
The Asses of Balaam

Randall Garrett



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**THE
ASSES
OF
BALAAM**

By **DAVID GORDON**

Illustrated by Schoenherr

The remarkable characteristic of Balaam's ass was that it was more perceptive than its master. Sometimes a child is more perceptive—because more straightforward and logical—than an adult....

It is written in the Book of Numbers that Balaam, a wise man of the Moabites, having been ordered by the King of Moab to put a curse upon the invading Israelites, mounted himself upon an ass and rode forth toward the camp of the Children of Israel. On the road, he met an angel with drawn sword, barring the way. Balaam, not seeing or recognizing the angel, kept urging his ass forward, but the ass recognized the angel and turned aside. Balaam smote the beast and forced it to return to the path, and again the angel blocked the way with drawn sword. And again the ass turned aside, despite the beating from Balaam, who, in his blindness, was unable to see the angel.

When the ass stopped for the third time and lay down, refusing to go further, Balaam waxed exceeding wrath and smote again the animal with a stick.

Then the ass spoke and said: "Why dost thou beat me? I have always obeyed thee and never have I failed thee. Have I ever been known to fail thee?"

And Balaam answered: "No." And at that moment his eyes were opened and he saw the angel before him.

—STUDIES IN SCRIPTURE

by Ceggawynn of Eboricum

W

ith the careful precision of controlled anger, Dodeth Pell rippled a stomp along his right side. *Clopclopclopclop-clopclop-clopclop-clopclopclopclop....* Each of his twelve right feet came down in turn while he glared across the business bench at Wygor Bedis. He started the ripple again, while he waited for Wygor's answer. The ripple was a good deal more effective than just tapping one's fingers, and equally as satisfying.

Wygor Bedis twitched his mouth and allowed his eyelids to slide up over his eyeballs in a slow blink before answering. Dodeth had simply asked, "Why wasn't this reported to me before?" But Wygor couldn't find the answer as simply as that. Not that he didn't have a good answer; it was just that he wanted to couch it in exactly the right terms. Dodeth had a way with raking sarcasm that made a person tend to cringe.

Dodeth was perfectly well aware of that. He hadn't been in the Executive Office of Predator Council all these years for nothing; he knew how to handle people—when to praise them, when to flatter them, when to rebuke them, and when to drag them unmercifully over the shell-bed.

He waited, his right legs marching out their steady rhythm.

"Well," said Wygor at last, "it was just that I couldn't see any point in bothering you with it at that point. I mean, *one* specimen—"

"Of an entirely new species!" snapped Dodeth in a sudden interruption. His legs stopped their rhythmic tramp. His voice rose from its usual eight-thousand-cycle rumble to a shrill squeak. "Fry it, Wygor, if you weren't such a good field man, I'd have sacked you long ago! Your trouble is that you have a penchant for bringing me problems that you ought to be able to solve by yourself and then flipping right over on your back and holding off on some information that ought to be brought to my attention immediately!"

There wasn't much Wygor could say to that, so he didn't try. He simply waited for the raking to come, and, sure enough, it came.

Dodeth's voice lowered itself to a soft purr. "The next time you have to do anything as complicated as setting a snith-trap, you just hump right down here and ask me, and I'll tell you

all about it. On the other hand, if the lower levels all suddenly become infested with shelks at the same time, why, you just take care of that little detail yourself, eh? The only other alternative is to learn to think."

Wygor winced a trifle and kept his mouth shut.

Having delivered himself of his jet of acid, Dodeth Pell looked down at the data booklet that Wygor had handed him. "Fortunately," he said, "there doesn't seem to be much to worry about. Only the Universal Motivator knows how this thing could have spawned, but it doesn't appear to be very efficient."

"No, sir, it doesn't," said Wygor, taking heart from his superior's mild tone. "The eating orifice is oddly placed, and the teeth are obviously for grinding purposes."

"I was thinking more of the method of locomotion," Dodeth said. "I believe this is a record, although I'll have to look in the files to make sure. I think that six locomotive limbs is the least I've ever heard of on an animal that size."

"I've checked the files," said Wygor. "There was a four-limbed leaf-eater recorded seven hundred years ago—four locomotive limbs, that is, and two grasping. But it was only as big as your hand."

Dodeth looked through the three pages of the booklet. There wasn't much there, really, but he knew Wygor well enough to know that all the data he had thus far was there. The only thing that rankled was that Wygor had delayed for three work periods before reporting the intrusion of the new beast, and now five of them had been spotted.

He looked at the page which showed the three bathygraphs that had been taken of the new animals from a distance. There was something odd about them, and Dodeth couldn't, for the hide of him, figure out what it was. It aroused an odd fear in him, and made him want to burrow deeper into the ground.

"I can't see what keeps 'em from falling over," he said at last. "Are they as slow-moving as they look?"

"They don't move very fast," Wygor admitted, "but we haven't seen any of them startled yet. I don't see how they could run very fast, though. It must take every bit of awareness they have to stay balanced on two legs."

Dodeth sighed whistlingly and pushed the data booklet back across the business bench to Wygor. "All right; I'll file the preliminary spotting report. Now get out there and get me some pertinent data on this queer beast. Scramble off."

"Right away, sir."

"And ... Wygor—"

"Yes, sir?"

"It's apparent that we have a totally new species here. It will be called a *wygorex*, of course, but it would be better if we waited until we could make a full report to the Keepers. So don't let any of this out—especially to the other Septs."

"Certainly not, sir; not a whistle. Anything else?"

"Just keep me posted, that's all. Scramble off."

After Wygor had obediently scrambled off, Dodeth relaxed all his knees and sank to his belly in thought.

His job was not an easy one. He would like to have his office get full credit for discovering a new species, just as Wygor had—understandably enough—wanted to get his share of the credit. On the other hand, one had to be careful that holding back information did not constitute any danger to the Balance. Above all, the Balance must be preserved. Even the snith had its place in the Ecological Balance of the World—although one didn't like to think about sniths as being particularly useful.

After all, every animal, every planet had its place in the scheme; each contributed its little bit to maintaining the Balance. Each had its niche in the ecological architecture, as Dodeth liked to think of it. The trouble was that the Balance was a shifting, swinging, ever-changing thing. Living tissues carried the genes of heredity in them, and living tissues are notoriously plastic under the influence of the proper radiation or particle bombardment. And animals *would* cross the poles.

The World had been excellently designed by the Universal Motivator for the development and evolution of life. Again, the concept of the Balance showed in His mighty works. Suppose, for instance, that the World rotated more rapidly about its axis, thereby exposing the whole surface periodically to the deadly radiation of the Blue Sun, instead of having a rotation period that, combined with the eccentricity of the World's orbit, gave it just enough libration to expose only sixty-three per cent to the rays, leaving the remaining thirty-seven per cent in twilight or darkness. Or suppose the orbit were so nearly circular that there were no perceptible libration at all; one side would burn eternally, and the other side would freeze, since there would be no seasonal winds blowing first east, then west, bringing the warmth of the Blue Sun from the other side.

Or, again, suppose there were no Moon and no Yellow Sun to give light to the dark side. Who could live in an everlasting night?

Or suppose that the magnetic field of the World were too weak to focus the majority of the Blue Sun's output of electrons and ions on the poles. How could life have evolved at all?

Balance. And the Ultimate Universal Motivator had put part of the responsibility into the hands of His only intelligent species. And a part of that part had been put into the hands of Dodeth Pell as the head of Predator Control.

Fry it! Something was niggling at the back of Dodeth's mind, and no amount of philosophizing would shake it. He reached into the drawer of the business bench and pulled out the duplicate of Wygor's data booklet. He flipped it open and looked at the bathygraphs again.

There was no single thing about them that he could pinpoint, but the beasts just didn't *look* right. Dodeth Pell had seen many monstrous animals in his life, but none like this.

Most people disliked and were disgusted by a snith because of the uncanny resemblance the stupid beast had to the appearance of Dodeth's own race. There could be no question of the genetic linkage between the two species, but, in spite of the physical similarities, their actions were controlled almost entirely by instinct instead of reason. They were like some sort of idiot parody of intelligent beings.

But it was their similarity which made them loathsome. Why should Dodeth Pell feel a like emotion when he saw the bathygraphs of the two-legged thing? Certainly there was no similarity.

Wait a minute!

He looked carefully at the three-dimensional pictures again.

Fry it! He couldn't be sure—

After all, he wasn't a geneticist. Checking the files wouldn't be enough; he wouldn't know how to ask the proper cross-filing questions.

He lolled his tongue out and absently rasped at a slight itch on the back of his hand while he thought.

If his hunch were correct, then it was time to call in outside help now, instead of waiting for more information. Still, he needn't necessarily call in official expert help just yet. If he could just get a lead—enough to verify or disprove the possibility of his hunch being correct—that would be enough for a day or two, until Wygor got more data.

There was always Yerdeth, an older parabrother on his prime-father's side. Yerdeth had studied genetics—theoretical, not applied—with the thought of going into Control, and kept on dabbling in it even after he had discovered that his talents lay in the robot design field.

"Ardan!" he said sharply.

At the other end of the office, the robot assistant ceased his work for a moment. "Yes, sir?"

"Come here a minute; I want you to look at something."

"Yes, sir."

The robot's segmented body was built very much like Dodeth's own, except that instead of the twelve pairs of legs that supported Dodeth's body, the robot was equipped with wheels, each suspended separately and equipped with its individual power source. Ardan rolled sedately

across the floor, his metallic body gleaming in the light from the low ceiling. He came to a halt in front of Dodeth's business bench.

Dodeth handed Ardan the thin data booklet. "Scan through that."

Ardan went through it rapidly, his eyes carefully scanning each page, his brain recording everything permanently. After a few seconds, he looked back up at Dodeth. "A new species."

"Exactly. Did you notice anything odd about their appearance?"

"Naturally," said Ardan. "Since their like has never been seen before, it is axiomatic that they would appear odd."

Fry it! Dodeth thought. He should have known better than to ask a question like that of Ardan. To ask it to determine what might be called second-order strangeness in a pattern that was strange in the first place was asking too much of a robot.

"Very well, then. Make an appointment for this evening with Yerdeth Pell. I would like to see him at his home if it is convenient."

"Yes, sir," said the robot.

Evening was four work-periods away, and even after Yerdeth had granted the appointment, Dodeth found himself fidgeting in anticipation.

Twice, during the following work periods, Wygor came in with more information. He had gone above ground with a group of protection robots, finally, to take a look at the new animals himself, but he hadn't yet managed to obtain enough data to make a definitive report on the strange beasts.

But the lack of data was, in itself, significant.

Dodeth usually liked to walk through the broad tunnels of the main thoroughfares, since he didn't particularly care to ride robot-back for so short a distance, but this time he was in such a hurry to see Yerdeth that he decided to let Ardan take him.

He climbed aboard, clamped his legs to the robot's sides, and said: "To Yerdeth Pell's."

The robot said "Yes, sir," and rolled out to the side tunnel that led toward one of the main robot tunnels. When they finally came to a tunnel labeled *Robots and Passengers Only*, Ardan rolled into it and revved his wheels up to high speed, shooting down the tunnelway at a much higher velocity than Dodeth could possibly have run.

The tunnelway was crowded with passenger-carrying robots, and with robots alone, carrying out orders from their masters. But there was no danger; no robot could harm any of Dodeth's race, nor could any robot stand idly by while someone was harmed. Even in the most crowded of conditions, every robot in the area had one thing foremost in his mind: the safety of every human within sight or hearing.

Dodeth ignored the traffic altogether. He had other things to think about, and he knew—without even bothering to consider it—that Ardan could be relied upon to take care of everything. Even if it cost him his own pseudolife, Ardan would do everything in his power to preserve the safety and health of his passenger. Once in a while, in unusual circumstances, a robot would even disobey orders to save a life, for obedience was strictly secondary to the sanctity of human life, just as the robot's desire to preserve his own pseudoliving existence was outranked by the desire to obey.

Dodeth thought about his job, but he carefully kept his mind off the new beasts. He knew that fussing in his mind over them wouldn't do him any good until he had more to work with—things which only his parabrother, Yerdeth, could supply him. Besides, there was the problem of what to do about the hurkle breeding sites, which were being encroached upon by the quiggies. Some of the swamps on the surface, especially those that approached the Hot Belts, were being dried out and filled with dust, which decreased the area where the hurkle could lay its eggs, but increased the nesting sites for quiggies.

That, of course, was a yearly cycle, in general. As the Blue Sun moved from one side to the other, and the winds shifted accordingly, the swamps near the Twilight Border would dry out or fill up accordingly. But this year the eastern swamps weren't filling up as they should, and some precautionary measures would have to be taken to prevent too great a shift in the hurkle-

quiggie balance.

Then there was the compensating migratory shift of the Hotland beasts—those which lived in the areas where the slanting rays of the Blue Sun could actually touch them, and which could not stand the, to them, terrible cold of the Darklands. Instead, they moved back and forth with the Blue Sun and remained in their own area—a hot, dry, fiery-bright hinterland occupied only by gnurrs, gpoles, and other horrendous beasts.

Beyond those areas, according to the robot patrols which had reconnoitered there, nothing lived. Nothing could. No protoplasmic being could exist under the direct rays of the Blue Sun. Even the metal-and-translite bodies of a robot wouldn't long protect the sensitive mechanisms within from the furnace heat of the huge star.

Each species had its niche in the World. Some, like the hurkle, lived in swamp water. Others lived in lakes and streams. Still others flew in the skies or roamed the surface or climbed the great trees. Some, like Dodeth's own people, lived beneath the surface.

The one thing an intelligent species had to be most careful about was not to disturb the balance with their abilities, but to work to preserve it. In the past, there had been those who had built cities on the surface, but the cities had removed the natural growth from large areas, which, in turn, had forced the city people to import their food from outside the cities. And that had meant an enforced increase in the cultivation of the remaining soil, which destroyed the habitats of other animals, besides depleting the soil itself. The only sensible way was to live *under* the farmlands, so that no man was ever more than a few hundred feet from the food supply. The Universal Motivator had chosen that their species should evolve in burrows beneath the surface, and if that was the niche chosen for Dodeth's people, then that was obviously where they should remain to keep the Balance.

Of course, the snith, too, was an underground animal, though the tunnels were unlined. The snith's tunnels ran between and around the armored tunnels of Dodeth's people, so that each city surrounded the other without contact—if the burrows of the snith could properly be called a city.

"Yerdeth Pell's residence," said Ardan.

"Ah, yes." Dodeth, his thoughts interrupted, slid off the back of the robot and flexed his legs. "Wait here, Ardan. I'll be back in an hour or so." Then he scrambled over to the door which led to Yerdeth's apartment.

Twenty minutes later, Yerdeth Pell looked up from the data book facsimiles and scanned Dodeth's face with appraising eyes.

"Very cute," he said at last, with a slight chuckle. "Now, what I want to know is: is someone playing a joke on you, or are you playing a joke on me?"

Dodeth's eyelids slid upwards in a fast blink of surprise. "What do you mean?"

"Why, these bathygraphs." Yerdeth rapped the bathygraphs with a wrinkled, horny hand. He was a good deal older than Dodeth, and his voice had a tendency to rasp a little when the frequency went above twenty thousand cycles. "They're very good, of course. *Very* good. The models have very fine detail to them. The eyes, especially are good; they look as if they really *ought* to be built that way." He smiled and looked up at Dodeth.

Dodeth resisted an urge to ripple a stomp. "Well?" he said impatiently.

"Well, they can't be real, you know," Yerdeth replied mildly.

"Why not?"

"Oh, come, now, Dodeth. What did it evolve from? An animal doesn't just spring out of nowhere, you know."

"New species are discovered occasionally," Dodeth said. "And there are plenty of mutants and just plain freaks."

"Certainly, certainly. But you don't hatch a snith out of a hurkle egg. Where are your intermediate stages?"

"Is it possible that we might have missed the intermediate stage?"

"I said 'stages'. Plural. Pick any known animal—*any* one—and tell me how many genetic changes would have to take place before you'd come up with an animal anything like this one." Again he tapped the bathygraph. "Take that eye, for instance. The lid goes down instead of up, but you notice that there's a smaller lid at the bottom that *does* go up, a little ways. The closest thing to an eye like that is on the hugl, which has eyelids on top that lower a little. But the hugl has eighteen segments; sixteen pairs of legs and two pairs of feeding claws. Besides, it's only the size of your thumb-joint. What kind of gene mutation would it take to change that into an animal like the one in this picture?"

"And look at the size of the thing. If it weren't in that awkward vertical position, if it were stretched out on the ground, it'd be as long as a human. Look at the size of those legs!"

"Or, take another thing. In order to walk on those two legs, the changes in skeletal and visceral structure would have to be tremendous."

"Couldn't we have missed the intermediate stages, then?" Dodeth asked stubbornly. "We've missed the intermediates before, I dare say."

"Perhaps we have," Yerdeth admitted, "but if you boys in the Ecological Corps have been on your toes for the past thousand years, we haven't missed many. And it would take at least that long for something like this to evolve from anything we know."

"Even under direct polar bombardment?"

"Even under direct polar bombardment. The radiation up here is strong enough to sterilize a race within a very few generations. And what would they eat? Not many plants survive there, you know."

"Oh, I don't say it's flatly impossible, you understand. If a female of some animal or other, carrying a freshly-fertilized zygote, and her species happened to have all the necessary potential characteristics, and a flood of ionizing radiation went through the zygote at exactly the right time, and it managed to hit just the right genes in just the right way ... well I'm sure you can see the odds against it are tremendous. I wouldn't even want to guess at the order of magnitude of the exponent. I'd have to put on a ten in order to give you the odds against it."

Dodeth didn't quite get that last statement, but he let it pass. "I am going to pull somebody's legs off, one by one, come next work period," he said coldly. "One ... by ... one."

He didn't, though. Rather than accuse Wygor, it would be better if Wygor were allowed to accuse himself. Dodeth merely wanted to wait for the opportunity to present itself. And then—ah, *then* there would be a roasting!

The opportunity came in the latter part of the next work period. Wygor, who had purportedly been up on the surface for another field trip, scuttled excitedly into Dodeth's office, wildly waving some bathygraph sheets.

"Dodeth, sir! Look! I came down as soon as I saw it! I've got the 'graphs right here! Horrible!"

Before Dodeth could say anything, Wygor had spread the sheets out fan-wise on his business bench. Dodeth looked at them and experienced a moment of horror himself before he realized that these were—these *must* be—doctored bathygraphs. Even so, he gave an involuntary gasp.

The first 'graphs had been taken from an aerial reconnaissance robot winging in low over the treetops. The others were taken from a higher altitude. They all showed the same carnage.

An area of several thousand square feet—*tens* of thousands!—had been cleared of trees! They had been ruthlessly cut down and stacked. Bushes and vines had gone with them, and the grass had been crushed and plowed up by the dragging of the great fallen trees. And there were obvious signs that the work was still going on. In the close-ups, he could see the bipedal beasts wielding cutting instruments.

Dodeth forced himself to calmness and glared at the bathygraphs. Fry it, they *had* to be fakes. A new species might appear only once in a hundred years, but according to Yerdeth, this couldn't possibly be a new species. What was Wygor's purpose in lying, though? Why should he falsify data? And it must be he; he had said that he had seen the beasts himself. Well, Dodeth would have to find out.

"Tool users, eh?" he said, amazed at the calmness of his voice. Such animals weren't unusual. The sniths used tools for digging and even for fighting each other. And the hurkles dammed up

small streams with logs to increase their marshland. It wasn't immediately apparent what these beasts were up to, but it was far too destructive to allow it to go on.

But, fry it all, it *couldn't* be going on!

There were only two alternatives. Either Wygor was a liar or Yerdeth didn't know what he was talking about. And there was only one way of finding out which was which.

"Ardan! Get my equipment ready! We're going on a field trip! Wygor, you get the rest of the expedition ready; you and I are going up to see what all this is about." He jabbed at the communicator button. "Fry it! Why should this have to happen in my sector? Hello! Give me an inter-city connection. I want to talk to Baythim Venns, co-ordinator of Ecological Control, in Faisalla."

He looked up at Wygor. "Scatter off, fry it! I want to—Oh, hello, Baythim, sir. Dodeth. Have you had any reports on a new species—a bipedal one? What? No, sir; I'm not kidding. One of my men has brought in 'graphs of the thing. Frankly, I'm inclined to think it's a hoax of some kind, but I'd like to ask you to check to see if it's been reported in any of the other areas. We're located a little out of the way here, and I thought perhaps some of the stations farther north or south had seen it. Yes. That's right: two locomotive limbs, two handling limbs. Big as a human, and they hold their bodies perpendicular to the ground. Yes, sir, I know it sounds silly, and I'm going out to check the story now, but you ought to see these bathygraphs. If it's a hoax, there's an expert behind it. Very well, sir; I'll wait."

Dodeth scowled. Baythim had sounded as if he, Dodeth, had lost his senses.

Maybe I have, he thought. Maybe I'll start running around mindlessly and get shot down by some patrol robot who thinks I'm a snith.

Maybe he should have investigated first and then called, when he was sure, one way or another. Maybe he should have told Baythim he was certain it was a hoax, instead of hedging his bets. Maybe a lot of things, but it was too—

"Hello? Yes, sir. None, eh? Yes, sir. Yes, sir; I'll give you a call as soon as I've checked. Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

Dodeth felt like an absolute fool. Individually and collectively, he consigned to the frying pan Baythim, Wygor, Yerdeth, the new beast—if it existed—and finally, himself.

By the time he had finished his all-encompassing curse, his two dozen pistoning legs had nearly brought him to the equipment room, where Ardan and Wygor were waiting.

Four hours and more of steady traveling did very little to sweeten Dodeth Pell's temper. The armored car was uncomfortable, and the silence within it was even more uncomfortable. He did not at all feel like making small talk with Wygor, and he had nothing as yet to say to Ardan or the patrol robots who were rolling along with the armored car.

One thing he had to admit: Wygor certainly didn't act like a man who was being carried to his own doom—which he certainly was if this was hoax. Wygor would lose all position and be reduced to living off his civil insurance. He would be pitied by all and respected by none.

But he didn't look as though that worried him at all.

Dodeth contented himself with looking at the scenery. The car was not yet into the forest country; this was all rolling grassland. Off to one side, a small herd of grazing grancos lifted their graceful heads to watch the passage of the expedition, then lowered them again to feed. A fanged zitibanth, disturbed in the act of stalking the grancos, stiffened all his legs and froze for a moment, looking balefully at the car and the robots, then went on about his business.

When they came to the forest, the going became somewhat harder. Centuries ago, those who had tried to build cities on the surface had also built paved strips to make travel by car easier and smoother, and Dodeth almost wished there were one leading to the target area.

Fry it, he *hated* traveling! Especially in a lurching armored car. He wished he were bored enough or tired enough to go to sleep.

At last—at *long* last—Wygor ordered the car to stop. "We're within two miles of the clearing, sir," he told Dodeth.

"All right," Dodeth said morosely. "We'll go the rest of the way on foot. I don't want to startle

them at this stage of the game, so keep it quiet and stay hidden. Tell the patrol robots to spread out, and tell them I want all the movie shots we can get. I want all the Keepers to see these things in action. Got that? Then let's get moving."

They crept forward through the forest, Dodeth and Ardan taking the right, while Wygor and his own robot, Arsam, stayed a few yards away to the left. They were all expert woodsmen—Dodeth and Wygor by training and experience, and the robots by indoctrination.

Even so, Dodeth never felt completely comfortable above ground, with nothing over his head but the clouded sky.

The team had purposely chosen to approach from a small rise, where they could look down on the clearing without being seen. And when they reached the incline that led up to the ridge, one of the armed patrol robots who had been in the lead took a look over the ridge and then scuttled back to Dodeth. "They're there, sir."

"What are they doing?" Dodeth asked, scarcely daring to believe.

"Feeding, I believe, sir. They aren't cutting down any trees now; they're just sitting on one of the logs, feeding themselves with their handling limbs."

"How many are there?"

"Twenty, sir."

"I'll take a look." He scrambled up the ridge and peeked over.

And there they were, less than a quarter of a mile away.

Dazedly, Dodeth took a pair of field glasses from Ardan and focused them on the group.

Oh, they were real, all right. No doubt of that. None whatever. Mechanically, he counted them. Twenty. Most of them were feeding, but four of them seemed to be standing a little apart from the others, watching the forest, acting as lookouts.

Typical herd action, Dodeth thought.

He wished Yerdeth were here; he'd show that fool what good his ten-to-the-billionth odds were.

And yet, in another way, Dodeth had the feeling that his parabrother was right. How could the life of the World have suddenly evolved such creatures? For they looked even more impossible when seen in the flesh.

Their locomotive limbs ended in lumpy protuberances that showed no sign of toes, and they were covered all over with a dull gray hide, except for the hands at the ends of their handling limbs and the necks and the faces of their oddly-shaped heads, where the skin ranged in color from a pinkish an to a definitive brown, depending on the individual. There was no hair anywhere on their bodies except on the top and back of their heads. No, wait—there were two long tufts above each eye. They—

"Do you see what they're *eating*?" Wygor's voice whispered.

Dodeth hadn't. He'd been too busy looking at the things themselves. But when he did notice, he made a noise like a throttled "*Geep!*"

Hurkles!

There were few enough of the animals—only a few small population was needed to keep the Balance, but they were important. And the swamps were drying up, and the quiggies were moving in on them, and *now*—

Dodeth made a hasty count. Twenty! By the Universal Motivator, these predators had eaten a hurkle apiece!

Overhead, the Yellow Sun, a distant dot of intensely bright light, shed its wan glow over the ghastly scene. Dodeth wished the Moon were out; its much brighter light would have shown him more detail.

But he could see well enough to count the gnawed skeletons of the little, harmless hurkles. Even the Moon, which wouldn't bring morning for another fifteen work periods yet, couldn't have made it any plainer that these beasts were deadly dangerous to the Balance.

"How often do they eat?" he asked in a strained voice.

It was Wygor's robot, Arsam, who answered. "About three times every work period. They sleep then. Their metabolic cycle seems to be timed about the same as yours, sir."

"Gaw!" said Dodeth. "Sixty hurkles per sleep period! Why, they'll have the whole hurkle population eaten before long! Wygor! As soon as we can get shots of all this, we're going back! There's not a moment to lose! This is the most deadly dangerous thing that has ever happened to the World!"

"Fry me, yes," Wygor said in an awed voice. "Three hurkles in one period."

"Allow me to correct you, sir," said the patrol robot. "They do not eat that many hurkles. They eat other things besides."

"Like what, for instance?" Dodeth asked in a choked voice.

The robot told him, and Dodeth groaned. "Omnivores! That's even worse! Ardan, pass the word to the scouts to get their pictures and meet at that tree down there behind us in ten minutes. We've got to get back to the city!"

Dodeth Pell laid his palms flat on the speaker's bench and looked around at the assembled Keepers of the Balance, wise and prudence thinkers, who had spent lifetimes in ecological service and had shown their capabilities many times over.

"And that's the situation, sirs," he said, after a significant pause. "The moving and still bathygraphs, the data sheets, and the samplings of the area all tell the same story. I do not feel that I, alone, can make the decision. Emotionally, I must admit, I am tempted to destroy all twenty of the monsters. Intellectually, I realize that we should attempt to capture at least one family group—if we can discover what constitutes a family group in this species. Unfortunately, we cannot tell the sexes apart by visual inspection; the sex organs themselves must be hidden in the folds of that gray hide. And this is evidently not their breeding season, for we have seen no sign of sexual activity.

"We have very little time, sirs, it seems to me. The damage they have already done will take years to repair, and the danger of upsetting the Balance irreparably grows exponentially greater with every passing work period.

"Sirs, I ask your advice and your decision."

There was a murmur of approval for his presentation as he came down from the speakers bench. Then the Keepers went into their respective committee meetings so discuss the various problems of detail that had arisen out of the one great problem.

Dodeth went into an anteroom and tried to relax and get a little sleep—though he doubted he'd get any. His nerves were too much on edge.

Ardan woke him gently. "Your breakfast, sir."

Dodeth blinked and jerked his head up. "Oh. Uhum. Ardan! Have the Keepers reached any decision yet?"

"No, sir; not yet. The data are still coming in."

It was three more work periods before the Keepers called Dodeth Pell before them again. Dodeth could almost read the decision on their faces—there was both sadness and determination there.

"It was an uncomfortable decision, Dodeth Pell," said the Eldest Keeper without preliminary, "but a necessary one. We can find no place in the Ecological Balance for this species. We have already ordered a patrol column of two hundred fully-armed pesticide robots to destroy the animals. Two are to be captured alive, if possible, but, if not, the bodies will be brought to the biological laboratories for study. Within a few hours, the species will be nearly or completely extinct.

"By the way, you may tell your assistant, Wygor, that the animal will go down in the files as *wygorex*. A unique distinction for him, in many ways, but not, I fear, a happy one."

Dodeth nodded silently. Now that the decision had been made, he felt rather bad about it. Something in him rebelled at the thought of a species becoming extinct, no matter how great

the need. He wondered if it would be possible for the biologists and the geneticists to trace the evolution of the animal. He hoped so. At least they deserved that much.

Dodeth Pell delayed returning to his own city; he wanted to wait until the final results had been brought in before he returned to his duties. The delay turned out to be a little longer than he expected—much longer, in fact. The communicator in his temporary room buzzed, and when he answered, Wygor's voice came to him, a rush of excited words that didn't make any sense at all at first. And when it did make sense he didn't believe it.

"What?" he squealed. "*What?*"

"I said," Wygor repeated, "that the report has come back from the pesticide column! They've found no trace of any such animal as we've described! They're nowhere to be found, in or near the clearing!"

"I think," said Dodeth very calmly, "that I'll take a little trip over to the Brightside and take up permanent residence there. It's going to be pretty hot for me around here before long."

And he cut the connection without waiting for Wygor's answer.

The armored car jounced across the grassland at high speed. Behind it, two more cars followed, each taking care not to run exactly in the tracks of the one ahead, so that there would be as little damage as possible done to the grass.

In the lead car, Dodeth Pell watched the forest loom nearer, wondering what sort of madness he would find there this time. Beside him, the Eldest Keeper dozed gently, in the way that only the very young or the very old can doze. It was just as well; Dodeth didn't feel much like talking.

This time, as they approached the clearing, he didn't bother to tell the car to stop two miles away. If the animals were gone, there was no point in being cautious. All through the wooded area, he could see occasional members of the pesticide robots. He told the car to stop at the base of the little rise that he used before as a vantage point. Then, without further preliminaries, he got out of the car and marched up the slope to take a look at the clearing. Overhead, the burning spark of the Yellow Sun cast its pale radiance over the landscape.

At the ridge, he stopped suddenly and ducked his head. Then he grabbed his field glasses and took a good look.

The animals had built themselves a few crude-looking shelters out of the logs, but he hardly noticed that.

There were four of the animals, in plain sight, standing guard!

The others were obviously inside the rude huts, asleep!

Great galloping fungus blight! Was he out of his mind? What was going on around here? Couldn't the robots *see* the beasts?

"That's very odd," said the voice of the Eldest Keeper in puzzled tones. "I thought the robots said they'd gone away. Lend me your field glasses."

As he handed the powerful glasses over to the Keeper, who had followed him up the hill, Dodeth said: "I'm glad you can see them. I thought maybe my brain had been short-circuited."

"I can see them," said the Eldest Keeper, peering through the glasses. Then he handed them back to Dodeth. "Let's get back down to the car. I want to find out what's going on around here."

At the car, the Eldest Keeper just scowled for a moment, looking very worried. By this time, the other two cars had pulled up nearby, discharging their cargo of two more Keepers apiece. While the Eldest Keeper talked in low tones with his colleagues, Dodeth stalked over to one of the pesticide robots who was prowling nearby.

"Found anything useful?" he asked sarcastically, knowing that sarcasm was useless on a robot.

"I'm not looking for anything useful, sir. I'm looking for the animals we are supposed to destroy."

"You come over and tell the Eldest Keeper that," Dodeth said.

"Yes, sir," the robot agreed promptly, rolling along beside Dodeth as he returned to where the Keepers were waiting.

"What's going on here?" the Eldest demanded curtly of the robot. "Why haven't you destroyed the animals?"

"Because we can't find them, sir."

"What's your name?" the Eldest snapped.

"Arike, sir."

"All right, Arike," said the Eldest somewhat angrily. "Stand by for orders. You'll repeat them to the other robots, understand?"

"Yes, sir," said the robot.

"All right, then," said the Eldest. "First, you take a run up that hill and look into that clearing. You'll see those creatures in there all right."

"Yes, sir. I've seen those creatures in there."

The Eldest Keeper exploded. "Then get in there and obey your orders! Don't you realize that their very existence threatens the life of all of us? They must be eliminated before our whole culture is destroyed! Do you understand? Obey!"

"Yes, sir," said the robot. His voice sounded odd, but he spun around and went to pass the word on to the other robots. Within minutes, more and more of the pesticide robots were swarming towards and into the clearing. They could hear rumbling noises from the clearing—low grunts that were evidently made by animals who were trapped by the encircling robots.

And then there was a vast silence.

Dodeth and the Keepers waited.

Not a shot was fired.

It was as though a great, sound-proof blanket had been flung over the whole area.

"What in the Unknown Name of the Universal Motivator is going on around here?" said Dodeth in a hushed tone. He wondered how many times he had asked himself that.

"We may as well take a look," said the Eldest Keeper.

Two hundred pesticide robots were ranged around the perimeter of the clearing, their weapons facing inward. Not a one of them moved.

Inside the circle of machines, the twenty wygorex stood motionless, watching the ring of robots. Now and then, one of them gave a deep, coughing rumble, but otherwise they made no noise.

Dodeth Pell could stand it no longer. "Robots!" He shouted as loudly as he could, his voice shrill with urgency. "I order you to fire!"

It was as though he hadn't said a word. Both robots and wygorex ignored him completely.

Dodeth turned and yelled to one one of the patrol robots that was standing nearby. "You! What's your name?"

"Arvam, sir."

"Arvam, can you tell what it is those things have done to the robots?"

"They haven't done anything, sir."

"Then why don't the robots fire as they've been told?" Dodeth didn't want to admit it, even to himself, but he was badly frightened. He had never heard of a robot behaving this way before.

"They can't, sir."

"They *can't*? Don't they realize that if those things aren't killed, we may all die?"

"I didn't know that," said the patrol robot. "If we do not kill them, then you may be killed, and you have ordered us to kill them, but if we obey your orders, then we will kill them, and that will

mean that you won't be killed, but they will, so we can't do that, but if we don't then you *will* be killed, and we must obey, and that means we must, but we can't, but if we don't we will, and we can't so we must but we can't but if we don't you will so we must but we can't but we—" He kept repeating it over and over again, on and on and on.

"Stop that!" snapped Dodeth.

But the robot didn't even seem to hear.

Dodeth was really frightened now. He looked back at the five keepers and scuttled toward them.

"What's wrong with the robots?" he asked shrilly. "They've never failed us before!"

The Elder Keeper looked at him. "What makes you think they've failed us now?" he asked softly.

Dodeth gaped speechlessly. The Eldest didn't seem to be making any more sense than the patrol robot had.

"No," the Keeper went on, "they haven't failed us. They have served us well. They have pointed out to us something which we have failed to see, and, in doing so, have saved us from making a catastrophic error."

"I don't understand," said Dodeth.

"I'll explain," the Elder Keeper said, "but first go over to that patrol robot and tell him quietly that the situation has changed. Tell him that we are no longer in any danger from the wygorex. Then bring him over here."

Dodeth did as he was told, without understanding at all.

"I still don't understand, sir," he said bewilderedly.

"Dodeth, what would happen if I told Arvam, here, to fire on you?"

"Why ... why, he'd *refuse*."

"Why should he?"

"Because I'm *human*! That's the most basic robot command."

"I don't know," the Eldest said, eyeing Dodeth shrewdly. "You might not be a human. You might be a snith. You *look* like a snith."

Dodeth swallowed the insult, wondering what the Eldest meant.

"Arvam," the Eldest Keeper said to the robot, "doesn't he look like a snith to you?"

"Yes, sir," Arvam agreed.

Dodeth swallowed that one, too.

"Then how do you know he *isn't* a snith, Arvam?"

"Because he behaves like a human, sir. A snith does not behave like a human."

"And if something does behave like a human, what then?"

"Anything that behaves like a human is human, sir."

Dodeth suddenly felt as though his eyes had suddenly focused after being unfocused for a long time. He gestured toward the clearing. "You mean those ... those *things* ... are ... *human*?"

"Yes sir," said Arvam solidly.

"But they don't even *talk*!"

"Pardon me for correcting you sir, but they do. I cannot understand their speech, but the pattern is clearly recognizable as speech. Most of their conversation is carried on in tones of subsonic frequency, so your ears cannot hear it. Apparently, your voices are supersonic to them."

"Well, I'll be fried," said Dodeth. He looked at the Elder Keeper. "That's why the robots reported they couldn't find any *animal* of that description in the vicinity."

"Certainly. There weren't any."

"And we were so fooled by their monstrous appearance that we didn't pay any attention to their actions," said Dodeth.

"Exactly."

"But this makes the puzzle even *worse*," said Dodeth. "How could such a creature evolve?"

"Look!" interrupted one of the other Keepers, pointing. "Up there in the sky!"

All eyes turned toward the direction the finger pointed.

It was a silvery speck in the sky that moved and became larger.

"I don't think they're from our World at all," said the Eldest Keeper. He turned to the patrol robot. "Arvam, go down and tell the pesticide robots that there is no danger to us. They're still confused, and I have a feeling that the humans in that ship up there might not like it if we are caught pointing guns at their friends."

As Arvam rolled off, Dodeth said "Another World?"

"Why not?" asked the Eldest. "The Moon, after all, is another World, smaller than ours, to be sure, and airless, but still another World. We haven't thought too much about other Worlds because we have our own World to take care of. But there was a time, back in the days of the builders of the surface cities, when our people dreamed such things. But our Moon was the only one close enough, and there was no point in going to a place which is even more hellish than our Brightside.

"But suppose the Yellow Sun also has a planet—or maybe even one of the more distant suns, which are hardly more than glimmers of light. They came, and they landed a few of their party to make a small clearing. Then the ship went somewhere else—to the dark side of our Moon, maybe, I don't know. But they were within calling range, for the ship was called as soon as trouble appeared.

"We don't know anything about them yet, but we will. And we've got to show them that we, too, are human. We have a job ahead of us—a job of communication.

"But we also have a great future if we handle things right."

Dodeth watched the ship, now grown to a silvery globe of tremendous size, drift slowly downward toward the clearing. He felt an inward glow of intense anticipation, and he fidgeted impatiently as he waited to see what would happen next.

He rippled a stomp.

THE END

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