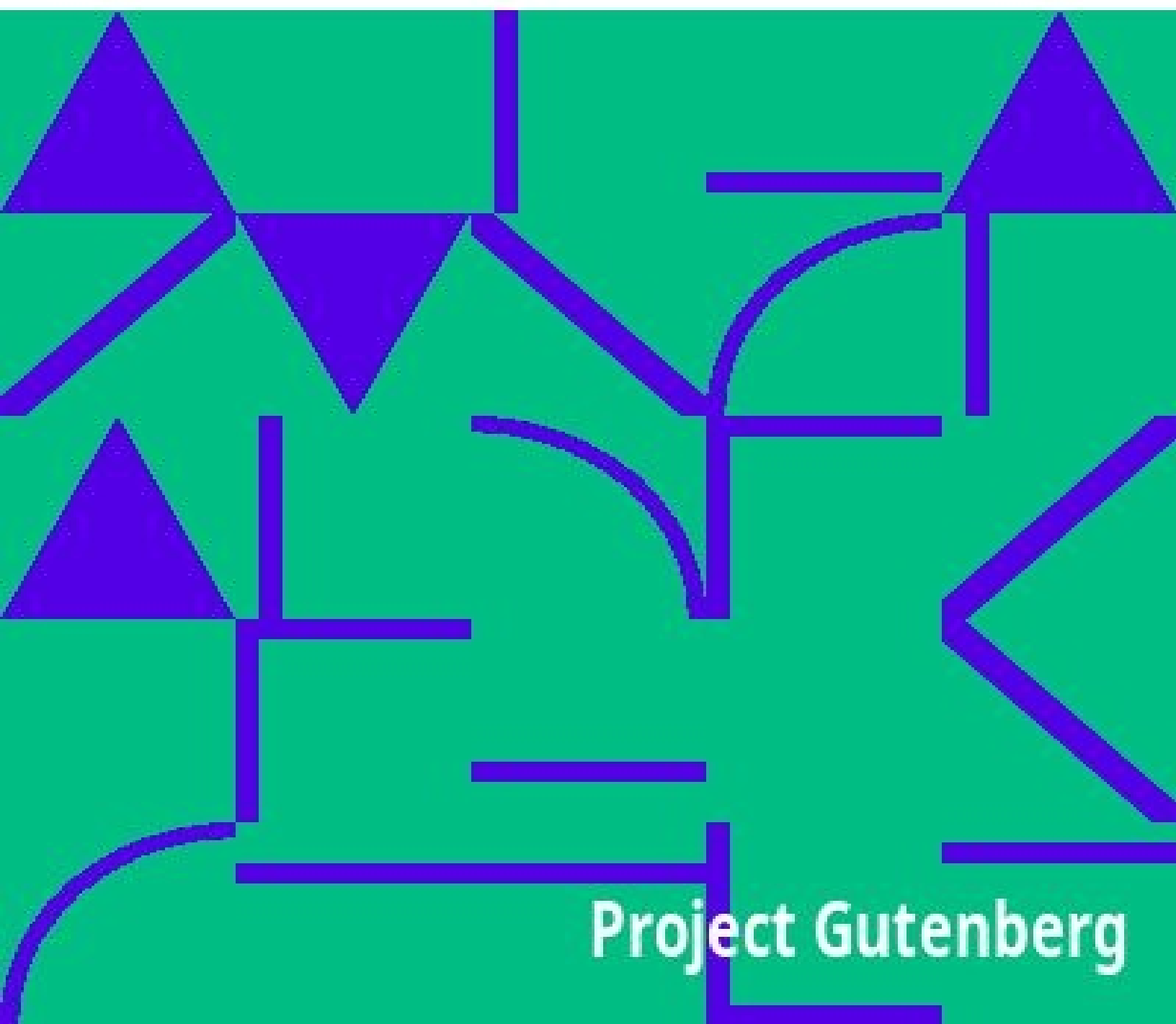


A Transmutation of Muddles

H. B. Fyfe



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A
TRANSMUTATION
OF MUDDLES

An experienced horse-trader, bargain-haggler, and general swapper has a very special talent for turning two headaches into one aspirin pill....

By H. B. FYFE

Illustrated by Van Dongen

T

IE rugged little stellar scout ship flared down to the surface of Kappa Orionis VII about a mile from the aboriginal village. The pilot, Lieutenant Eric Haruhiku, scorched an open field, but pointed out to Louis Mayne that he had been careful to disturb neither woodland nor shoreline.

"The Kappans are touchy about those, Judge," he explained, "They fish a lot, as you'd guess from all these shallow seas, and they pick fruit in the forests; but they don't farm much."

"No use provoking trouble," Mayne approved. "It's a long way from Rigel."

"It's a longer way from Sol," said the pilot.

"Don't I know, boy! If it weren't, I'd be just another retired space captain, quietly struggling with my ranch on Rigel IX. As it is, to get the grant, I had to remain on call as an arbitrator."

"Somebody has to settle these things," said Haruhiku. "There's not much law way out here, except what the Space Force can apply. Well, if you'll excuse me, sir, I'll have them get out the helicopter and take us over to the village."

"Let me see that last message again, before you go," Mayne requested.

The pilot extracted a sheet from his clipboard and handed it to Mayne as he left. Mayne studied the text with little pleasure.

Terran Space Force headquarters on Rigel IX wished to inform him that the long awaited envoy from Terra to Kappa Orionis VII not only had arrived but had departed two days behind Mayne.

It was hoped, the communication continued, that nothing would interfere with the desired objective of coming to some friendly agreement with the Kappans that would permit Terran use of the planet as a base for spaceships. The envoy,

of course, was prepared to offer trade inducements and various other forms of help to the semi-civilized natives. Mayne was requested to lay whatever groundwork he could.

In my spare time, no doubt, he reflected. I'm to settle this silly business any way at all—as long as the natives get their way. But has anybody told the government about insurance companies? If it costs money or a lawsuit, will they back me up?

He felt himself to be in a ridiculous dilemma. The Kappans were reported to have seized a Terran spaceship as it landed to trade. Naturally, the captain had squawked for help. He claimed he had crashed; his insurance company thought otherwise; the Kappans seemed to have some entirely different idea in mind. Mayne had been summoned into action to render a decision, after the rough and ready system of these settlements on the surface of Terra's sphere of explored space.

Regretfully, he made his way now to the cubbyhole allowed him on the cramped scout, where he changed to a more formal tunic of a bright blue he hoped would look impressive to native eyes. By the time he was ready, the helicopter was waiting. He and Haruhiku entered, and the crewman at the controls took off for the scene of the dispute.

Arriving over the village, they hovered a few minutes while Haruhiku studied the lay of the land. The lieutenant had been to this world before, long enough to pick up some of the language and customs, so Mayne was content to follow his advice about landing a little way off from a spaceship that towered outside the village.

They came down about a hundred yards away, between a rutted sort of road and a long hut covered by a curved, thatched roof.

"They're expecting us," said Haruhiku, gesturing at the group before the hut.

It consisted of half a dozen humans and several of the Kappan natives. The latter, naturally, caught Mayne's eye first. The most imposing individual among them stood about five feet tall. The planet being of about the same mass as Terra, the Kappan probably weighed over two hundred and fifty pounds. He was a rugged biped with something saurian in his ancestry; for his skin was scaled, and bony plates grew into a low crown upon his long skull. His arms and legs were heavy and bowed, with joints obscured by thick muscles and loose skin. Mayne was

struck by the fancy that the Kappan's color, a blend of brown and olive, was that of a small dragon who had achieved a good suntan. A yellow kilt was his main article of attire, although he wore a few decorations of polished bone.

One of the Terrans stepped forward. He wore a semimilitary uniform.

"I suppose you're Louis Mayne?" he asked.

"Right," answered Mayne. "You would be Captain Voorhis, of the *Gemsbok*?"

"Check. This here is Eemakh. He's more or less chief of the village, or tribe, or whatever you wanna call it."

Mayne found his gaze sinking into catlike slits of jet in a pair of huge orange eyes shaded by massive brow ridges. The native made some statement in a clicking language that had a harsh, choppy rhythm.

"He welcomes you to Kappa," Haruhiku interpreted. "He hopes the gods will not be displeased."

"What a warm welcome!" commented Mayne. "Have you been getting along that well, Captain Voorhis?"

"Just about," said the spacer. "One of my boys knows a few words. Rest of the time, we make signs. I gotta admit they ain't been too unfriendly."

"But they *have* seized your ship?"

"You're damn' right! That insurance guy they sent out don't see it that way though."

"Where is this representative of the Belt Insurance Company?" asked Mayne.

"Melin? His ship landed over on the other side of the village, about half a mile. He oughta be along soon. Must've seen you land."

Mayne wondered whether it were necessary to await the arrival of the insurance adjustor before asking any questions. To cover his hesitation, he turned to take his first good look at the hull of the *Gemsbok*.

"What do they think they're doing?" he demanded, staring.

The *Gemsbok* was—or had been—an ungraceful, thick starship on the verge of aging into scrap. Towering here between the village and the huge, bluish-green leaves of the Kappan forest, she was in the process of being transformed into a planet-bound object of a certain weird grace.

A framework was being constructed about the hull by a swarm of natives. They had reached halfway up the ship, which served as a central column. Much of the exterior appeared to be a network of strangely curved sections of wood that had been given a high polish. Mayne suspected the greenish highlights were reflections of the forest color.

"Bone," said Voorhis succinctly. "They collect it from things they catch in the sea. Main supports of timber, of course, built to fit the hull."

"The fish here grow very large," put in Haruhiku. "If you could call them fish, that is. I once saw them butchering what looked more like a dinosaur."

Mayne realized that the bone framework formed a sort of curtain wall. At the lower levels, some of the natives seemed to be experimenting with a coating of wet leaves which they were molding to the wall.

"They've soaked them in something they boil out of fish parts," his pilot explained. "Like the village roofs. When it dries, it's pretty hard, even waterproof. The stink never dries out."

"But what do they have in their bony little brains?" asked Mayne. "Just what is that mess supposed to be?"

"A temple, believe it or not," answered Voorhis. "They tell me I set her down on land sacred to the great god Meeg!"

Mayne looked at Haruhiku.

"Oh, come on, now! I came all the way from—" He stopped as he noticed the pilot's grave expression. "Oh! That sort of thing *could* be serious, I guess."

He imagined he had seen the chief, Eemakh, come alert at the mention of the local god. Mayne sighed. It was going to be a long day.

He was saved for the time being by a hail from the direction of the village. A procession was approaching along the set of ruts between Mayne and the ship.

The place of honor appeared to be occupied by a two-wheeled cart of crude but massive design. Upon it rode a Kappan driver, two Kappans with spears and the look of official guards, and a Terran with a death-grip upon the side railing. A brace of truculent beasts of frighteningly saurian mien shuffled ponderously along in the loose harness. From time to time, one or the other would stumble over a turn in his rut and emit a menacing rumble as if he suspected his team mate of causing the misstep.

Before and behind this conveyance marched a guard of honor of Kappan warriors. The rear contingent kept close to the cart, but the advance party had opened a noticeable gap between themselves and the hulking team.

The procession halted, the soldier in charge raised his spear in salute to Eemakh, and the shaken Terran was assisted to dismount. He introduced himself to Mayne as Robert Melin.

"Let's go over to the hut they made for us an' sit down," suggested Voorhis.

Melin, a tall, gloomy blond whose civilian suit seemed a trifle formal for the surroundings, acceded gratefully. He mopped the dust from his long face and watched the cart being turned around.

The procession moved off in the direction of the village, the advance guard stepping out especially smartly, and Mayne began to get his conference arranged.

He learned that the evicted crew of the *Gemsbok* had been living in the hut nearby. Before it stood a long table with benches, all evidently knocked together from recently felled timber. Melin was given credit for this by Voorhis, since before the arrival of the insurance adjuster and his crew, no power tools had been available to the men from the *Gemsbok*.

Mayne took a place at the end of the table. Some of the *Gemsbok's* crew came out of the hut to watch. Most of the Kappan warriors attending the chief took up stations between the table and the ship, in a manner suggesting long habit. Mayne guessed that attempts had been made to re-enter the ship.

He put Haruhiku at his right hand to translate should it be necessary. Melin and Voorhis sat at his left, their backs to the hut. To the other side of the table, Eemakh brought two Kappans who were explained to Mayne as being the tribal high priest, Igrillik, and Kaynox, who represented a sort of district overlord.

"I meant to land up by *their* city," Voorhis put in, "but we hit some bad winds up

in the stratosphere. We got knocked around a bit in the storm, and set down where we could."

"Well, tell me about the details," said Mayne. "I want to get this straight from the start, if I can. By the way, Lieutenant Haruhiku, explain to the chief that a special envoy is on the way, that we want his friendship, and that he will be dealt with fairly."

He waited out the exchange of choppy speech between the pilot and Eemakh.

"He says he is sure he will be fairly dealt with," reported Haruhiku.

"I wonder what he meant by that," murmured Mayne. "If we make a deal here, and thereby with his overlord, will that cover enough territory to be official?"

"As much as you can get together anywhere on this world, sir."

Mayne nodded, then turned to Captain Voorhis.

"Now about this so-called crash?" he prompted.

"Well, there was this storm, like I said. Trouble was we didn't expect to hit it and ... well ... somebody took it in his head to blow some of the fuel tanks for a crash landing. That's why I'm not claimin' anythin' on the fuel," he finished, turning to Melin.

"We are perfectly willing to pay on that item," replied the insurance man.

"Anyhow," continued Voorhis, "I set down here where we saw the open spot, an' then of course we were stuck with nothin' to lift off with. It looked all right. We'd unload our goods, an' if the local crowd couldn't use them all, why they'd pass the rest on at a profit to themselves. So we come out to palaver, an' then they won't let us go back in the ship. We were just lucky my com man had sent out a landing report when it looked like we piled up, or the Space Force patrol never woulda heard of us."

"Was there any trouble?" asked Mayne. "Any unnecessary hostility?"

Voorhis considered, rubbing the back of his head thoughtfully.

"Well ... I suppose, lookin' at it their way, they coulda been a lot rougher. A couple of punches got thrown, an' one of my boys got a spear busted over his head, but mostly they acted ... well ... maybe more like cops than cannibals."

"Just enforcing the native laws, eh?"

Voorhis did not swallow that quite so graciously. He did not know or care what the local laws might be, but he thought it suspicious in the extreme that he should have plopped down exactly upon the spot chosen by the natives for a temple.

"So do they have to use my ship to hang it on?" he finished plaintively.

"The company is in agreement with you there, captain," Melin put in. "You see, Judge, our point is that nothing is really lost or seriously damaged, neither ship nor cargo. They are merely being withheld from their rightful owner, and we believe that puts the responsibility for recovery upon the Terran government. Captain Voorhis has our entire sympathy—"

"Yeah!" said Voorhis. "An' if I get my head sliced off tryin' to get at that undamaged cargo, you'll come to my funeral! I say it's a loss!"

"Now, gentlemen!" interrupted Mayne. "Let me get on with this. Both of you, I'm sure, realize that I'm not a lawyer in spite of being a special judge. If the colonies way out here had enough lawyers to spare, I certainly wouldn't be sticking my head into this. Nevertheless, any decision I make here will be regarded as legally binding by the government of Rigel IX, so let us remain level-headed."

"Very well, Judge," said Melin. "Here are the figures on—"

"Please round them off," said Mayne. "If I have to listen to a long list in centicredits, I'll probably go off to see what kind of beer they brew here."

"You wouldn't like it," muttered Voorhis, staring sourly at the village.

"No doubt," grinned Mayne.

Melin swallowed and returned to an inner pocket a sheaf of papers he had withdrawn.

"Speaking very loosely," he went on, as if hating to do anything loosely, "the coverage was about as follows: for the *Gemsbok* herself, two million; but that was really a nominal figure accorded as a sort of courtesy. Otherwise, at her true worth, the authorities would hardly have permitted Captain Voorhis to take her

into space—"

"Get on with it," urged Mayne, to forestall any wrangle.

"Er ... yes. Then on the cargo, the purchase cost of two hundred thousand credits."

Voorhis visibly flinched and began to acquire a ruddy hue.

"And, finally, on the fuel load, the cost price of three hundred thousand. Of course, Judge, there are detailed clauses as to normal use of fuel. He was actually insured against defects, premature explosions, accidental loss, et cetera."

Mayne did some addition in his head.

"So your company," he said aloud, "is prepared to pay two and a half million for the loss sustained by Captain Voorhis. What seems to be wrong with that?"

Both men began to talk but Melin, struggling less with temper, got the lead.

"Actually," he said, "we feel liable for only three hundred thousand."

Now it will get tough, thought Mayne. He silently awaited elucidation.

The combined stares of all parties, including the enigmatic glance of Eemakh, calmed the spluttering Voorhis. Melin continued.

"In the first place, the true value of the ship, even if we consider her to be incapacitated—which we do not—is only about one hundred and fifty thousand."

"She's worth more than that as scrap!" bellowed Voorhis.

"No, captain, just about that. It is exactly how we valued her. Do you have any idea, Judge, of how old that crock is?"

"Let's not go into that just yet," suggested Mayne.

"As to the fuel," said Melin, "I am willing, as a gesture of good will, to stick my company's neck out—and mine with it, you may be sure—and honor a full claim."

"Even though he used about half the fuel getting here?" asked Mayne.

"We'll ignore that. We admit that he is out of fuel, and we want to—"

"You want to give me a moon and take a star," said Voorhis.

"Just a minute!" Mayne held up his hand. "That's the ship and the fuel. What about the cargo?"

"Why, as to that, Judge, we do not admit that it is lost. It is right over there, easily accessible. We consider it more the job of the Space Force to restore rightful possession than it is the responsibility of the company to reimburse Captain Voorhis for the inflated value he sets upon it."

"I begin to see," murmured Mayne. "You can't stick each other, so you're out to slip *me* the bill."

That aroused a babble of denials. Mayne eventually made himself heard and demanded to know how the spacer's evaluation differed from Melin's. Voorhis pulled himself together, glowering at the insurance man.

"In the first place," he growled, "I don't want his lousy payment for fuel. I said I'd take the blame for that, an' I will. On the ship ... well, maybe she ain't worth two million. Maybe she ain't been for a few years now—"

Melin made a show of counting on his fingers.

"... But they charged me premiums by that figure an' I say they oughta pay by that figure."

"But can you prove she's a total loss, captain?" asked Mayne.

Voorhis grimaced and spat upon the ground.

"Try to get near her, Judge! You'll get proof fast enough!"

"Well ... about the cargo, then?"

"*That's* where he's gouging me!" exploded Voorhis. "The idea of using the cost as of loading on Rigel IX! Hell, you know the margin of profit there is in trading on these new planets, twenty to one at least. I figured to lift off with four million worth of ores, gems, curios, and whatnot."

"So your point is that the mere transportation of the goods through space to this planet increased their value. What about that, Mr. Melin?"

Melin shifted uncomfortably on his bench. Mayne would have liked to change his own position, but feared splinters.

"There is an element of truth in that," admitted Melin. "Still, it would be rash to expect such a return every time a tramp spaceship lands to swap with some aboriginal easy marks."

"I suppose," said Mayne, "that our orange-eyed friends speak no Terran?"

"I hope not!" exclaimed Voorhis.

"Well, anyway," Melin said after a startled pause, "how can we be expected to pay off on hopes? He wants the paper figure for the ship; but he refuses the paper figure for the cargo."

Mayne shrugged. He turned to Haruhiku.

"If Captain Voorhis and Mr. Melin don't mind, lieutenant, I'd like to get the chief's view of all this."

"Hah!" grunted Voorhis, clapping both hands to his head.

Melin contented himself with rolling his eyes skyward.

With Haruhiku translating, Mayne began to get acquainted with the Kappans. The visitor from the neighboring city chose mostly to listen attentively, but Igrillik, the priest, occasionally leaned over to whisper sibilantly into Eemakh's recessed ear. Mayne fancied he saw a resemblance between the two, despite Igrillik's professional trappings—a long robe of rough material that had been dyed in stripes and figures of several crude colors, and a tall cap to which were attached a number of pairs of membraneous wings.

The first thing that Mayne learned was that the *Gemsbok* was not a spaceship; it was a symbol, a sign sent to the Kappans by the great god Meeg.

"And why did he send it?" asked Mayne.

He had sent it as a sign that he was impatient with his children. They had vowed him a temple, they had set aside the necessary land, and yet they had not begun the work.

"Is that why they're all over there, slaving away so feverishly?"

It was indeed the reason. After all, Meeg was the god of the inner moon, the one that passed so speedily across the sky. If he could guide the strangers' ship directly to his own plot of ground, he might just as easily have caused it to land in the center of the village. They had seen the flames that attended the landing. Could the honored chief from the stars blame them for heeding the warning?

"I see their point," muttered Mayne resignedly. "Well, maybe we can talk sense about the cargo. Tell them that there is much in the holds that would make their lives richer. Tools, gems, fine cloth—give them the story, lieutenant."

This time, Eemakh conferred with the high priest. It developed that the cargo was a sacred gift to be used or not as the god Meeg might subsequently direct. The chief meant no insult. The Kappans realized that Voorhis and his crew were no demons, but starmen such as had often brought valuable goods to trade. The Kappans had not sought to harm or sacrifice them, had they? This was because they were both welcome as visitors and respected as instruments of Meeg.

Eemakh wished to be fair. The starmen might think they had lost by the divine mission. Very well—they would be granted land, good land with forest for hunting and shoreline for fishing. But go near the temple they should not!

"Could *I* get in to inspect the cargo?" asked Mayne.

Haruhiku took this up with the Kappans, who softened but did not yield.

"The best I can get, Judge," said the pilot, "is that they wish it were possible but only those who serve the purposes of Meeg may enter."

"They *would* look at it that way," sighed Mayne. "Let's leave it at that, until we can think this over some more. It's time for a lunch break anyway."

He and Haruhiku were flown back to the scout ship. Mayne brooded silently most of the way. Voorhis thought he was entitled to about six million credits for ship and cargo; Melin thought half a million for the ship and fuel would be stretching it. Mayne foresaw that he would have to knock heads.

The two of them lunched in the pilot's cabin, with hardly room to drop a spoon. Except for companionship, Mayne would as soon have eaten standing in the galley.

He considered the vast area of the planet's land surface. Would it be wiser for the

envoy to land elsewhere? What sort of ties were there between tribes?

"Loose," the pilot told him. "Still, word gets around, with no great mountain or ocean barriers. They've split into groups, but there is a lot of contact."

"So if the Space Force should seize the *Gemsbok*, they'll all hear about it?"

"Within a few weeks, sir. That kind of news has wings on any world. I think we could take her for you, but we might do some damage. The size of a scout crew doesn't lend itself to hand-to-hand brawls."

"And if you sling a couple of torpedoes at the Kappan village, you'll probably wipe it out," said Mayne thoughtfully. "Give the story a month to spread, and no Terran would be trusted anywhere on the planet. Hm-m-m ... hardly practical!"

"There would also be a chance of damaging the *Gemsbok*."

"Actually, Eric, I'd hardly care if you blew her into orbit, with Voorhis and Melin riding the fins! But I'm supposed to spread sweetness and light around here—not scraps and parts of spaceships."

He gnawed moodily upon a knuckle, but saw no way to escape putting up some government money. Soaking the company would just make *them* appeal instead of Voorhis.

"This Meeg," he said to change the subject. "How important is he?"

Haruhiku considered a moment before replying.

"They have a whole mess of gods, like most primitive societies. Meeg is pretty important. I think he has a special significance to this tribe ... you know, like some ancient Terran cities has a special patron."

"He's the god of that little moon?" Mayne asked.

"Oh, more than that, I think. Really the god of speed, a message bearer for the other divinities. There always seems to be one in every primitive mythology."

"Yes," murmured Mayne. "Let's see ... one parallel would be the ancient Terran Hermes, wouldn't it?"

"Something like that," agreed Haruhiku. "I'm a little vague on the subject, sir. At least, he isn't one of the bloodthirsty ones."

"That helps," sighed Mayne, "but not enough."

He got a message blank from the pilot. With some labor, he composed a request to Terran headquarters on Rigel IX for authorization to spend two million credits on good-will preparations for the Terran-Kappan treaty conference.

It almost sounds diplomatic, he told himself before having the message sent.

The waiting period that followed was more to be blamed upon headquarters pussyfooting than upon the subspace transmission. When an answer finally came, it required a further exchange of messages.

Mayne's last communique might have been boiled down to, "But I *need* it!"

The last reply granted provisional permission to spend the sum mentioned; but gleaming between the lines like the sweep of a revolving beacon was a strong intimation that Mayne had better not hope to charge the item to "good will." The budget just was not made that way, the hint concluded.

"It's due to get dark soon, isn't it?" he asked Haruhiku, crumpling the final message into a side pocket. "I don't believe I'll resume the talks till morning. Maybe my head will function again by then."

In the morning, one of the scout's crew again took the pilot and Mayne to the meeting by helicopter. Mayne spent part of the trip mulling over a message Haruhiku had received. The spaceship *Diamond Belt* could be expected to arrive in orbit about the planet later the same day, bearing special envoy J. P. McDonald. The captain, having been informed of Haruhiku's presence, requested landing advice.

"I told him what I know," said the pilot. "We can give him a beam down, of course, unless you think we should send him somewhere else."

"Well ... let's see how this goes," said Mayne. "They seem to be waiting for us down there."

They landed to find Voorhis, Melin, and the native officialdom gathered at the hut facing the new "temple." After exchanging greetings, they sat down at the table as they had the day before.

"All right, gentlemen," said Mayne to the two Terrans. "You win. The

government is going to have to put something in the pot. I want to make it as little as possible, so let us have no more nonsense about the true value of ship or cargo as they stand."

They looked startled at his tone. Mayne went on before they could recover.

"The object I have in mind, if it seems at all possible, is to put Captain Voorhis back in business without costing Mr. Melin his job. Now, let's put our heads together on that problem and worry about justifying ourselves later."

The most difficult part was to convince Voorhis to surrender his dream of fantastic profits; but sometime before Mayne got hoarse, the captain was made to see that he could not have his cake and eat it, too.

Melin agreed that he might pay the paper value of the *Gemsbok* if he could pay likewise for the cargo, in which case he would admit a loss. After all, a spaceship anchored by a temple might reasonably be termed unspaceworthy. He would take over the cargo and cut his losses by allowing the government to buy it at two million.

"You wanna come with me next trip?" invited Voorhis when he heard this. "If that's how you cut loose, we'll make a fortune!"

"Well, there it is," said Mayne, straightening up to ease his aching back. He must have been leaning tensely over the table longer than he had thought. "The captain gets two and a half million, Mr. Melin gets off with paying only half a million, and you've stuck me for the rest."

"Congratulations, Judge!" said Melin. "You now own a ship and cargo which I presume you will present to the Kappans."

"How can he?" demanded Voorhis. "They figure they own it already."

"We'll worry about that later," said Mayne.

"You will!" Voorhis guffawed. "I hope you get *some* credit out of it."

Haruhiku interrupted to inform Mayne that the Kappans, who had been interested if bewildered listeners, had invited the Terrans to a small feast.

"I translated enough to let them understand there would be no attempt to disturb their temple building," he explained. "They now feel they owe us hospitality."

"Good, that's something," said Mayne.

"I'll tell you what else will be something," grunted Voorhis. "The food!"

The assemblage repaired to the Kappan village. The Terrans—though it took some doing—survived the feast.

Mayne thought it best not to inquire into the nature of the dishes served. Eemakh was evidently determined to display his village's finest hospitality, so the Terrans even tried the Kappan beer. Mayne absorbed enough to get used to it.

Or did it absorb me? he wondered. *Igrillik's beginning to look almost human!*

Eventually, carts were brought, and they rode bumpily out to admire progress made on the temple. A fresh breeze helped Mayne to remember that it was now late afternoon and he had yet to settle one matter with Eemakh.

When they arrived at the site, crewmen from the *Gemsbok* saw fit to take Voorhis in charge and carry him into their hut. Mayne sank down at the table outside, watching Melin grope to a place beside him. He noticed that Haruhiku's helicopter pilot handed him a message as soon as the lieutenant alighted.

"That will be from the *Diamond Belt*," Mayne guessed.

He eyed Melin with some amusement. The insurance man stared very quietly at the board beneath his elbows. His complexion held a tint of green. Even Eemakh, plodding ponderously up, lowered himself to a bench with a sigh. The high priest seemed less affected by the celebration, and Mayne was proud when Haruhiku walked over with his normal bland alertness.

"They're getting near?" he asked.

"Doing braking circles," reported the pilot. "I sent an order for the scout to give them a beam. There may still be time to send them somewhere else—"

"One more try here first," Mayne decided. "Tell Eemakh we want to straighten out some confusion about Meeg and the cargo."

Haruhiku permitted himself a small shrug and translated. Eemakh aroused himself to a show of interest, while Igrillik turned a suspicious orange stare upon Mayne. The latter strove to frame in his mind an argument that would strike them as logical.

"Tell him," he instructed, "that we believe this Meeg was known on Terra, but by another name. Then describe the mythical Hermes and see what he says."

Haruhiku began a conversation that lasted several minutes. Igrillik, as an authority, obviously felt moved to deliver a lengthy opinion. At last, the pilot turned to Mayne.

"They say we are to be congratulated," he reported.

"Is that all?"

"Well, they do seem a bit more friendly. I was going to try drawing a picture of that famous statue, with the winged heels and hat, but it would never match their own conception. Igrillik asks if you claim belief in Meeg."

"Avoid that," said Mayne. "Now—do they know about ship communications?"

"They are aware that it is done," said Haruhiku. "After all, they just saw me send a message to the scout over the helicopter screen."

"Good! Point out to them that the *Gemsbok* also has such equipment."

Haruhiku engaged in another long talk. The Kappans began to show signs of uneasiness at the end. They remained silent.

"And that therefore," added Mayne, "the Terran who served this machine should rank in their eyes as a servant of Meeg just as much as Igrillik. The cargo in the ship was no more his than a message belongs to the messenger bearing it."

The pilot put this into Kappan, with gestures.

"And furthermore," said Mayne, before it could be suggested that the owner might be Meeg, "what I have arranged here with Melin and Voorhis is that the cargo now belongs to all of the Terran people."

Eemakh began to scowl, an impressive contortion on a broad, olive Kappan visage. Mayne hurried on.

"This being the case, the Kappans *have absolutely no right* to deny us the privilege of contributing all these goods to the glory of their temple!"

"Oh, boy!" grunted Haruhiku. He rattled off the translation.

Mayne watched it hit home. Igrillik leaned over to peer at him unbelievably.

Eemakh seemed to have difficulty in focusing his glowing eyes on the Terran.

There were, of course, requests for clarification. Mayne left the repetitions to the pilot.

In the end, Eemakh arose and embraced him, a startling action that left Mayne feeling introspectively of his ribs. Igrillik called out something to the bodyguard attending the chief, causing Mayne to repress a shudder at the flashing display of big Kappan teeth. He assumed that a smile was a humanoid constant.

Haruhiku's pilot approached with a new message.

"Now they have to land near here, in half an hour or less," said the spacer.

"There's just one more thing," Mayne told him. "Voorhis is satisfied, Melin—look, he's gone to sleep on the table!—is relieved, the Kappans are friendly, and J. P. McDonald will be happy when he lands. Now I have to get myself off the hook for two million!"

He turned to the *Gemsbok* crewmen loitering before the hut.

"Who was the communications man?" he demanded.

A lean, freckled youth with a big nose admitted to the distinction. Mayne draped an arm about his shoulders and told him he was back in business.

"Say to them," he instructed Haruhiku, "that if they are to learn how to use the equipment Meeg has provided for their temple, they must not delay one minute in taking our friend here into the ship ... uh ... make that 'temple.' He will show them how a spaceship is called down from the skies."

Haruhiku gave him a straight-faced glance that was a masked guffaw. He translated, and orders began to be shouted back and forth among the Kappans, all the way to the top-most level of the construction. The lieutenant called his pilot.

"I'll have him flash the scout an order to monitor the *Gemsbok* and transfer landing control as soon as they hear her on the air," he explained.

Mayne nodded. He clutched the arm of the *Gemsbok* operator, who was being urged away by Igrillik and a group of warrior escorts.

"Just one thing, son," he shouted over the babble. "Forget about the ship's call

sign. You go on the air calling yourself Kappa Orionis Central Control."

"Kappa Orionis Central...?" repeated the youth distrustfully.

"You've got it," said Mayne, and shoved him on his way. He turned to Haruhiku. "The last thing to do is to send the helicopter for some paint. I don't care if it *isn't* dry when the *Diamond Belt* touches down—I want a sign over the door of this hut!"

"A sign?"

"Make it read 'Spaceport Number 1.' Two million is cheap enough for buying a spaceport already in operation. There won't be any trouble, since the Kappans promised the land."

Everyone seemed to be running somewhere. Mayne wiped his face with a handkerchief and sat down beside Melin, who looked comfortable enough with his head on the table.

From inside the hut, Mayne could hear snores that must have Voorhis as a source; the rest of the *Gemsbok* crewmen had followed the crowd to the control tower that was also a temple. After a while, Haruhiku returned and sat down across from Melin.

"Magnificent, Judge!" he said. "We might even get away with it."

"Of course we will," said Mayne, gazing at Melin and listening to Voorhis. "After all, Hermes was the god of thieves, too!"

THE END

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