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To The Last Rite!

by
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One-Girk-Two sadly shivered against the cold of this strange, possibly hostile, alien world. Fingers of light probed between the mountain depressions ahead, signifying that morning had come and that the time had arrived to awaken his whole body, in this, his life's greatest trial.

The swirled yellow-in-blue snappers around his boulder had finally quieted, some of the wounded dying while the more aggressive ones had scuttled away in search of other prey. One-Girk-Two stared at the remaining horde below, shivering with the thought of how close those razor-sharp claws had come to his soft, organic form. How fortunate he had been to respond in terror to their noisy click-clack during the dark of the night and to have scrambled to his present safe perch. From the number of injuries and deaths below, they must have slashed one another in wild displays of temper and frustration during the night.

Was patience a necessary solution against the dangerous elements of this planet? Was it a necessary characteristic which he must possess to advance from a Two to a One?

He did not know.

Whatever the case, he was thrilled by the opportunity to strive for the mighty advancement of himself from a Two to a One. The fact that all of his kind had similar chances -- or perished -- made no difference to him. Instinctively and consciously his tiny body cried for the right to try and rejoiced at the dangerous situation's potential.

Every One-Girk longed to be a One-Girk-One for that was the nature of genetic heritage as well as purpose for being.

Actually the symbols One, Girk and Two were quite literal transcriptions of an otherwise alien viewpoint most difficult for human understanding. Such symbols are vague approximations of their true meaning. The first "One" stood for the fact that One-Girk-Two was composed primarily of neural tissue whose ultimate function might be that of providing the drive and decision-making function of the Unit -- a composite of many Girks, each of different but coordinated function.

The "Two" stood for the fact that this particular One-Girk had achieved success in passing every civilized test for his species -- fourteen in total number -- except the last. Should he pass this last test, consisting partially of his ability to survive in a strange and hostile environment and partially upon an as yet unknown set of criteria, he would automatically raise himself to the rank of a One-Girk-One, with all of its rights and privileges assigned.

Which simply meant that this particular Girk organism had been approved by the standards of his society and that he was fit to coordinate the activities of the complete, composite organism which made up the Girk Unit.

Though his tiny eyebuds still roved over the slain snappers, One-Girk-Two's busy thoughts actually reflected the lessons he'd learned during his early period of trial successes. To appreciate interrelationships fully, one must be a Unit. Becoming a Unit was the highest ideal. Noting and understanding relationships is a great achievement. Partially sensed fragments of instinctive concepts within the range of One-Girk-One were awesome and overshadowed all feelings of fear during his present hideous test.

He glanced toward the horizon noting the thin, dull streak of light reflected through the morning clouds. Dew had just fallen, leaving glistening spheres everywhere. One-Girk-Two stretched his surface membranes, the better to absorb moisture.



Turning thoughts back to the snappers below, he considered their relationship to the flora and fauna around. Without predators of some kind the fertile grasses and forests would soon be overgrazed and overburdened with herbivorous life forms. Then, life's balance destroyed, all would wither and die until a new balance came into being.

He recognized the last thought as fragmentary, far below the Unit knowledge level of interrelationships. With the snappers, proper toll was taken of the herbivorous life forms, food of another kind was returned to the grasses below -- and this was as far as his present knowledge reached. Every cycle had other cycles interlaced -- the rain, the grass, the minerals, the animals -- perhaps, even as a lowly One-Girk-Two, if he were to concentrate sufficiently long and hard he would be able to see how the very planet's motion cycled and interlaced with the ultimate purpose of the snappers.

The thought was one to muse on. But now the light had become stronger and he knew that the day would bring a new set of trials, a new set of tests -- perhaps even his death. It was nevertheless a joyfully encountered time -- for it could bring him closer to Unit status.

His appendages were weak, developed primarily for locking into Unit position for life. His tools were primitive -- heat gun, food convertor, signal generator. Somewhere during the night a change in attitude had taken place in his makeup. Unable at first to use the heat gun against life forms even in self-defense, One-Girk-Two had scabbled away from the snappers and found safety above their clacking claws. He had rationalized the action to himself as unwillingness to use up charge.

But the night's changes in his attitude now caused him to unlimber the heat beam, take aim at the still living, dangerous snappers and press the button. Steam sizzled upward from the rocks below until they were covered with charred and smelly snappers no longer capable of action against him. He was truly relieved -- their sharply lined mouths and their clutching, curling foot pods, too, were gone.

Another attitude had changed. Patience is good. Death, too, may serve a useful purpose -- that another might live.

Would these thoughts endure so that he could bring them back to his own planet? He did not know.

Immediate danger over, he still stayed to think through his next move. The light would soon be stronger. The ship, which was most certainly monitoring his every movement, would probably expect him to move on soon. Would his test be valid without moving constantly over the planet's surface? He did not know.

Probably inaction would mean automatic failure. And, having failed the test, this particular One-Girk-Two would be eliminated -- killed as useless, of no purpose in the cycle of things in his present form. He would be destroyed -- returned to ashes of ordinary chemical compounds to be spread over the single broad sea of the home planet.

How civilized the test! Tens of thousands of years ago the Two-Girk-Ones (bodies), Three-Girk-Ones (mobiles), along with the One-Girk-Ones (brains), were assembled into Units by trial and error caused by the play of wind and wave. How long it must have taken before civilization created a sensible set of rules for the assembly of Unit selections!

The value of each assembled Unit was determined by the selection processes, too. He knew that should he survive the current tests he would become a part of a very important Unit, indeed. Great inward pleasure swept through One-Girk-Two as he contemplated the future.

The sun's rays probed his soft flesh. He pushed out his almost atrophied, fine-line appendages and used them to move from the rock. Gravity was stronger here by an eighth than on his home world. Simple movement was slow and time-consuming.

He woke his body and put every cell to the effort of traversing the long, grassy valley. His senses were alerted for the tiniest sound which might indicate movement of snappers. His eyes and tympanic membranes were especially alerted for dangers of unknown size and type.

Ahead he could see billowing strands of blue-green grass. To his right were low-lying hills, browned



and dusty in the morning sunlight. On his left was a creek bed and beyond the creek bed he could see a thick forest of dark blue-green.

Immediately ahead he spotted the double humps of nesting insects he'd found to be numerous and painful. On the day of his arrival he'd walked unknowingly into similar humps where he'd been stung repeatedly. He gave these humps wide berth.

At a dry creek bed he was careful not to dislodge gravel or rattle the dry, rustling brush as he slipped down toward the bottom.

The creek followed the edge of the forest and One-Girk-Two noted that a cleared space on either side provided an easy view for possible dangers. Sharp-edged stones and pointed sticks that every now and then gouged his tender flesh. Travel was not too difficult, however.

Sudden sounds of scrambling rocks and hustling bushes halted him warily, and, almost without thinking, he edged his slight body under the roots of a tree at the creek's edge.

A thundering noise was followed by billows of dust and then the outlines of gigantic animals loomed through the dust. One-Girk-Two raised his heat beam to face the great bulks in the event they had chosen him as their target. He didn't think the slight beam would affect their thick hides, and so he hunched down quietly.

The herd thundered past.

One-Girk-Two eased out to the middle of the creek bed again, and when he later looked downward he discovered that his signal generator was missing. Without it, he'd never be able to signal the ship at pickup time, so he backtracked, finding the device hanging on a root in his earlier hiding place. He carefully latched it to his body pack, checked his food converter, and turned down the stream bed again.

When the creek finally turned away from the forest, One-Girk-Two painfully pulled himself over its steep bank onto the forest floor. He didn't want to walk among the tall trees, as there were many unknowns throughout the whole planet, and he suspected that the woods might hide more dangers than he'd be able to spot in time for defense. Still, the hot sun beat heavily against his thin, liquid-demanding hide, and so he eased himself into the shadows, laboriously pulling himself along by means of brush and clumps of tough grasses found scattered in open glades.

Presently he stood before a giant black-boled tree fringed with delicate blue-green lacy stringers. He looked upward and viewed thick branches and gnarled limbs linked together with gossamer webbings. Birds? Insects? Plants? He did not know.

When he stepped gingerly forward, he felt himself caught up and was swung around and forward. All of his tiny appendages were tightly bound, held by something unseen, and he could not reach for his heat beam.

He could not move.

II

Strands of sticky fibers closed over One-Girk-Two, wrapping him in a nest of crisscross lines. Panic stricken, he nonetheless noted other bundles hanging from other tree branches, as if they were growths from the tree itself. One bundle was jerking and bobbing back and forth. The trapped creature was persistent, and its energy never ceased, for the bundle jerked and bobbed constantly. Suddenly, a fearsome apparition descended on it, a being without discernable form, an amorphous mass without appendages. It clung to the frantically bouncing bundle. A fold extruded from this new creature, stretching over and wrapping the fighting creature, after which all motion ceased.

One-Girk-Two knew his odds for survival were low, and a deep depression swept through him. Then, from the depths of a long genetic heritage, the urge to survive formulated strongly, and the imagery on his potential for reaching Unit status. Massing together all of his formidable neural tissue, linking cell to cell, and pushing downward his fears, he concentrated on solutions to the problem at hand.



Associations flowed but in a disciplined manner, searching and discarding possible solutions. Finally the most probable line of approach was seized upon by more and more neuron clusters. His now massive intellect tested the hypothesis, mocking up reality as it must be, should be, will be, and so he resolved to try the thought in practice.

Part of One-Girk-Two's attention was focussed on the ambiguous being now feeding, while other parts of his body/mind began the simple process of secreting liquids through his external membrane. The weak, watery acid was rapidly absorbed by the vegetable-like fibers holding him, and capillary action moved the fluid evenly throughout the fibrous network. The webbing at first sagged, and then it broke open, spilling the nearly dehydrated One-Girk-Two clumsily to soft ground.

He knew a swift surge of pride and happiness, not at his own cleverness, but at the thought that he was still eligible to become a Unit component.

He carefully bypassed the webbing, making his way slowly through tangled woods again.

His external membrane slowly absorbed moisture from rising humidity beneath the thick foliage, restoring his body/brain fluids. When hunger came, it was but mere moments to drop organic debris picked up along the way through his food converter and change it to a thin paste that his body could ingest, after which he rested on the trunk of a fallen tree.

Part of One-Girk-Two's consciousness reflected on the environment around him, comparing and classifying sensations and shapes into safe, possibly safe, possibly dangerous and dangerous categories. The vine now ahead of him, for example, appeared as safe as thousands of others he'd seen.

Another small part of his reflections, like some small, irritating insect, considered the principles or philosophies he was expected to formulate and present during the final testing. So far he'd changed his pattern of behavior by terminating other life forms. It followed that his attitude and orientation toward himself and the universe were also changed. Was the change in the proper direction? He did not know.

Certainly the development of utilizing his whole mass of neural tissue when confronted with an otherwise unsolvable problem was in the right direction. Everything he instinctively knew about his hoped-for and ultimate goal hinted at even higher, almost godlike, powers of concentration that would be his as a Unit.

The vine ahead waved, but so did all the other vines hanging nearby. The wind whistled through a cone formed of foliage in the jungle roof. One-Girk-Two passed beneath the dangling plant when, without warning, it twisted and curled itself around him.

One-Girk-Two contracted his body and slipped out of the coils. Unfortunately his heat beam was jerked from its carrying strap and crushed.

Shock struck One-Girk-Two at this sudden loss. Could he survive such a hostile environment without the formidable heat weapon?

He did not know.

By the time One-Girk-Two had pushed his way up a steep ridge beyond the first section of jungled tangles, daylight was no more than a faint, gray line stretched along the horizon. He figured that the last light would be gone in moments.

His passage had been slow and difficult. Deep shadows smoothed the ground around him while beneath still was pain from loose rocks and dead branches, these latter often masking treacherous holes and other low places.

Twice he fell into such holes, making no outcry. Each time he carefully appraised his position, then pulled himself out in the most logical and efficient manner.

Unfamiliar, excessive gravity was beginning to take its toll. His body seemed to sag and appendages, never very strong, were slower at each mental command. At each step he more fully realized how faulty



were his plans. How could he have decided simply to move on and on across this planet, with no purpose to his direction? Perhaps he should have waited, first to develop philosophies.

Whatever, his present need was to rest the night on the ridge overlooking the thick forest below. There he would at the least be safe from snappers. What else might lie in wait for him was unknown and unknowable -- hence, must be risked.

He reached the end of the narrow plateau along which he'd traveled. Light was growing steadily weaker. In a very short while he'd be on top of the ridge and would command his body to rest while part of him kept watch.

A dry stick crackled and One-Girk-Two again plunged downward suddenly. This time his fall was more severe due to a longer fall. His body flattened outward, forming a thin membrane stretching precariously over rough, sharp rocks. More slowly than previously, he pulled himself together and heightened his other senses.

He heard a low, muted whisper at the end of this cavernlike trap. The sound might be the breathing, of an animal of some kind.

The hole through which he'd fallen had straight walls from top to bottom, showing no projections. He'd landed on tumbled rocks and organic debris, most of which had probably been sucked through the same hole that had caught him. But even in the dying light One-Girk-Two could easily view a tunnel lined with jagged rocks, probably created by ancient planetary processes.

The heavy breathing came from somewhere in the tunnel's darker portion.

One-Girk-Two pulled himself into a corner of the pit and waited with every sense alert. The breathing seemed to rise and fall in decibels, depending upon how close he pinpointed its source. To test his conjecture, he pushed his body toward the noise. The breathing quickened, and grew louder.

One-Girk-Two permitted his tissue to rest while he dwelt on consequences of the breathing phenomenon. The animal might or might not be dangerous. It could also be more frightened of him than he of it. In either case, his tissues needed rest and, until some light found its way into this new prison, his best judgment was that he should now rest.

When morning arrived with slim streaks of light finding their way into this hole, One-Girk-Two could see that the animal in the tunnel was considerably smaller than himself, and that dark fur covered its whole body. Its peering eyes were sunk beneath folds of fur, where large black centers collected the dim light.

He could make out smaller, similar forms beneath the body, and he realized that these were young being nurtured and protected. He congratulated himself for having chosen to wait during the night, because even harmless animals will attack when defending their young.

One-Girk-Two surmised that the tunnel was the animals' normal entranceway to the cavern. He decided to sidle with care past the nest in an effort to reach the outside world. Grasping a rocky shard, he held it between himself and the frightened animal as he carefully moved toward and alongside, whence sharp teeth were bared as the animal smoothly turned to face him as he sidled by.

At last he was able to let himself down into a narrow gash, shallow and barely wide enough to accommodate his bulk, yet a lucky opening, maybe, to the outside world. He worked his way down slowly, finding the descent surprisingly easy -- and then his good fortune ended.

Above his head was a crevice too high to climb. Through it came a bright spear of light illuminating a steep canyon. He could not leap the gap.

One-Girk-Two puzzled over the impasse, and then put all of his mind to work on the problem, as he'd learned to do when caught by the tree-webbing. Time stretched while connections and cross-connections were forged. Every possible solution to his difficulty presented itself and was discarded for one reason or another -- including the possibility of retracing steps to secure bridging materials from the burrowing



animal's nest.

The only solution was no solution at all -- rather, it was a gamble. He must attempt to jump. His brain estimated that his death was probable, regardless of which alternative. It told him that the probability of his successfully jumping the crevice was miniscule -- as little, perhaps, as 0.00001. Yet to do nothing was also certain death.

He glanced down again, noting the sharp projections of rocks along the sides of the crevice. He could not see the bottom where he heard a light sibilance -- a breath of air or maybe an echo of running water. Perhaps his brain had estimated a choice based upon these subliminal impressions -- perhaps there was water below.

Setting himself for the jump, he gathered together his various appendages and pushed them all in the same direction against the floor, arching clumsily over the center of the crevice.

He didn't make it, and fell swiftly.

III

The fall was long. One-Girk-Two believed that his body could not repair itself after a fall of such a distance. The sound of coursing water became plain, however, and just after plunging into deep despair, he found himself also plunging deeply into a cold, swift stream. His body pushed through the water and pressed itself lightly against the stream bed before the effects of the fall halted.

Naturally buoyant, he rose to the stream's surface where, bobbing around and up and down like a piece of tree bark, he rode the stream's swift, dark flight.

One-Girk-Two adjusted metabolism to both the dark and cold. He realized that his food converter was gone, as he reached about the surrounding water for it.

Now the stream's pounding through rocks and narrowing crevices pulled at his immediate attention. One-Girk-Two was heavily battered at each turn, and then suddenly the stream arched outward in a long, sweeping waterfall which he rode down, sickeningly plunging once again.

Tunnel walls widened and his ride became even and slow.

Light gleamed ever-brighter and, at the end, he leisurely and pleasantly floated out of the long tunnel's mouth into bright sunlight.

Too exhausted to struggle over the river's bank, he rested his body, permitting his remaining neural tissue to dwell on whatever random stimuli came to it. Inevitably his thoughts raced back to the beginning of his present plight and conflicting emotions he'd felt.

He was still alive, hence certainly still eligible for One-Girk-One status. Were his signal generator to be activated now, signaling the end of this portion of the final test, he'd still be lacking knowledge of those essential principles required for the true Unit status. What could they be? He did not know.

Cover was scant along the stream's banks. There was only a litter of rocks that had -- in storm-ridden times past -- scoured muddy grooves down the mountainside and had come to rest along the foot of its scrubby, thinly grown foothills.

Such plant life as existed had managed to sprout and to maintain itself on barren ground in the heat-blasted summers and extremely bitter winters. Scorching heat, even now, caused visible steam to rise from the river's surface.

One-Girk-Two had passed through a steep mountain range which divided this land into two climate zones. He almost wished for a return to the more comfortable -- but probably more dangerous -- jungle zone. Only his signal generator remained. He would absorb food through his membrane. Here, without his food converter and heat-beam, his nourishment would probably have to come from the raw blood of small animals. He shivered at the uncivilized thought.

By now the sun had reached its highest point. One-Girk-Two, using only a portion of his tissues, made the decision to stay in the water. It had slowed to a sluggish, muddy river.

He let his body rest, closing down even more of his conscious processes until only slight attention



was placed on the surrounding environment. The river swept slowly around snaky bends, moving him as much as five miles in curvilinear distance for every linear mile.

Trees, tall and stately, began to appear with increased frequency along the banks of the river. The sun passed its zenith and crept downward, and the trees cast longer shadows. Another turn in the river and suddenly a net arced over One-Girk-Two, entangling him and stimulating his tissue to full wakefulness.

Primitive animals in hollowed-out logs, had surrounded his floating form and thrown a net over him while he had rested. They appeared to be bipedal with two arms, two eyes, two ears and coverings of purple, silky, hair-like growth. Their mouths were rounded and, as they made what seemed to be talking noises to one another, he could see vicious-looking, needle-sharp teeth.

One jabbed at him with a wide stick probably used to propel a log through the water. One-Girk-Two let his membrane stretch to absorb the blow, meanwhile his appendages, below the visible waterline, were busy searching and testing every strand for some access route or weak link. He found none.

The net was drawn together more tightly and, without further blows from these floating animals, he was roughly hauled into one of their hollowed logs wherein these strange creatures sat. Once within, their inspection of him became more detailed and more painful. Two of the animals, using sharpened sticks, prodded and poked at every exposed area.

Again, and yet again, he adjusted membranes to absorb blows, but even his remarkable stretching capacity was finally not enough. One animal turned noisily to another, then prodded the stick completely through him. His outer membrane punctured, fluids leaked. Excruciating pain overcame him.

He shut off the pains, placing his wounded body parts into a deep sleep, while continuing to react to additional blows in other body parts.

Soon almost every part of his brain-tissue was compartmented and One-Girk-Two was no longer aware of his surroundings.

From One-Girk-Two's cage various tribal members could be seen in various postures, sitting, squatting or walking around a community fire. Twisted fibers from a tough tree root formed the bars of his cage. He'd already learned that his weak body acids would not burn through the bars, and most body tissues were closed off, to prevent the continuous pain from searing consciousness.

Water was never offered, so he absorbed liquids slowly from the air's humidity -- a pitiful quantity, barely allowing normal biological functions to proceed.

Food was thrown by amused bystanders, and only through trial and error did he learn which scraps were sufficiently fine-grained to be absorbed by his external membrane.

Some foods had to be washed by exudations from his bodily fluids, breaking down their cellular structure so that he could absorb some of the nutrients. Other particles had to be left to rot, until microorganisms had broken up their matrices. All these ways helped provide life-giving nourishment, and they were new ways, invented by himself out of necessity.

Though all these primitive conditions for survival were painful and burdensome, nothing hurt his emotions more than the loss of his signal generator. Without that precious means of contact, life itself was unimportant -- no opportunity -- no opportunity at all to become a member of a Unit, and so he was as nothing, nothing at all.

But a spark of hope continued. He could view the signal generator dangling from the neck of one who appeared to be dominant. It was a rugged mechanism and might still be operating despite daily abuse.

Often One-Girk-Two directed the total mass of his tissues in search of a solution to his present plight. A slight suggestion of escape -- a bare, tenuous possibility seemed to offer itself. To that possibility, he devoted every bit of conscious neural tissue.



Evening was the time for peaceful social gatherings. At that time, fishermen, hunters and their trainees, the children, relaxed, and sleep was not far distant. Daylight was nearly gone, few daily activities remained to be performed.

Females usually enclosed their very youngest in brilliant red skinfolds to protect them from colder air during the evenings. The older children, more self-sufficient, followed their assigned instructor and formed into larger groups for what appeared to be games.

Frequently a group of youngsters assembled outside One-Girk-Two's cage to prod him with sticks, throw pebbles, sand or garbage, or simply to stand quietly and stare through large, unblinking eyes.

One of these primitives in particular had sustained an unusual curiosity. He'd never teased or thrown objects. He'd come night upon night to stare and seemingly to study One-Girk-Two.

One-Girk-Two looked forward to this small, actually trivial, event -- for in that small alien's behavior lay the tiny, almost insignificant possibility for survival. He'd determined to learn their language, and this small, unswerving child was a potential key to a major effort. As most children were fully engaged in prodding or somehow attempting to get a response from him, this particular male child seemed like a very fortuitous anomaly.

The strategy he developed was simple. Whenever the male child appeared, One-Girk-Two sidled over to the bars, placing his body as close to the child as possible. There was nothing more he could do until he learned their language.

Meanwhile, he absorbed noises and related them to patterns of behavior. Had his body not been so totally injured and compartmented, he might have learned very much more rapidly, but he did learn.

The day finally arrived when, with persistent use of his remaining integrative functions, he brought the language to his abnormally small conscious portion and, with the exception of some ambiguities here and there, he was ready for speech trials.

He waited until no one but the unusual child was nearby. His reproductions were not too easily recognizable as speech, for One-Girk-Two's membrane was not capable of imitating sounds struck from needle-sharp dentures. At first the child to whom they were directed was delighted with this new phenomenon, and all were invited to hear the sounds. Prodding by sticks increased, until he and other children learned that One-Girk-Two immediately shut off the sounds, so for many weeks afterward all prodding ceased and One-Girk-Two rewarded their behavior by attempting his peculiar speech patterns at every opportunity.

Visiting tribesmen were fascinated with One-Girk-Two and soon great status was associated with the tribe that possessed him. Meanwhile, One-Girk-Two's speech patterns improved, though slowly, and he rewarded Sutic, the young male he'd chosen as contact, by reserving for him a true description of his origins, saying, "I am One-Girk-Two from another world beyond your sun. I'm here to complete my apprenticeship before becoming whole, a One-Girk-One, should I pass my final test. I become then a member of a Unit, the highest form of our life."

Such concepts as "Unit" and "One-Girk-Two" were exceedingly difficult to communicate to the primitive alien and were perhaps never made clear. The idea of a "world beyond our sun" was not quite so difficult, for Sutic was familiar with worlds beyond the desert, beyond the mountain, beyond the trees, beyond life and so on.

Soon Sutic's special knowledge and relationship with their captive raised Sutic in the tribe's esteem.

In due time One-Girk-Two made his request of Sutic, saying, "I must have the box hanging around your chief's neck. Without it I will not continue to live."

"Grandfather places much *sebble* on the box. He would never part with it."

Unable to translate the word *sebble*, One-Girk-Two inferred that it represented either "prestige," or "magic."



With the gradual approach of colder weather, One-Girk-Two assumed a spherical shape to maximize heat conservation. When he explained to Sutic why he'd change form, Sutic acquired for him a place nearer the ever-present campfire, and also had hides placed inside his cage. But One-Girk-Two continued to be unable to shake Sutic's reluctance to approach his grandfather on the subject of the box around his grandfather's neck.

Surely the Watchers, high above, knew where he was and what was happening to him, for they had broad and mysterious powers belonging only to the Unit level. The rules for trial were clear and specific. He must maintain signal contact with them, and be ready to respond to their signal at any time they initiated contact. Soon, he knew, he'd be stranded among these aliens. In point of fact, he may already be stranded. There was no way to tell. Signals may already have come for his response. If this were so, then all his efforts to retrieve the box were already too late. He did not know.

Slowly One-Girk-Two became part of the tradition of Sutic's tribe, the Corogers. When the cold season passed, and then the windy season, it was followed by the hot season. The sun blazed mercilessly, but by then One-Girk-Two was given his physical freedom as a tribal pet might have been. Of course, he found many excuses to remain by the head-man's side -- and near his signal generator.

He learned that the tribe's life was stable in both births and deaths; food was easy in the streams or foothills, and even in the deserts. Climate was not immoderate for the genetic heritage of the Corogers, and their tempers, though undisciplined, were for the most part even. Their tribal life was unassuming, a pastoral but primitive framework. He watched and waited.

He also reflected on the lessons he'd learned from this long venture, their possible content and significance with respect to Girk life, evolution, development and his particular future role in his culture's matrix, were he yet to succeed.

IV

Life to any Girk is simple, though it may not appear so to an outsider. Each Girk is born of the apparently undifferentiated parent mass of cellular tissue that once covered the floor of his planet's single ocean.

Variations in temperature and nutrients surrounding the parent tissue cause a differing in the type and kind of budding which, when pulled out from the parent, becomes a particular kind of Girk. Usually the One-Girks stem from the hotter, equatorial regions. The Two-Girks -- the bodies -- usually came from the slightly cooler regions. The Three-Girks -- the mobiles of various sizes and shapes -- came from even colder regions.

The Twelve-Girks, tiny reproductive ceullar clusters which might eventually -- distant in time -- return to the parent body, usually came from the coldest regions of all.

Often One-Girk-Two reflected on the probable early beginnings of his race, its complexities and simplicities, its beauty and rightness. He contrasted his race's evolutionary pathway against that of his captors, the Corogers, noting their strange incompleteness and nonunified nature -- they were most like single Girks, un-integrated Girks, all of their lives. Yet he must marvel that they had brains, body, legs, arms and other otherwise normal integrated features, such as would a Unit.

Hundreds of thousands of years earlier One-Girks, Two-Girks and all other Girk components when separated from parent, were tossed at random across their planet's single ocean. They intermingled, one kind of component with another, until, by chance alone, a complete Unit had come into being, and thus had begun civilization, through the Units.

Eventually the application of science and philosophy brought about a selection process whereby only those components that were most fit became defined as Units.



One-Girk-Two reflected on the precision and desirability of his present testing. The Girk culture had become immensely improved during the period of only several generations. Subsequent refinements of the tests had brought its abilities to even greater heights. One-Girk-Two had been subjected to hundreds of tests which had measured his ability to use both inductive and deductive reasoning, as well as to solve problems intuitively and creatively.

What was the exact extent of his abilities?

He reflected on his current plight, and solutions he'd designed. He had killed. He'd suffered great pain, indignities and humiliations at the hands of primitive, backward, alien beings. Yet he'd striven and overcome, in a sense, having joined with his captors. Had he come to accept that these beings, too, had a right to their own evolutionary growth, at their own pace?

He examined further the principle of cooperation between alien races.

One-Girk-Two was able to teach his captors simple uses of the wheel, and how better to make a fire. Such was the value placed on him -- their unusual captive -- that Sutic's grandfather, in great ceremonials and before the whole tribe, returned his coveted communications box, saying, "Take the box as a gift in return for your great gifts to us."

Overjoyed, One-Girk-Two quickly checked the box for damage, strapped it on his diminutive form, and proudly, somehow, exuded a feeling of oneness with these strange beings. Somehow, he reflected, this tribe must become componentized with his own species. That feat would be his greatest gift to them!

Already they had well-developed structures which tended to specialize activities within a unity or whole. This feature could be improved, and biological unitization could take place at another level -- but what of the end result? Would it be desirable? If he sought to change their natural evolution, would they be grateful? Or would they consider the Girk's as interlopers, without consideration. Would they still be friends? Or enemies?

He contemplated in silence on this mightiest of tasks: to change the biological nature of a life-form -- which was a kind of destruction, a death, no matter what the beneficial reasons given oneself. Would he not be using on his friends, and their descendants a kind of weapon, long-range through time, and deadlier than the heat-beam that struck only one individual at a time?

One-Girk-Two at last arrived at a conclusion: Other than minor assists, such as the wheel and improved firemaking, it was not his place, nor any other species' place, to change the natural evolution of a species in one's own image.

As though triggered by that very thought, One-Girk-Two's signal at last came. Strangely, he was unexcited and ready for it, as could easily be determined by the deliberate manner by which he pushed his return signal, acknowledging in proper code sequence. Then he waited with a new moment to moment view of his former captors.

High in the sky, like a crystalline jewel sparkling brightly in strong sunshine, hung an energy balloon. It would be operated by a Unit from the ship overhead, just as one had been operated on his arrival upon this planet's crust so many months before.

As the bright point of light became brighter and bigger, Corogers' activities ceased.

The light became larger and expanded. The craft became visible, its outlines clearer, and representing nothing more or less than a bubble with nothing inside. At last it halted before One-Girk-Two, controlled entirely by the signal generator, and it hovered close by, waiting.

One-Girk-Two pushed his small body against the outer wall, thus blending himself with it. To One-Girk-Two's primitive friends it appeared as though he'd walked through the bubble's walls.

One-Girk-Two turned to watch the tribe from inside the hollow sphere. This was truly a parting, for he would have to wait for them to come to the Unit stage -- or its equivalent -- in their own time, and in



their own peculiar manner.

Sadly he removed his signal generator, pushing it through the bubble's wall and dropped it at Sutic's feet -- Sutic, the first friend he'd known anywhere.

A great noise rose from the mouths and throats of the tribal members.

One-Girk-Two knew he'd passed the physical survival portion of his test. Had he also passed its philosophical portion? He did not know, but he knew that love of life in all of its forms must represent, also, willingness to take great risks, and that he'd just taken all of them. What did this mean?

The Unit guiding the bubble of forces upward would give him his answer. Regardless of its nature, he was satisfied, with himself, and life.

