

When I thrust the upper part of my head over the dune crest, I still was short of the toboggan slide, but much closer to it and from the hollow between the dunes came a sliding, scraping sound. Straining my ears, it seemed to me that I caught some motion in the trough, but could not be sure. The Sound of sliding and of scraping stopped and then began again and once more there was a hint of movement. I slid my rifle forward so that in an instant I could aim it down into the trough. I waited.

The slithering sound stopped, then started once again and something moved down there (I was sure of it this time) and something moaned. All sound came to an end.

There was no use of waiting any longer.

"Hello down there!" I called.

There was no answer.

"Hello," I called again.

It could be, I realized, that I was dealing with something so far removed from my own sector of the galaxy that the space patois familiar to that sector was not used by it and that we would have no communications bridge.

And then a quavering, hooting voice answered. At first it was just a noise, then, as I wrestled with the noise, I knew it to be a word, a single hooted question.

"Friend?" had been the word, "Friend," I answered.

"In need am I of friend," the hooting voice said. "Please to advance in safety. I do not carry weapon."

"I do," I said, a little grimly.

"Of it, there is no need," said the thing down in the shadows. "I am trapped and helpless."

"That is your ship up there?"

"Ship?"

"Your conveyance."

"Truly so, dear friend. It have come apart. It is inoperative."

"I'm coming down," I told it. "I'll have my weapon on you. One move out of you..."

"Come then," the hooter croaked. "No move out of me. I shall lie supine."

I came to my feet and went across the top of that dune as quickly as I could and plunging down the other slope, crouched to present as small a target as was possible. I kept the rifle trained on that shadowed area from which the voice came.

I slid into the trough and crouched there, bending low to sight up its length. Then I saw it, a hump of blackness lying very still.

"All right," I called. "Move toward me now."

The hump heaved and wallowed, then lay still again, "Move," it said, "I cannot."

"OK, then. Lie still. Do not move at all."

I ran forward and stopped. The hump lay still. It did not even twitch.

I moved closer, watching it intently. Now I could see it better. From the front of its head a nest of tentacles sprouted, now lying limply on the ground. From its rather massive head, if the tentacle-bearing portion of it actually was its head, its body tapered back, four feet or so, and ended in a bluntness. It seemed to have no feet or arms. With those tentacles, perhaps, it had no need of arms. It wore no clothing, upon its body was no sign of any sort of harness. The tentacles grasped no tool or weapon.

"What is your trouble?" I asked. "What can I do for you?"

The tentacles lifted, undulating like a basketful of snakes. The hoarse voice came out of a mouth which the tentacles surrounded.

"My legs are short," it said. "I sink. They do not carry me. With them I only churn up sand. I dig with them a deeper pit beneath me."