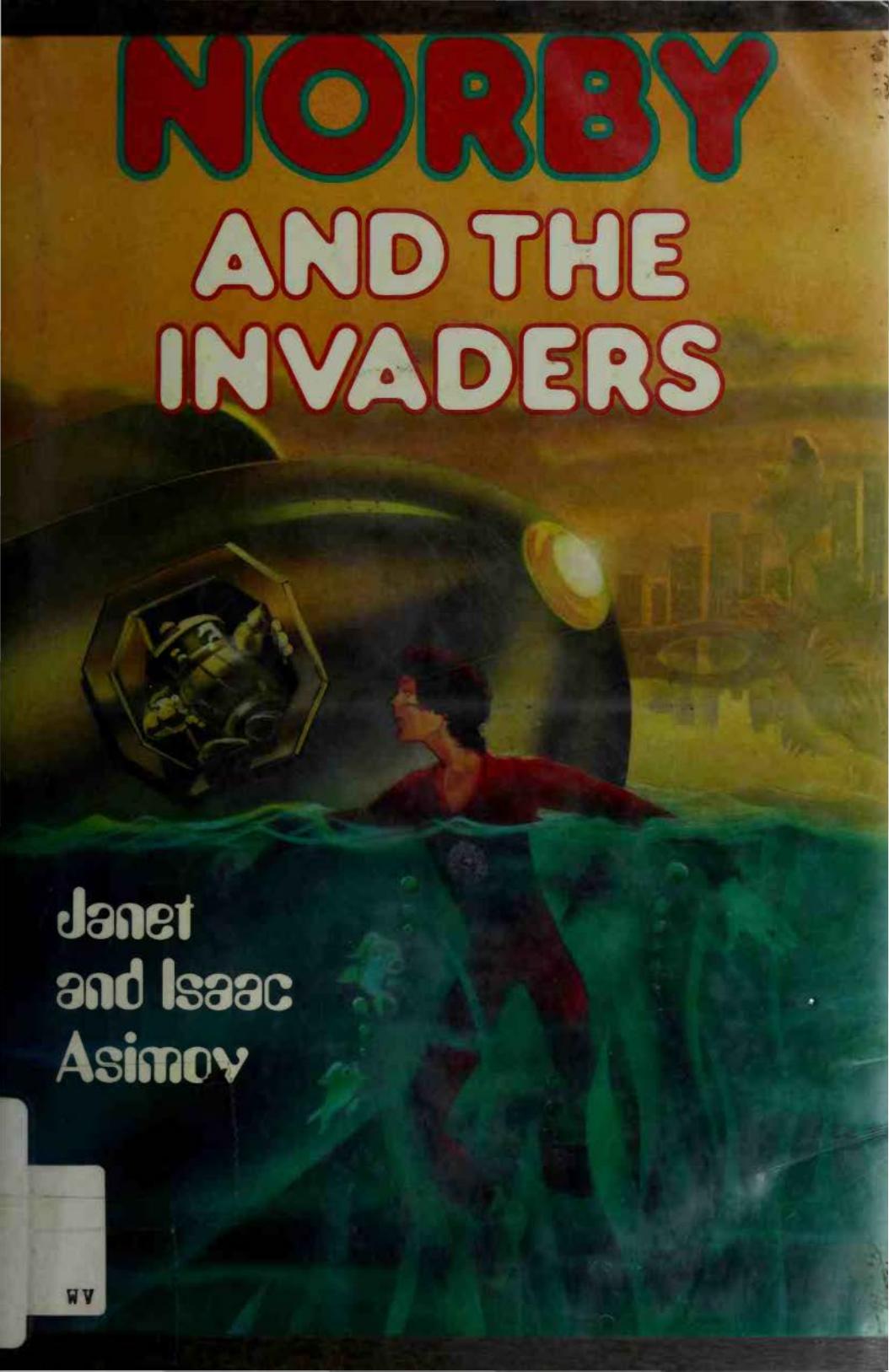


# NORBY AND THE INVADERS



Janet  
and Isaac  
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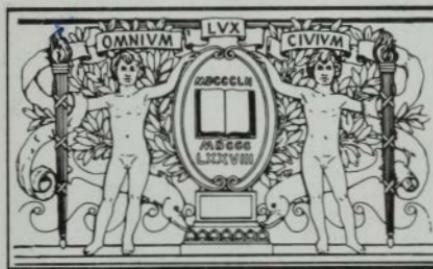
# NORBY AND THE INVADERS

Janet and Isaac  
Asimov

In this new Norby adventure, Jeff and Norby, accompanied by two friends, rush off to Jamya to help Norby's ancestor, Mentor First. But their mission becomes complicated when the Grand Dragon of Jamya is whisked off to another planet by strange alien creatures known as the Hleno. These blimplike creatures, at home in water or air, believe themselves to be protecting the environment from excessive uses and abuses of technology. Norby and Jeff are taken prisoners, too, along with Jeff's pet, Oola. Encased in an impenetrable plastic bubble, Norby is helpless. And without Norby, Jeff is handicapped in outer space. With humor and drama, the authors have created a new fantasy that follows the earlier adventures told in *Norby*, *The Mixed-Up Robot*, *Norby's Other Secret*, and *Norby and the Lost Princess*.

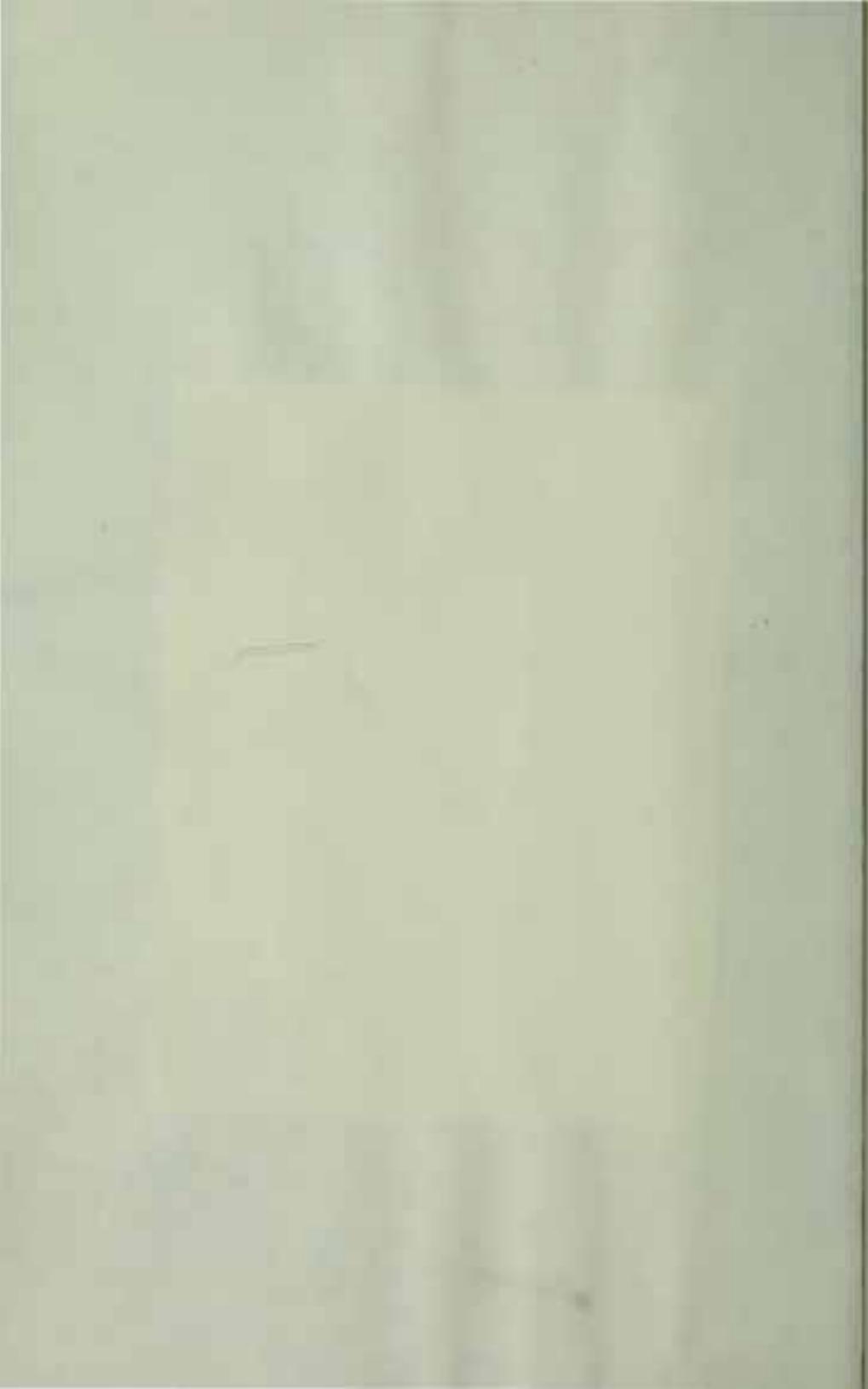
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# NORBY AND THE INVADERS

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**Janet and Isaac Asimov**

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Norby, the Mixed-Up Robot  
Norby's Other Secret  
Norby and the Lost Princess  
Norby and the Invaders

# NORBY AND THE INVADERS

**Janet and Isaac  
Asimov**



**Walker and Company  
New York**

**WASHINGTON VILLAGE**

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JUL 23 1986

*to the handsome younger generation*

*Bruce*

*David*

*Eric*

*Johnny*

*Larry*

*Richard*



# 1

## Emergency!

Norby, the mixed-up robot, stood up to take his turn. His telescopic legs were fully extended and his two-palmed hands were clasped in front of his barrel-shaped body. Beneath the brim of his domed-shaped hat, the two eyes in back and the two eyes in front of his half-head were opened wide—all four of them.

Norby sang loudly and out of tune:

*The bravest of robots I am!  
I'll get you all out of a jam!  
I fight against crime  
In space or in time,  
Although I'm as meek as a la—"*

The song was interrupted because Norby had flung his hands outward in a gesture so dramatic that it unbalanced his barrel and sent him tumbling. Screeching metallically, he saved himself from completing the fall by switching on his antigrav and zooming up to the ceiling, while Fargo Wells repeated the last line of Norby's song in an altogether different way:

*Although you're a terrible ham!*

Laughter filled the Manhattan living room of the Wells brothers: black-haired, handsome Farley Gordon "Fargo" Wells, age twenty-four, a secret agent for Federation Space Command, and Jefferson Wells, a cadet in the space academy, who had curly brown hair and too much responsibility for his fourteen years—though he never shirked any of it.

The deep bass rumble came from Fargo's boss at Space Command, Admiral Boris Yobo, who was bigger than most people and twice as determined. Manhattan police lieutenant Albany Jones, who was blond and beautiful, first punched her friend Fargo for insulting Norby and then laughed in a rippling contralto.

Jeff smiled because there was no doubt that Norby *was* a ham and because the Admiral's birthday party was clearly turning out to be a success. He leaned over to explain to their remaining guest what "ham" meant in this context. That guest, a small Jamyn dragon named Zargl, clapped her claws in glee at the explanation.

Oola, Jeff's all-purpose pet, lengthened her cat-face to allow more internal resonance, turned her nose to the ceiling, and howled.

"Norby's singing offends Oola," said Fargo, "Though howling isn't my favorite way of showing it. Like me, she has perfect pitch."

Jeff frowned slightly. Norby was saying nothing, which was strange. He should have been shouting insults in return. What's more, Norby's head had withdrawn farther into the barrel, which was now floating on antigrav about a meter above the floor, and his sensor wire was sticking out of his hat.

"What's wrong, Norby?" asked Jeff.

"I don't know," said Norby. "I thought I heard something."

"The neighbors complaining, probably," said Yobo.

"No," said Norby. "You all go on with your songs. I'll just keep listening. Zargl, sing your song now. The rest of you listen closely, because she has a very instructive and inspiring song. Of course, I helped her with the rhymes."

The green dragon grinned, showing all her sharp teeth in what would have been a frightening display if the others hadn't known how gentle and affectionate she was. She flapped her wings in excitement and said, "The song's in Terran Basic because I wanted to show off how much I've learned on this visit. And I improved Norby's rhymes, too."

She sang:

*Jamyra is my home—it's a planet far away,*

*It was changed by unknown Others long ago.*

*The Others went away, but our Mentor robots stay*

*To teach us everything that we should know.*

*My mother's aunt, her Highness, the Grand Dragon of us all*

*Sent me here to be your charming visitor—*

*Earth is so exceptional, that there'll be affectional*

*Ties that bind and link our worlds forevermore.*

Fargo muttered softly, "Exceptional? Affectional? Needs work."

Everyone else clapped though, and Norby bowed in the air as though the credit were all his.

Yobo rose majestically. "Lieutenant Jones, judging from the ineffable fragrance emanating from the kitchen, I'm sure that my African specialty is ready for the final basting and for the addition of my secret ingredients. Are you still interested in the recipe?"

"You bet," said Albany. Together they went to the kitchen

while the others sighed and wondered if they could supply the room for one more course.

"Anything coming through, Norby?" asked Jeff.

The little robot sank to the floor and jiggled rhythmically on his symmetrical feet. "I don't understand what's happening. I keep thinking a telepathic message is trying to reach me, but that can't be. All of you are here, but you're not touching me, so there can't be telepathic contact with you. The only other telepaths I know are in Jamya, which is much too far away."

"It doesn't seem far to me," said Zargl, "because any time I want to go home, Norby can take me there in a few minutes of hyperspace travel, can't you, Norby? It's lucky part of your insides were made by Mentor First. Otherwise you wouldn't have the power, and I couldn't visit Earth unless your ship came for me."

"Yes," said Jeff, "but our ship, the *Hopeful*, only works because Norby plugs himself into its computer."

"That limitation may not last," said Fargo. "The admiral is certain that we Terrans will have true hyperdrive soon, thanks to those mini-antigrav collars the Jamyn dragons gave him."

"I hope so," said Norby. "Then those Federation scientists would leave me alone. I don't want them dissecting me!"

"In fact," said Fargo, "there's a rumor that Space Command has one experimental ship almost ready—but who knows?"

Norby's eyes suddenly closed, and Jeff asked "What's the matter, Norby?"

"I almost had it," said Norby.

"Had what?"

"A message." Norby's eyes opened. "Do you think maybe

the Others are trying to reach me? No, that's ridiculous. It's been thousands of Terran years since they've been to any of the planets we know they visited. It's so annoying not to have any idea what they look like, or where they came from, or where they went."

Fargo said, "Don't let the admiral hear you say that, Norby. We don't want to inspire him to send us on another mission to find them. So far we've always failed."

"Not completely, Fargo," said Jeff, who believed in the constructive approach. "We've found out quite a bit. They were organic beings who had an advanced civilization with hyperdrive, robots, and the ability to bioengineer other creatures like the Jamyn dragons. The dragons are small and intelligent only because of the Others."

"For which I'm glad," said Zargl. "I'd hate to be as big and ugly and mean as my ancestors. Just the same, I'm glad we dragons can still breathe flame when we want to, even if my mother says it isn't civilized. You know, if the Others had not activated the Mentor robots by remote control, *they* would remember what the Others looked like."

"Pooh," said Norby. "It doesn't matter what they were like. The important thing is that they made the Mentor robots, who then made me or the part of me that an old Terran spacer put into a Terran robot."

"Resulting in extraordinary talent," said Zargl, rubbing her nose against Norby's barrel.

"All of me is extraordinary," said Norby smugly, "and you don't really need the Others as long as you have me." Abruptly, Norby turned to Jeff. "It is a message. It's coming in clearly now. It's from Mentor First!"

Everyone was shocked into a sudden silence that brought Yobo and Albany from the kitchen to see what was going on.

Norby was sensing with his mind. His multi-jointed arms were still and his eyes were shut. Then his head sank into his barrel till his domed hat was tight against it. Only the sensor wire stuck out.

"Norby?" asked Jeff.

Time passed and Norby did not move. It felt to Jeff as if years were going by.

Suddenly Norby's head shot up. "I've got to leave at once!" he shouted. "Mentor First is in trouble. All of Jamya is in trouble, and I've got to go there. They've forced the message through hyperspace just to get my help."

"What kind of trouble?" asked Fargo with an excited gleam in his eye. Danger was made to be leaped into as far as he was concerned.

"I'm not sure. He didn't have time to go into detail." Norby's hands clasped each other in agitation. "But it's an emergency, a terrible emergency."

"But why didn't he explain what it was?" asked Yobo.  
"Why did the message end?"

"He just stopped. It was as if he'd been—I can't say it."

"Tell us what you think, Norby," said Albany gently.

Norby's voice was higher now, almost tinny. "Mentor First stopped in mid-sentence just as if he'd been—deactivated!"

"That's awful," said Jeff, taken aback.

Oola, sensing the emotional tension, began to howl again. Jeff picked her up and stroked her green fur to calm her. Whimpering like a dog, instead of the cat she usually resembled, she curled round Jeff's shoulders for security.

"Are you sure, Norby?" asked Fargo.

"That's what it felt like. I don't have emotive circuits for nothing, you know. I could sense Mentor First's strong

frustration. He was powerless to stop whatever it was that attacked him, and then he was deactivated. I'm sure of it. I must leave at once."

"Certainly," said Yobo, a frown creasing the broad expanse of his black forehead. "We will start preparations at once. You and Fargo get the *Hopeful* ready, and I'll notify Space Command that I have an urgent mission to attend to, and . . ."

"You don't understand," moaned Norby. "There isn't time for all that. Mentor First said the whole planet was in danger. Just before he stopped I got just a glimpse. I think the planet is being *invaded*. I have to leave now."

"Not without me!" yelled Zargl, using her wings and antigrav collar to fly to Norby. She landed on his hat and clung to it. "You must take me with you. If my home is being invaded, I've got to help."

"You're too little," said Norby. "There'd be too much danger for a dragon-child—"

"No!" said Zargl, pounding Norby's hat. "Take me with you. I want to go *home!*"

"All right. Good-bye, everyone . . ."

"I'm coming, too," said Jeff in a low, determined voice. He seized one of Norby's arms tightly and pushed at Oola with his other hand. "Get off, Oola!"

But Oola dug her claws firmly into his uniform and held on.

"Now!" said Norby and he, along with Jeff, Zargl, and Oola, vanished from the Wells' apartment.

## 2

## Jamya Under Attack

Inside the small protective field that Norby generated while he was in hyperspace, Jeff tried to relax and control his breathing. He also tried to calm Oola, who was digging her claws into his shoulder and probably growling—although, of course, none of the distance senses would work so that he could not hear her any more than he could see or smell her.

Jeff tried to reach Norby telepathically:

——Jamya's been invaded by whom? Or what?

——Mentor First didn't say.

——Is Zargl still with us?

——Here I am, Jeff, on Norby's hat. Will we be at my home soon?

——Right—this—*minute!* [said Norby.]

Jeff landed with a thump on a cold stone floor. It was dark, but not so dark that he couldn't tell where he was. They were in the Great Hall in the Mentors' castle.

"Got you here right on the bull's eye," said Norby, "as I always do."

Jeff didn't say that Norby almost never did. He had let go of Norby's hand, but Oola was still on his shoulders, snarling fiercely. Then she jumped to the ground, her green fur standing on end.

Zargl flew from Norby's hat to the opposite side of the hall.

"The Mentors are here—but they're dead!"

Jeff ran over, followed by Norby and Oola. Norby inspected the Mentors carefully, touching each one with his hand and his sensor wire.

"I don't think they're actually dead," he said. "They're paralyzed but still conscious underneath. They're just unable to function. It's as if the Mentors have been put into stasis, but there's no machine generating a stasis field." He edged a bit closer to Jeff. "I've never seen anything like this, Jeff. It's scary. What could have happened?"

Jeff looked up at the old black metal bodies of the Mentors looming above him, each with four arms hanging uselessly at the sides, their three eyes unmoving. Was it his imagination or did he detect a faint, remaining glow in those eyes, indicating they were still alive?

"Can you telepath with Mentor First?" asked Jeff.

"No," said Norby, "I've just tried. I wonder if the castle computer is out, too."

Norby went to a far wall and touched a switch. A section of wall slid back, but there was no opening, only what looked like a strange, featureless blue barrier. Norby touched it and jumped backward.

"That's a force field! Mentor First must have activated it before he was paralyzed. It protects the computer, and I don't know how to turn it off. And I don't want to turn it off either, because whatever invaded Jamya and paralyzed the Mentors would probably also want to destroy the computer."

Zargl began to sniff loudly. "I want my mother. Where is she? Maybe the Invaders have done something to her, too."

"We'll find out, Zargl," said Jeff soothingly. "You stay here, Norby. Whoever did this to the Mentors doesn't seem

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to like robots, so you're in danger. Zargl and I will go down to the village—”

“Not alone,” Norby interjected. “With me along you can always leave Jamya in a hurry. The Mentors couldn't get away because they don't have built-in ability for hyperspace travel, but I do—so I'm coming with you.”

“Who's there?” The distant shout reverberated into the Great Hall, as if it had come from far down a corridor. “Who is in the Hall of the Mentors?”

“That's the Grand Dragon's voice,” said Zargl, flying across the hall into the corridor that led to the front door. Jeff picked up Oola and followed with Norby trotting along beside him.

Near the front door was the Grand Dragon, her sumptuous purple cloak trailing behind on her polished green tail as she strode toward Jeff. The diamond caps on her fangs glistened, and she looked very unhappy. Behind her was a smaller dragon who held out her arms to Zargl.

“Mother!” cried Zargl, flying into Zi's arms. “You're safe!”

While Zi comforted her daughter, the Grand Dragon clasped Jeff's hand and said in a throaty moan, “Jamy is doomed unless we can get help. It's ridiculous to think that any of us are safe as long as those revolting Invaders keep popping in and out of Jamya's space. I can't even *fly* to get away from them because they caught us by surprise and deprived us of our antigrav collars. Zi and I had to make it to the castle *on foot* to find out why the Mentors aren't doing something about the problem.”

“The Mentors have been paralyzed,” said Norby, “and I don't know how to free them. The computer is behind a force field and I can't get to it.”

“Then we're lost,” sighed the Grand Dragon, sitting on

her massive tail. She was the biggest of the Jamyn dragons—as tall as Jeff.

"We'll do our best to help," said Jeff.

"I don't know if you can. Is your ship well-armed? Can you get your Federation Fleet to join you?" asked the Grand Dragon. "It will take the full Terran force, I think, to defeat the Invaders. I'm so desperate I'd even be pleased to see that large, very loud admiral of yours."

"I'm afraid we've left everything behind and have just come by ourselves," said Jeff. "Norby came so quickly—"

"You didn't bring a single ship?"

"We didn't know the conditions, your Dragonship. Mentor First gave us so little information before he was paralyzed, and we were convinced there was no time to wait. Once we find out exactly what's happening and what kind of help is needed, we'll go back and get it, never fear. Tell us about the Invaders, ma'am."

The Grand Dragon rubbed her top scales as if she were very tired. "I can't tell you much except that they look awful and act worse. They seem able to deactivate any equipment. Perhaps if you had come in the *Hopeful* they would already have grounded her, so even your ship wouldn't have helped. Oh, it's no use. Nothing's any use."

"Can the Invaders fly?" asked Norby.

"Not exactly," said Zi. "They float, and they move as if propelled by jets of air."

"They're disgusting," said the Grand Dragon. "I was flying from them, trying to evade their nasty clutching tentacles and get into position to strike back, when they plucked my antigrav collar from my neck. I have never been so ill-treated and demeaned in my life. In fact, it was all I could do to flap my wings hard enough to break my fall. Our

wings are very beautiful, of course, but they aren't really big enough to let us fly efficiently without a bit of antigrav to help, especially when you are as massively majestic as I am. I feel I've let all the Jamyn people down. After all, Grand Dragons should always . . . Let's see . . . what point was I making?"

"You were being ill-treated and demeaned, ma'am," said Jeff deferentially. The Grand Dragon was an excessively royal personage.

"Precisely," she said, angrily emitting a small flame. "If you open the front door a crack and peep out, you'll probably see the Invaders hovering over our village. They appeared out of nowhere, the way you and Norby do when you come through hyperspace. They don't talk, as far as I can tell. They just float around, turning off our electricity, removing our collars, taking away our little helper robots—and now they've paralyzed our beloved Mentors! They've got horrid tentacles all around their snouts and no legs or arms. Ugh!"

Zargl peeped around the door. "Oh, Jeff, it's like the picture you showed me in the Terran encyclopedia. These Invaders look like knobby, blobby dirigibles, only much smaller I think."

Jeff looked too. The Invaders, six of them, hovered over the trees of the Jamyn village and did indeed resemble the old-fashioned airships that were used on Earth long ago—except, of course, that the airships were not lumpy and tentacled. He estimated that the Invaders were perhaps twice as long as he was tall.

"These Invaders act as if a civilized being doesn't need mechanical help," said Zi indignantly. "If we dragons have to do all the physical work that our robots do, how will we

remain civilized? We may live in small villages, but our culture is sophisticated, thanks to the Mentors, and we're spreading out over all our island continent. If we don't have the means of communicating electronically, or even the ability to fly, each village will be isolated since we can't use telepathy unless we touch each other. We'll just sink back into barbarism and go about breathing fire like primitive dragons."

"Something must be done!" said the Grand Dragon grandly, lifting her claws high into the air—but she didn't say what that something might be.

At that moment, Oola ran through the opening of the door to the stone terrace outside. Jeff tried to grab her and failed. Oola jumped onto a green hassock-shaped object and meowed loudly.

The Grand Dragon sighed, "That's Mentor First's all-purpose pet, Oola's mother. One of my subjects, before fleeing the castle, reported that the pet had bravely attacked one of the Invaders. It struck her with one of its tentacles, and that hurts—I know—because it gives one an electric shock. The pet promptly grew her protective shell around herself."

Oola whimpered and raised her nose to the sky. She was evidently very upset about her mother.

"She's going to howl," said Jeff, "and that will bring the Invaders, if anything will." He dashed out, scooped her up, and stroked her frantically.

"Look out, Jeff!" called Norby from behind the door.

A shadow blocked the warmth of Jamyn's sun and Jeff, looking up, saw an Invader directly overhead, gazing down at him with yellow eyes. As a tentacle reached for him, Oola leaped at it savagely, raking it with her claws.

The Invader's tentacle shook and withdrew. The Invader moved higher overhead.

The Grand Dragon swept from around the door, her cape outspread and her claws outstretched. "See here, you bullying monster—I order you to leave our planet! You have no business interfering in the lives of other species!"

The Invader came close again. Jeff tried to maintain his hold on Oola, who was squirming away.

By this time, Oola, who was not bright enough to take deliberate advantage of her antigrav collar, had become so eager to get at the Invader that her striving brought the collar into automatic play. She pulled out of Jeff's arms and lofted to the side of the Invader's bloated body. She clawed at the Invader's side, and a distinct hissing of air was heard.

The Grand Dragon's eyes widened as she suddenly realized that Oola had an antigrav collar. "Oola," she shouted, stamping her feet and tail, "come down and give me that collar, and *I'll* let the wind out of its bag!" She bared her fangs and put her claws out to their fullest extent.

Oola, of course, paid no attention. She attacked again, but this time the Invader shoved her away with its tentacles.

The Grand Dragon flexed her muscles and took a fighting stance. "Come on down, you disgusting blob, and fight like an honest being—and while I smash you to a pulp, I will give you a large piece of my mind. Argh!"

The Grand Dragon's words were choked off as a tentacle wrapped itself around her throat. She hit out at the Invader with her claws, and her tail smashed into its gray body.

There was a crackling noise and suddenly the Invader disappeared, taking the Grand Dragon with it.

"Oh, no," said Zi. "They've taken Auntie. They've taken our beloved Grand Dragon. They'll kill her."

"I think we'd all be better off inside the castle," said Jeff.  
"The rest of you go there while I get Oola."

That was easy to say, but not so easy to do. Oola was looking down the hill to the village and snarling. Every time Jeff tried to seize her, she bounded away, moving further down the hill.

"Oola," shouted Jeff, "come here, blast you!"

Norby rounded the edge of the door, withdrew his legs into his barrel-body, and elevated on his own antigrav. "I'll catch her for you, Jeff."

He propelled himself toward Oola, with Jeff in close pursuit. Norby arrived first, scooped up the indignant pet and gave her to Jeff. "Now," he said, "let's go back home and see what the admiral has to say about this situation. Maybe it *will* take the whole fleet, except that if it does, the admiral will have to tell the Federation about Jamya."

"It would be about time," said Jeff, hanging onto Oola's collar and desperately thinking *down* because she was thinking *up*. The collar, obeying the thoughts of beings touching it, would follow whichever thought was stronger. If they lifted off the ground and into the air, the Invaders would certainly notice them.

Jeff, panting with the effort of mind-concentration as he moved back to the castle, said, "Maybe the Federation ought to accept Jamya as a member even if Jamyns aren't human."

But then there was a popping noise and an Invader appeared out of nowhere almost on top of Jeff. Tentacles lashed out and, as Jeff fought them off, Norby's voice made itself heard.

"Stop that, or I'll ram all the air out of you!" said Norby, who could be as brave as a lion if he were excited enough. He zoomed up in the air and directly into the Invader's hide.

The Invader made a noise like "ooph," and grabbed Norby instead of Jeff.

"Worrwwrrr," said Oola, trying to hit the Invader.

"Norby," shouted Jeff, trying to reach the little robot.

Then the Invader, holding Norby in its tentacles, vanished.

"Norby!" wailed Jeff with a sudden sense of loss.

"Come back, Jeff!" shouted Zi. "Hide in the castle! The other Invaders are coming here."

Jeff scrambled up the slope, holding onto Oola, but he couldn't make it. One of the Invaders caught him just as he got to the door.

The gray rubbery tentacles wound around his waist and lifted him off his feet. The Invader soared up and up, over the spires of the castle, while Jeff held onto Oola and her antigrav collar and fought to get away.

Other Invaders joined the one that had captured Jeff, and from the gestures of their tentacles, Jeff imagined they were somehow communicating, but he could hear no speech. Was it a sign language?

His head was aching and the tentacles holding him seemed to be vibrating unpleasantly.

Oola obviously hated the sensation. She yowled horribly and then twisted around in Jeff's arms, got a good fix on the nearest tentacle, and bit hard.

The Invader who was holding them seemed to shake all over. Jeff's headache got much worse and he blacked out.

# 3

## In the Ocean

When Jeff opened his eyes and returned to a groggy awareness that the universe existed, it was nighttime. He knew at once that he was not on Jamya or on Earth or anywhere he'd ever been, for the stars covered the sky so thickly and so brightly that the effect was of a widespread moonlight.

"We must be in a globular cluster," he muttered.

The Invader was still overhead. Jeff could see it as a shadow against the bright starlight. Jeff dangled loosely from the Invader's tentacles and it occurred to him that he could easily wriggle free. Then he looked downward and gasped. No wonder Oola had her forelegs around his neck and was holding on for dear life!

They were far above what seemed to be an immense ocean, its waves shimmering in the starlight. The water extended outward to the horizon in every direction, meeting the star-filled sky cleanly. It was a clear night with few clouds and no haze. There was a slight chill in the air.

They were traveling quickly, and it seemed to Jeff that puffs of air were coming from inside two flaps of skin that opened and closed rhythmically, one on each side of the Invader's body, creating a small wind that ruffled his hair. It wasn't impossible for the Invaders to travel by jet propulsion, but surely they were too big to float without some sort of antigrav device.

Jeff put one hand on Oola's collar, the only thing that would save him from falling if the Invader released its grip.

Where were they going? A useless question, for there didn't seem to be any place to go to. Jeff could see nothing but restless star-reflection in all directions, and he was sure that even in daylight the ocean below would be featureless.

How long would the flight continue? Oola was beginning to make her "I am hungry" noises, and he held her closely to console her. With the other hand, he touched the Invader's tentacle gingerly, shuddered, and wished fervently that he were holding Norby's hand. He could then wiggle free, upheld by Norby's intelligent use of antigrav and together they could move into hyperspace and back to Earth. He wished he could hear Norby's voice talking as they zoomed along in air, or understand Norby's words in his mind as they traveled through hyperspace together. As it was . . .

In his agony of futile wishing, he forgot to be careful of Oola, who found the tip of the Invader's tentacle and bit it hard.

Like a writhing snake, the tentacle uncoiled and Jeff fell—only to rise as he and Oola thought "up" simultaneously. The Invader turned around and came back for them, tentacles outstretched, its yellow eyes glittering weakly in the starlight.

"Wowrrr!" said Oola, striking out at the tentacles.

The Invader drew back. Then, as if deciding that Oola and Jeff were not worth bothering about, it pointed itself head downward and plunged into the ocean.

Jeff looked down after it. Apparently they had arrived at their destination—or the Invader's destination, anyway—and Oola had decided to bite just a moment too soon. Now what?

"Meow?" said Oola in the tone of voice that meant, "I'm hungry and what are you going to do about it?"

Jeff was hungry, too. At Admiral Yobo's birthday party he'd had much less to eat than the others because, except for the last mysterious dish he'd never gotten to taste, he'd been the cook and had been too busy to eat much. His stomach rumbled, and there was nothing but water in sight.

Nothing but water? The starlight was rapidly dimming, the sky was growing lighter, and as a reddish sun rose above the horizon, its light hit a series of strange black objects. With difficulty, Jeff managed to get closer by manipulating Oola's collar—as often as not in opposition to her wishes.

Tall black cylinders jutted from a section of the ocean that seemed distinctly paler now that the sunlight made it easier to see. Beyond the pale zone, the water was much darker.

He had to maneuver still closer, but each time he tried he'd forget to think "up" and would sink, because Oola had apparently decided to think "down."

"What's the matter with you?" he said to her impatiently.

"Meowwr!" she said emphatically, and licked his chin. It tickled and Jeff laughed. At once, they dropped all the way to the surface, so that Jeff found himself immersed to his waist before he thought "up" hard enough for the collar to make them rise. Even then they didn't rise far. Oola seemed set on going down.

"I don't want to get wet, Oola. I want to go home, just as Zargl did a while ago—only Norby's not here to get me there. Let's look at those cylinders."

By dint of great flapping effort, Jeff positioned himself above the nearest cylinder. It was not solid and, as he sank to the top, he found its metal rim wide enough to sit on if he were careful. The cylinder was black metal and faintly warm.

He looked into the opening and could see only blackness at first, but he felt air rising through it, as if a gigantic creature were breathing through an enormous snorkel.

The hollow center of the cylinder was big enough for his body, and he was about to slip down to explore, when he caught the silvery glint of a metal grating that blocked the inside far down.

Jeff decided there was no use trying to go down to pry up the grating, and he began to work out possible alternative actions when Oola settled the matter by sniffing and jumping from his arms.

In surprise, Jeff found himself losing his balance. He gripped the rim of the cylinder hard to keep from falling into it and down upon Oola or into the water. Oola floated downward slowly, suspended on her antigrav collar, and he could see her, a barely visible splotch of green walking about the grating.

Jeff had to wait until she had satisfied herself that there was no way in. Having done that, she tried to leap up. Failing, she tried to climb. Only then did her desperation activate her collar. Up she went, spread-eagled, back to Jeff, who hugged her to him.

"That's all right, Oola. We can't get in that way, but there must be a building or something down there with air in it. We'll have to find a way of getting in."

He wasn't at all sure there was a building below the ocean surface, but the rising air in the cylinders had to be coming from somewhere, and saying it out loud made him feel better.

Oola tugged to get out of his arms, acting as if she had seen something in the water she wanted. Jeff decided it must be seaweed or something similar. Although Oola's ancestors

had been bioengineered by Mentor First from particularly bloodthirsty carnivores, members of the species were now thoroughgoing vegetarians, who could eat almost anything that wasn't animal.

*Almost anything,* Jeff thought. Oola could eat Jamyn and Terran vegetation with equal ease, but what if the plants on this world were poisonous?

He could see the plants rising to the surface now that the air had grown warmer with the sunlight. They had small clusters of flat crescent-shaped leaves almost the same color as the greenish-blue water, and bore bunches of white flowers like tiny puff-balls bobbing above the leaves on thin, short stems. They were a little like water lilies, but not quite.

"MeOWWW!" Oola squirmed out of Jeff's arms and jumped into the ocean, right onto a floating plant. Her jaws clamped on the plant, and she elevated back to the cylinder rim, trailing a long filmy stem with leaves extending alternately in either direction; the puff-ball flowers like tiny mushrooms.

Oola maneuvered herself onto Jeff's thigh and proceeded to eat ravenously. Oola always ate ravenously.

She didn't like the flowers and discarded them after trying to eat one. The stem—after a thoughtful munch—was also rejected. The leaves, however, were chewed and swallowed in quantity. When Oola had had quite enough, she licked her chops, washed herself, and purred.

"Fine," said Jeff. "At least one of us is fed. If only I could reach Norby—" He shut his eyes and concentrated, but without success. He needed to touch Norby to communicate telepathically.

Jeff had never felt so alone in his life. Sitting above the immense expanse of an unknown ocean, without any hope

of getting home, he felt himself sinking into despair. To avoid that final disaster, he took a deep breath and recited a version of his solstice litany:

*I am a Terran creature, part of the life that has evolved on Earth. I am far away from home, but I am still part of the Universe, part of its life. Everything is part of the Universe, no matter how strange or dangerous it may seem at some time. I will try to let go of my fear so that I can decide what to do.*

He stroked Oola to keep from thinking about hunger and thirst and stared at the ocean. At first he wished for a ship or for something that would appear on the horizon. When nothing did, he found himself imagining sadly how nice it would be to feel at home in an ocean.

What he wanted to be was a wonderful, sleek fish with gills, or even a seal with flippers, or a beaver with a nice flat tail that would serve as a rudder. The daydream went on until his hands told him that something had happened to Oola.

He looked at her. She had changed shape. She was longer and thinner, her legs flipperlike and her tail flattened. She yawned, kissed him, and dove into the water.

“Oola! Come back!”

She paid no attention, but swam over and under floating plants. She seemed to be having a wonderful time.

Jeff knew he'd have to get wet if he wanted Oola and her collar back. Jeff dove into the water and swam to the surface, thinking that it was not as cold as he expected and that it was amazingly clear. He dove again and saw that the black cylinder went down and down to a white surface, where many plants grew. He swam over them and noted that they

had the same crescent leaves as the ones that Oola had eaten. Occasionally, plants would break loose from the clump and rise to the surface.

Oola swam between his legs down to the plant garden, bit off some leaves, and returned to Jeff, champing happily. This time Jeff held tightly to her collar, for there were other creatures among the plants, crawling and scuttling and darting along, all of them unrecognizable. They looked smaller than Oola and probably weren't dangerous, but Jeff couldn't be sure.

With a queasy feeling, Jeff realized he didn't dare let go of his all-purpose pet. Without Oola's collar, he'd have to float in the water forever because he couldn't climb the cylinder by himself.

Oola wanted to play, but Jeff wanted only to keep his head above water. His desperate reluctance to be deprived of air might have inspired Oola, for he felt her neck change. He tried to examine it and, as far as he could tell, there were flaps of skin on each side that opened when she sank beneath the water. Gills?

"Are you turning into a fish, Oola?" Jeff asked.

But she hadn't lost her fangs, and suddenly she bared them with a snarl that turned to bubbles when she put her head back under the water. Jeff looked down through the clear water and saw a hugh gray shape approaching.

An Invader? It had the same tentacles around its snout, but twice as many as the air Invaders had had, and was twice as long. In fact the entire creature was twice as long. The body was almost tubular with a flattened portion in back that served as a tail. Only its nasty yellow eyes were the same. It was heading for Jeff.

There was no place to go but up, and Oola wouldn't go

up. She wanted to face the new enemy and fight. She might be a vegetarian, but her ancestry had included something very like a saber-toothed tiger.

Using all his will and brainpower, Jeff prevailed and they rose out of the water into the air. The Invader didn't follow. It swam around and around, occasionally breaking the surface with its tentacles to grab at Jeff, who managed to stay just out of reach.

But Oola did not like *that* manner of fighting. Squirming incessantly, she managed to squeeze from between his arm and his chest and leaped into the water on top of the Invader. She was followed, of course, by Jeff, who had no antigrav collar of his own. He swam as hard as he could away from the Invader, but when he turned, the creature was almost upon him.

And then, for no reason that Jeff could see, it slowed down, its tentacles reaching back instead of forward for Jeff. Something was bothering it.

Ducking his head under the water, Jeff saw Oola clamped with long, sharp claws to one of the flaps at the side of the Invader's body. Her fangs were at saber-toothed proportions, and she was striking again and again. Bluish-gray fluid streamed from the wound, and the Invader was obviously losing its own peculiar kind of blood.

The Invader gave up quickly. It turned tail and swam quickly away from Jeff and from the line of black cylinders. It carried Oola with it, and Jeff was left alone.

He swam to the nearest cylinder and tried to hug it for safety and support, but it was too wide for a good grip.

Some ocean water had gotten into Jeff's mouth, and he tasted it. There wasn't the strong taste of salt that Earth's ocean water had, but he felt it was still too salty for safe

drinking. Staying away from it was difficult however, because of his thirst.

Then he noticed that water had condensed on the sides of the metal cylinder. Might that be fresh water? He made a face and licked it. He didn't taste any salt at all, but when he had licked up all the water he could reach on every side of the cylinder, he still felt thirsty, and his tongue was sore.

"Meow?" Oola's catlike head bobbed up in front of him. She had a small bump on her nose and one ear was bent, but other than that she looked very pleased with herself. Jeff put his hands on Oola's collar and decided to try to elevate to the top of the cylinder again and then to go inside and attempt to pry up that grating.

Oola had other plans. She dove, dragging Jeff with her.

Holding his breath, Jeff saw that she was swimming quickly across the white surface below until it abruptly ended. Then she swam down over it into darker water. Jeff ran out of breath and let go, swimming to the surface as fast as possible because he needed air.

As he tried to float and take in great gulps of air, a wet furry head chucked him under the chin.

"Wowrrr!" said Oola, questioningly.

"I can't go with you," said Jeff. "I can't grow gills the way you can."

She banged at his chest with one of her flipperlike paws and meowed again, then swam away, only to turn and meow at him once more in an exasperated way.

"I can't," yelled Jeff, shaking his head.

She returned and he stroked her, thinking that at least one of them would survive on this watery planet. He imagined himself fully equipped for snorkling, enjoying a strange ocean—and then he felt something growing out of the back

of Oola's neck even as he stroked it. He looked down startled. It was like a tube open at the free end, and it bubbled.

Jeff asked quizzically "Oola, have you invented a snorkel?"

For a second he tried to figure out how Oola could breathe through gills under water, with lungs above water, and somehow still have air to expel through an air hose. But the physiology was beyond him. Experimentally he tried breathing in the air from Oola's hose and found that it worked. There was probably more carbon dioxide in it than there would be in the open air, and it smelled of vegetation—but it was breathable.

The next time Oola dove, Jeff held on to her collar and breathed her air. She swam with undulating movements just below him, and Jeff kicked with his legs to help. They swam past the black cylinders to the edge, then down the wall of a building, large in area but only about as high as a four-story building in Manhattan. He peered into the darkness of the ocean outside the building, but could see no other intact structures, although the area seemed littered with fantastic jumbles of building stone and metal girders, all festooned with undersea plant and animal life.

Beyond the littered area, the ground seemed to slope downward to such blackness that Jeff could see nothing. When Oola wanted to go back to the building, Jeff had no quarrel with her. They had just arrived at the white wall when Oola managed to drag Jeff behind a particularly large clump of plants. When he looked back to see what she was running from, he nearly dropped the snorkel.

Invaders!

There were three of them, sleek instead of fat and blobby like the ones that he had seen on Jamya, but smaller than the one that had attacked him here. They also had the same number of tentacles as the Jamya invaders; fewer than the savage one. Perhaps these creatures came in two species.

It's the air under their skins that makes them look fat and blobby when they're out of the water, thought Jeff. He watched them swim toward the building and curve to the left, following the curve of the building itself. Then they went out of sight.

Follow them, thought Jeff as he prodded Oola. She was not telepathic and could not understand thoughts, but clearly her mind responded to the emotions and yearnings of a person touching her, so she turned her nose in that direction and started swimming with Jeff attached to her.

There was a door! It looked like an unusually large, round air lock without a handle or doorknob. The Invaders must have entered the building this way, but Jeff couldn't see how. He ran his fingers around the door and found a ridge with a dimple on each side. Holding Oola close to him, he pressed first one depression and then the other, but nothing happened.

Jeff stopped to think. The Invaders had a circular arrangement of tentacles that could stream in various directions, so perhaps both dimples had to be pressed at once. Carefully pushing Oola's lower half into his uniform so that she wouldn't swim away and take her air with her, Jeff tried pressing both dimples at once, stretching his arms out as far as they would go.

This time the door dilated open, and he swam through into total darkness, sinking down as the water inside the

airlock drained away until he was standing in air. He let go of Oola's air hose and thought about a cat with four legs instead of flippers, and with no gills.

By the time the inner door opened, Oola's body was back to normal, and he walked into a dimly lighted entrance chamber.

He put Oola down. After shaking herself like a wet dog, she sat down and began to lick her fur like a cat. She was totally unafraid, and so, at the moment, was Jeff, because the room—big enough for several Invaders at once—was completely empty. It had three other doors, each round except for the very bottom, which was flattened.

Which door to try?

Jeff sighed and sat down, taking off his wet boots, which he strung together and slung over his shoulders to dry. While he sat there, he thought he felt Norby's voice.

Felt? He didn't hear it, not the way one heard a voice through air or even mind-to-mind by means of telepathy. It was a *feeling*.

He couldn't hear or understand any words, but he felt certain that Norby was trying to reach him. Norby must be here!

Now—which door?

# 4

## In Prison

Even as Jeff wondered which door to try, the middle one dilated open and a box on wheels rolled out.

"Me-eww!" said Oola in her most beseeching voice, which was not surprising since Oola was always hungry and the box smelled good. Right now, with all her efforts to change and develop gills and snorkel (all of which took energy), she must be very hungry despite the leaves she had eaten. She trotted over to the box as it slowly rolled into the center of the chamber. She sniffed and patted it with one paw, but it paid no attention. Then it turned sharply and headed for the door to Jeff's left, followed by Oola.

"Wait for me," said Jeff, following her on bare feet. As his head cleared from the immersion in water, he became aware that there was a constant background noise, a faint hum as if the building had machinery running, which was only logical since the air was fresh and some equipment had to recirculate and refreshen it, sucking air from outside through some cylinders and giving it back through others.

The left-hand door dilated, and the box rolled through on the flat part of the doorway into a corridor beyond. Oola and Jeff followed. They were lucky, because they saw no Invaders in the corridor, and the occasional closed door along it did not open. The box moved purposefully until it came to the end, where another, larger door dilated. The box went through, and so did Jeff and his pet.

Jeff immediately picked up Oola and crouched behind a bush because, in the distance, this room seemed full of Invaders. It was hard to call it a room though, because it was more like a gigantic cavern planted with trees, bushes, and flowering vegetation. The box moved along a narrow path that turned and switch-backed down a slope. It reached a large pool of water where several Invaders seemed to be playing, tossing balls back and forth in the air above the water.

A recreation room? thought Jeff, trying to shush Oola's food noises. The box she was interested in stopped at the edge of the pool, and the top flipped back.

The Invaders clustered around the box, picking out what looked like green and brown cubes, which they took up in their tentacles and stuffed into the mouths that opened just under the snout. They seemed preoccupied by eating, so Jeff took off his uniform to dry in the warm air. He hung it and his boots on the other side of a bush and stayed out of sight behind it, peeping at the Invaders through the branches.

In the meantime, Oola had found a flowering plant to sample, which took her mind off joining the Invaders' dinner party. But Jeff was still hungry and thirsty. Thirst must sharpen the senses however, for over the background hum of machinery, he thought he heard the trickle of running water. On his hands and knees, staying lower than the bushes, he crawled toward the sound which came from the nearby wall. There was a little jet of water from a pipe in the wall, forming a tiny stream that gurgled down the slope to the pool. Jeff tasted it, found it fresh, and drank thirstily.

Instantly he felt better. When your mouth is dry with thirst, it's hard to tell that it isn't dry with anxiety. With his naked body drying off and his thirst quenched, Jeff found it a lot easier to forget he was scared and to go about figuring

out what to do next.

But what *can* I do? he thought. He stared at the surroundings. The plants and trees were strange to him, of course. He followed the line of the tallest trees up to the ceiling, and his jaw dropped.

The ceiling was glass or something transparent. Beyond it there were small fishlike creatures swimming in the clear blue water. If he and Oola had traveled farther over the building's surface, they might have passed over this glass room and been seen by the Invaders!

Opposite was a wall with another door. Should he make for that door? The trouble was that the pool was in between, and the Invaders could stop swimming, inflate their bodies with air, rise above the pool, and be on his back in a moment.

As he stared at the other door, it opened and a larger box rolled in and then down another inclined path to the pool.

"I'll burn you all to a crisp for this outrage!" shouted a well-known voice in Jamyn.

This box was a cage and inside it, shaking the bars in fury, was the Grand Dragon of Jamya. Jeff managed to snatch Oola back just as she was about to run gladly toward someone she knew.

When the cage was almost at the pool's edge, it stopped just behind the food box. The Invaders picked out green cubes which they tossed into the dragon's lap as she sat on her tail in indignation.

"Monsters! Do you think you can pacify me with this nauseating stuff?" The dragon threw the cubes out of the cage and exhaled a flame that caused the closest Invader to jet backward. Another Invader dipped into the pool and up again, spouting all over the dragon and putting out her flame.

One of the green cubes had landed not far from Jeff, and his nose wrinkled at its smell. He offered it to Oola, who ate it at once with obvious relish. Jeff shook his head. She was going to have bad breath after a meal of those things.

The Grand Dragon shouted, "Now I'm not only hungry, but also wet. What sort of primitive barbarians are you creatures? Why don't you talk? You're nothing but a bunch of bloated odd-balls I'd like to puncture." She snarled and showed off the diamond points on her fangs.

The Grand Dragon of Jamya had never been noted for tact and diplomacy.

The Invaders now threw brown cubes into her cage. These she sniffed at and then tasted.

"Ugly stuff," she said, "but not too terrible. I suppose it's nourishing. Mentor First always taught me to try to stay in good health so that my mind would work better." She ate one cube and then several others, while Jeff wished he didn't have to touch the dragon in order to communicate with her telepathically.

"All right now," said the dragon, licking her chops. "You've fed me, and there's bottled water in my cage, and I suppose you think that will do. Well, it won't. I'm the Grand Dragon of Jamya and I want to go home! I demand that you take me home, do you hear?" She glared at them. "I see, you don't hear or you don't understand or you're just too stupid to talk. You couldn't possibly have built this building, so from whom did you steal it?"

Of course, there was no answer.

"Let me out!"

The biggest Invader pressed something on top of the box and it promptly began to move back up the inclined path to the door from which it had come—with the Grand Dragon yelling all the way.

Jeff watched the cage go out and the door shut, and then he put on his damp clothes and boots. It would not do to rescue the Grand Dragon while naked.

Rescuing the Grand Dragon seemed to be impossible, at least by way of the door through which she had disappeared, for the Invaders were still bobbing around in the water and air and would certainly see him. Jeff sat down to think and to hold Oola, who promptly went to sleep in his arms. Unlike the dragon and Jeff, who fervently wanted to go home, Oola was at home whenever and wherever she was warm and fed and comfortably nestled in the arms of someone familiar.

The building seems to be circular, thought Jeff. The cage went out that way, which should bring it somewhere into the middle of the building because this recreation room is the left-hand door and next to the outer wall.

Then, thought Jeff, perhaps the dragon has been taken to the room beyond that middle door, the one the food box came out of.

Wishing he had Norby with him so he could escape into hyperspace in case of trouble, Jeff took one more drink of water and then carried Oola back through the empty corridor, through the left-hand door, and into the entrance chamber, which was still empty.

This time he headed straight for the middle door which, at his approach, opened for him automatically. There was no corridor inside, just a large room that seemed to be full of machinery and huge metal tanks. The entire front half of the room smelled like the green cubes. Jeff walked quickly through it, trying to hold his breath and hoping Oola wouldn't wake up and pretend she hadn't eaten for several centuries.

The farther half of the room contained more tanks, but at

the very back were huge machines in constant motion. Standing in the middle was a robot, which turned and came toward Jeff.

It looked only vaguely like a robot, for it had a hump instead of a head. It had eight arms and a wheeled base. Jeff ducked between two tanks, but the robot passed him as if he did not exist and stopped before one of the tanks, turning switches.

A snakelike metal tube swung down from a pipe overhead into the tank. After a few minutes, the robot turned off the switches and went toward the back wall. At that moment, the wheeled food box from the recreation room entered through the outer door and joined the robot, who opened the top and let a cascade of brown cubes tumble into the box from a processing machine.

Green algaelike things were formed into green cubes, thought Jeff, and some sort of protein-plant made up the brown ones. All the Invaders' food was being made here in this factory.

The food box passed him and lined up with other food boxes at the wall in back of the tanks. They were all open, so Jeff walked over and took out a brown cube. It was reasonably good, slightly fishy and mealy, but edible. He was so hungry, as a matter of fact, that they tasted almost delicious. He ate several, while the worker robot ignored him. Perhaps it didn't even know he was there.

He stuffed his pockets with brown cubes, and, shaking his head, added some green cubes for Oola. His clothes were going to smell—his hands, too.

He wondered where the Grand Dragon was. Perhaps there was another door at the other end of this room.

Oola slept on, causing Jeff to envy her sublime confidence that she'd be able to manage in whatever strange corner of

the universe she found herself, especially if she had a tame human around to help out.

There was another door and it opened for him, but the room beyond was much darker. After his eyes adapted to the dimness, he made out more machines, many of which looked like strange varieties of robots. And there—in a pile on the floor—was a collection of the little mindless helper robots that did the gardening and other odd jobs on Jamya. They looked deactivated.

Nothing moved in the room. Nothing spoke, yet Jeff had the feeling that something was alive. He touched this robot and that robot, but none responded. Many were quite large, but none were as big as the Jamyn Mentors, who may have been too large for the Invaders to carry off.

In the darkest corner was an immense cage stretching up to the black shadow near the ceiling. It contained many more robots, all of them encased in transparent plastic bags—no, bubbles, for they were stiff. Jeff was trying to squeeze between the various immobile robots to get to the big cage, when a crack of light at the far end of the room suddenly widened to a blaze. Another door had opened.

The room filled with Invaders in the air overhead. Jeff crawled under a curved piece of machinery and stroked Oola, who was awake and growling. After the far door closed, the room darkened and Jeff couldn't tell how many Invaders were present. They seemed to be of various sizes and were very active. They darted every which way—up, down, back and forth, right and left.

Jeff was having difficulty holding Oola down, and he was afraid that any minute she would turn into a hound and howl, a sound that might be heard even by these strangely silent creatures.

Were they looking for him? Jeff realized that to them, *he*

was "the invader." But not by choice.

I wish I could go home, he thought. And then he had the added thought, but not without Norby and the Grand Dragon!

As quickly as they had come, the Invaders left. Jeff walked to the other door, the one from which they had entered, but this time he was stymied. The door did not open automatically, and there were no ridges or dimples to press.

After a while he gave up and went back to the struggle of getting near the cage of robots. He might have tried to elevate with Oola's antigrav collar, but if there were any mistake *this* time, he would land on a lot of sharp metal rather than in ocean water.

He was nearly at the cage when Oola hissed and Jeff looked up. An Invader, a little longer than Jeff was tall, was near the cage, floating up and up into the shadow.

It must have seen Jeff, but it did not come toward him. Instead, it rose higher and then floated over the cage.

Jeff held himself as still as he could, hoping the Invader would assume he was just another robot. What was the small Invader planning to do on top of the cage?

The answer came quickly. There was no top to the cage for the Invader descended *into* the cage. It seized something and rose out of the cage again, descended partway and rushed toward the door through which the other Invaders had gone.

In its tentacles was a transparent plastic bubble tightly covering an unmistakable barrel-body. The Invader was flying off with *Norby*!

# 5

## The Vine

"Norby!" shouted Jeff, but the Invader had already gone.

Jeff ran after it, but found himself banging uselessly into the door, which did not open automatically on this side as it had on the other. It took him several precious minutes to find the ridge and press the right dimples, and when he finally entered, he found the food factory empty. The Invaders had gone, every one of them.

Disregarding Oola's insatiable hunger and wish to stay in the food factory, Jeff ran out to the entrance hall. There was no one there, and he raced back through the door to the recreation section. He didn't care how many Invaders he ran into as long as he could find Norby.

The wooded recreation room, however, was empty of Invaders, and he could find no way of opening the door through which the Grand Dragon's cage had gone. He tried pressing ridges and dimples, with and without added kicks, but nothing happened.

"It's still a circular building," he muttered to himself. "There must be another way to the rest of it."

Back in the entrance chamber, he chose the right-hand door, the only one he'd not yet passed through, and it opened for him. He walked into a dark hall with a greenish light over another door at the far end. It seemed the only other door in the room so he walked toward it. As he approached, he saw that the light appeared green only

because it shone through the leaves of hanging vines that partly curtained the door. He brushed them aside and walked through.

He found himself in another vast wooded room, filled this time with animals as well as plants. He was about to move farther when he saw that the vines hanging near him were writhing. He jumped back. Snakes?

No, it was vines, perhaps all one vine, and it could move by itself. The thickest part had unpleasant round patches much like the shiny, multi-faceted compound eyes of Terran insects. Uneasily, Jeff moved back against the door which had opened automatically on the other side. It did not open for him on this side.

The vine plucked at Jeff's hair, but when Oola snarled and snapped it withdrew, and its bluish green dual leaves, like large butterflies, vibrated.

Quickly Jeff stepped out from under the vine and looked about. The room had many levels, each filled with different kinds of vegetation. The circular walls surrounding the room were covered with more of the vine that had accosted Jeff.

A bright pink creature flew by him to land on a nearby tree. It didn't look like a bird, because it had tentacles instead of feet and its head was that of a pop-eyed miniature elephant, but it acted like a bird. It sang a song, bobbed its head, then soared to another tree farther away, where its mate was in a nest. There were hundreds of different kinds of animals everywhere. In the distance was a herd of small, blue grazing creatures cropping short prickly-looking plants, and in some of the tallest trees were climbing creatures about the size of little monkeys.

None of the life-forms took any interest in him, and Jeff found himself absorbed in their strangeness. When he fi-

nally turned his gaze upward, he found the ceiling to be transparent, just as it was in the recreation room. Again he could see the swimming creatures crowding above it, only not so clearly this time, because vines had draped themselves across the ceiling.

"It's a zoo, Oola!" said Jeff in amazement. He had, of course seen many small and large aquariums where sea creatures could be seen by land creatures, but he'd never seen the reverse.

——Of course it's a zoo, you idiot!

"Who said that?" said Jeff, looking about wildly.

——I! The Dookaza! I am the ruler of this place.

Jeff could see no one, but he felt pressure upon his ankle. He looked down and saw that a part of the vine had snaked about it and was holding it tightly.

——Yes, I communicate telepathically if I touch another creature capable of doing the same. I would not have expected anything as stupid as you to be capable of telepathy, though. Your mind is a muddy muddle, so please do not try to think your thoughts at me. Speak them in your noisy sound-form of communication because then the mental picture in your thoughts becomes a bit less hazy.

"You say you are the ruler of this world?"

——No, only of this zoo. How can you be so stupid? The Hleno rule the world now that my masters have gone.

"Who are the Hleno?"

——I am placing an image in your mind. Haven't you seen them?

"Yes, I have. I call them the Invaders, because they invaded a planet belonging to friends of mine, and they stole a friend of mine. For that matter, they carried me off, too."

——It is not stealing. They removed unwanted objects.

"Now, see here. Whatever you may think, Norby is not an unwanted object, and one of those Invaders has him. He's my friend and I want him back. How do I accomplish that?"

—There is no reason for me to help you. You are a stranger, an alien, and so backward that you cannot even use antigrav.

"Can you?"

—I am the Dookaza. I do not need it. The Hleno need it because that is the only way they can leave the ocean and enter the atmosphere. Their antigrav is part of their physiology. They are remarkable creatures.

"Maybe they are, but they're pirates and thieves and—here they come!" Jeff tried to retreat hastily but found that the Dookaza's grip on his ankle had him pinned to the spot. "Let me go!" he whispered hoarsely. The Invaders were pouring in at the far end of the zoo.

The vine uncoiled so suddenly that Jeff fell, and when he picked himself up and tried to run, he found that he had lost his grip on Oola, and that she had promptly celebrated that fact by running into the underbrush. Trying to follow her, he tripped over a slow-moving creature with a double shell, something like a highly important turtle, and crashed into a flowering bush.

Jeff crawled under the bush where Oola was crouching, her tail lashing as though she were looking forward to tackling all the Invaders at once. He seized her so she wouldn't.

The Invaders were spreading out everywhere, but most were high in the room, over the trees. These would occasionally shoot downward into the open spaces, scaring the animals. Jeff's eyes went desperately from one to another, trying to see if any of them were carrying Norby, but he couldn't tell through the dense foliage of the bush. He

wondered uneasily if the Dookaza vine would tell the Invaders that an alien was in their zoo illegally.

"Let me out of here or I'll scorch your nasty hides!"

The familiar voice prompted Jeff to poke his head around the bush and find out where the Grand Dragon was. Another Invader was approaching from the far side of the room, carrying the Grand Dragon's cage. This Invader was large and acted as if the Grand Dragon's words were not important. Even when she puffed smoke at the Invader, it paid no attention.

"Wings and claws!" cried the Grand Dragon in disgust. "My fire's gone out."

Jeff knew that was not to be taken literally. The dragons of Jamya did not actually have a fire inside, only the ability to combine methane and oxygen by means of a catalyst in the throat tissue. The catalyst lost its capacity with overuse (or overwatering), and the dragons had to wait for renewal before flame could form again.

"Why are you hanging me way up here?" she continued to complain stridently. "I will not stand to be an exhibit in a zoo! Don't hang my cage up here! Let me out! I am not a zoo animal! And who's going to feed me those cubes?"

The cage remained where it was, but as if to answer her last question, the Invader threw in an assortment of cubes.

The other Invaders were milling about to watch the cage. They floated in circles around it, their tentacles tweaking at the cage bars and drawing back quickly when the dragon slashed at them with her claws.

"Nasty brutes!" she shouted. "You have no respect. I'll pay you back for this humiliation."

With the Invaders' full attention on the cage, Jeff had time to look carefully at each floating body and at the moving tentacles around each snout. No one was carrying Norby.

Oola was writhing and began to rise, carrying Jeff with her. She could obviously wait no longer to join battle.

"No!" whispered Jeff, rapidly thinking "down" and tapping Oola lightly across the nose to give her something other than the Invaders to think of. She sank, to Jeff's great relief. It was no time to take on an army of Invaders. Freeing the Grand Dragon and finding Norby were the more important tasks, and Jeff wished the Invaders would leave so that he could at least try to accomplish the first.

As if hearing his wish, the Invaders floated toward the door that had locked Jeff inside. As they bobbed up and down in front of the door, Jeff's ears and head ached momentarily, and the door opened.

"That was an open sesame," said Jeff under his breath, "only I don't see what they did to bring it about."

They were gone, and Jeff had the zoo to himself. He rose from his hiding place, clutching Oola, and thought, "up."

Slowly, quite slowly (because Oola had suddenly grown interested in something furry that ran through the underbrush) they moved upward toward the Grand Dragon's cage.

Jeff was nearly there when something fell on his back and wound about his waist, stopping him. It was the Dookaza vine.

—Where are you going?

"To rescue my friend, the Grand Dragon of Jamya." He called up at the cage, "Here I am, your Dragonship. Jeff Wells, at your service."

He could see the Grand Dragon's nose sticking out between the bars as she tried to look below the cage.

"Jeff! How did you get here? No, don't tell me. Just get me out and then we'll talk."

"I'll try to get you out if this interfering vine will let me."

"There seems to be a great deal of that vine in the zoo," said the Grand Dragon. "Is it intelligent?"

"Yes, and it talks telepathically."

— I am the Dookaza, and I do more than talk telepathically. I hear sound-communication, too. I understand Hleno and that loud animal in the cage speaks Hleno but pronounces it peculiarly.

Jeff sighed. The Grand Dragon did not speak much Terran Basic and if he spoke Hleno to her—no, Jamyn—the Dookaza would understand. Come to think of it, how could the Dookaza understand what he called Hleno? Jeff had never heard the Invaders speak at all.

The Grand Dragon was growing impatient. "Well, what's happening?"

Jeff said, "I have to negotiate with the vine. Please let go of me, Dookaza, so I can set my friend free. She is an important official—"

"*The most important official!*" said the Grand Dragon.

"—on the planet Jamya, and should not be in a cage."

The coil of vine tightened around his waist.

— You should be in a cage, too. I could inform the Hleno.

"What's *happening?*?" asked the Grand Dragon louder.

"It's threatening to inform the Hleno—I mean, the Invaders."

"What is it? The zoo guardian?"

— Tell that loquacious and arrogant creature with green scales that I am no guard, but the zoo's lord.

Jeff said, "You're pretty arrogant yourself, Dookaza. You say you *could* inform the Hleno, but you don't say you will, and I don't think you will."

— Are you sure of that?

"Yes, I am. I don't think you want the Hleno to know how

intelligent you are. And I think you're curious about alien intelligences who don't come from this world of yours."

——How do you know this is a planet of mine, alien? The creatures in this zoo are, like your green and insulting friend, from the many other planets visited by the Hleno.

"But I don't think you are. You've had time to grow all around the zoo, and I bet you're the only Dookaza vine here. No other voice talks to me. You've been here a long, long time, and you can only grow so successfully on this planet, in my opinion, if you are native to it."

Jeff was by no means sure of his reasoning, but he tried to be confident.

——I don't like your reasoning, alien.

"Because I am right?"

——Because it is insufficient. Perhaps I came from another planet, but one with properties highly similar to Nuhlenony.

"Is Nuhlenony the name of this planet?"

——In our language.

The Grand Dragon said loudly, "That's a silly name, and you can tell that crawling plant-snake I said so. Jeff haven't you got a knife or something useful that will cut you loose from that thing? What's the use of your being a rescuer if you don't rescue me?"

"I'm trying, your Dragonship," said Jeff, struggling to get free.

Oola, disturbed by the situation, wriggled out of his arms and soared to the top of the Grand Dragon's cage. Jeff, deprived of his pet's antigrav, began to fall.

——Why aren't you floating?

Jeff could not answer the Dookaza because the wind was knocked out of him as the section of vine holding him fell with him into a tree. The vine draped across an upper

branch, and Jeff, still in the vine's grip and being held upside-down, swung like a pendulum a couple of meters from the ground.

"Jeff!" the Grand Dragon sounded imperiously irritable.  
"Why did you let go of Oola? You might have been killed!"

"She let go of me, ma'am," said Jeff patiently. He grabbed part of the vine dangling him from the tree and hauled himself upright. "This vine thinks I have the same sort of built-in antigrav that the Invaders have. Can't you get Oola's collar from her?"

"What good will that do? It won't get me out of the cage."

—You seem to be a fragile species, alien. What do you call yourself?

"I'm a human being."

—Is that objectionable green creature also a human being?

"No, she's a Jamyn dragon. Now, Dookaza, let's stop fooling around. Either betray me to the Hleno, or be of some help and take me up to the cage."

"And Jeff, tell the Dookaza—"

"It can hear you, ma'am."

"Then *I* will tell it," said the Grand Dragon in her most royal tones. "Listen to me, Dookaza. You're here in this zoo pretending to be an ornamental plant, and that's just a charade. I will tell the Hleno if you don't let Jeff open my cage. And if I tell them, the Hleno will be so displeased, they will dig you up."

—Tell the offensive dragon that the Hleno will not dig me up. I am the last Dookaza.

Jeff told the Grand Dragon, who snorted. "It thinks it's a king, a ruler like me, and it's in a zoo!"

—Tell her Green Nastiness that she's in a zoo, too. But I *am* a ruler. Once each Dookaza had its own territory, its

own island—

"Where was this?" demanded Jeff. "Where do you come from?"

The Dookaza was silent for a long moment, and then its mood seemed to change completely. It slid over the branches of the tree, lowering Jeff to the ground, but maintained its grip on his waist.

——You and the dragon disturb my meditation. Go.

"Aren't you lonely, last of the Dookazas?"

——I am not lonely. I have the company of my thoughts, and you have disturbed them enough. The Hleno's speech is so high and rapid that I can easily ignore it. I cannot ignore yours, and I am tired of you. Go. In return, I will not betray you.

Jeff leaped forward and grabbed the end tendril of the withdrawing vine. "Wait, Dookaza. I cannot go without the Grand Dragon. She must be freed from her cage, and I must find my robot."

——Your robot?

"Yes. He was in a cage in the robot storage room."

——That's not a storage room. That's a prison, and I will not help anyone rescue a robot.

"Then help me get the dragon out of the cage."

——No. I have been talking to you like an equal but I see now that I was wrong. You are primitive creatures tied to technology, and I disapprove. Go away.

"You are tied to technology, too, you dumb vine!" shouted Jeff. "Technology runs this building and gives you your fresh air, your light, your water, your food. If that technology were stopped, you would die, Dookaza—so help your fellow primitive."

The vine seemed to shudder and rustled back against the wall.



# Rescuing the Grand Dragon

"Meow!" said Oola from the top of the dragon's cage.

"Ma'am," said Jeff, "can you touch Oola through the bars?"

"Yes, but she's too big to bring in, and while she's out, I can't get her collar off. You want me to throw it to you, don't you?"

"That's right. Try to stroke Oola with your claw and think about her getting thinner and thinner."

"But she's *your* pet, Jeff. Will she change shape for me?"

"I don't know. We have to try. The Dookaza is sulking and won't help. And the Invaders may come back at any moment."

The Grand Dragon looked through the bars at the top of her cage and pushed her right claw through as far as it would go. "Here, Oola, let me scratch behind your ears the way your mother likes. Nice little pet-child."

Oola flattened herself upon the top of the cage and stretched her neck so that the dragon's claw could reach the scratching place.

"Good Oola," said the dragon. "Nice, *thin* Oola—come through the bars. Thin, thin, thin, and through the bars."

While Jeff watched, the zoo around him rustled and twittered and snuffled as the animals went about their small lives, not worrying about yesterday or tomorrow. A red and

black creature that resembled a lizard with antennae perched momentarily on Jeff's toes, chattered, and left. Through nearby trees flew a flock of small creatures with shimmering wings, long bills, and claws at the top of their backs—presumably for hanging from twigs, although Jeff never saw them stop moving.

Now that he studied it, he could see that the Dookaza vine had spread everywhere, but it was flattening its leaves against the walls, and none of its movable tendrils were visible. It seemed to want to be as far from Jeff as possible.

"Good Oola!" The Grand Dragon shouted it joyfully.

Jeff craned his neck and saw an elongated lizardlike Oola inside the cage, rubbing against the Grand Dragon. Her Dragonship took off the collar. "Here, Jeff—catch!"

Jeff caught the collar and thought "up." The collar obeyed and he rose to the cage. He reached into his pockets and gave a brown cube to the dragon and a green one to Oola. Clearly they deserved them.

"Now, how are you going to get me out?" asked the Grand Dragon as she munched the cube.

Jeff climbed onto the cage and was joined by Oola, who squeezed through the bars and began to go back to her ordinary shape. She nosed the collar slung on his wrist and meowed until he put it back on her. "And don't go running away from me," he said to her firmly.

He examined the bars, which proved to be of such strong metal that he had no hope of breaking or even bending them.

The Grand Dragon said, "I can't budge them, so you can be sure you can't, for I am very strong. There must be some ordinary way of opening the cage. Can't you figure it out?" She puffed out a little smoke in her irritation.

"Not just yet, your Dragonship," said Jeff. Carefully, he ran his fingers over the entire top, but could find no ridge. "Are you sure they put you in from the top?"

"How would I know? I was unconscious. Do you suppose I would have let them take me if I were conscious? They must have powerful weapons."

"I don't think they have the usual kind. The one that took me vibrated its tentacles until I got a headache and blacked out."

"I don't care what it was," said the Grand Dragon. "I just want to go home. Even if you get me out of the cage, how do I go home? How do I get back to my beloved Jamya? I don't see the Invaders taking me back." A large tear rolled out of the dragon's right eye.

"Norby could get us back," said Jeff, "and he's here. It's just that he's a prisoner and I can't find him."

"That's not very reassuring. How is it you can't find him? If you know he's here, why don't you know where he is?"

"Because one of the Invaders took him from the cage where I saw him. By the way, he's encased in a plastic bubble like all the small robots the Invaders took from Jamya."

"How I would like to sink my fangs into some of the Invaders," said the Grand Dragon, gnashing those prominent parts of her dental equipment. "Please get me out, Jeff. There must be some way, and I order you to think of one."

"I'm doing my best, ma'am."

Jeff went over the top of the cage again and ran his fingers over the sides as far as he could reach. There were no ridges, but perhaps cages didn't open the way doors did. He tried again and this time he saw something—a lighter spot on the dark metal rim of the top. When he touched it, the spot

seemed slowly lower than the surface of the rim, as if a faint dimple had been made in it. Jeff tried to put his finger in the dimple, but nothing happened.

"I think you have to have a tentacle with a very small tip in order to press this little place I have found," he said.

"Try one of Oola's claws," said the Grand Dragon. "They might be the right size."

Jeff found it bothered him a little bit to have the Grand Dragon think of that first. Still, however vain and imperious she might be, there was no denying she was intelligent.

The problem now, however, was persuading Oola to put out her claws. Perversely, she was in a happy mood and presented only her velvet pads. Jeff smiled and took her paw. Gently, he put increasing pressure on it and finally out came the claws while Oola protested with rising wails.

"It's in a good cause, Oola." Jeff touched the dimple with the point of her claw. The top slid aside so quickly that it seemed to disappear so that Jeff and Oola fell into the cage and landed on the Grand Dragon. Since each of the dragon's back spines was tipped with jewels, this was uncomfortable.

"Ow!" said Jeff. "Uh—forgive me for landing on you, ma'am."

"I am strong and can withstand your weight," said the Grand Dragon calmly. "But let's not waste time. We will both hold Oola . . ."

Jeff said, "Not both, ma'am. Oola's collar is for a small animal. It works quite slowly with only my added weight."

The Grand Dragon snorted. "I am a dragon, Jeff, and have wings. They are not powerful enough to sustain my whole weight, but they can assist Oola's collar to get us safely to the ground. Shall we try?"

"Perhaps I could persuade the Dookaza vine to help," said

Jeff. "Since I last saw you, you have gained—I mean you have grown even more majestic."

"Nonsense. My majesty has nothing to do with it, and don't you have anything to do with that unpleasant vegetable matter you call Dookaza." She picked up Oola and stood at her full height. "Come, Jeff."

"Wait! Look at Oola!"

The all-purpose pet was growing longer fangs, and her fur was on end, making her look twice as large. She was also growling softly.

"Invaders!" said Jeff. "A lot of them, coming into the zoo."

"Quick," said the Grand Dragon. "I'll lie down and spread my cloak out. You and Oola get under it."

"What about the open cage?"

"I'll close the lid but keep a food cube in the opening so it won't lock."

Holding Oola, she rose slightly, pulling the lid of the cage until it was almost shut and sticking a food cube in the way.

"Now get under my cloak and don't try to peep out. I'll tell you what's going on in the deepest voice I can manage. These Invaders never hear me when I give them orders, and I think it's because my voice is so majestically deep."

"Well . . ." said Jeff, not at all sure of the logic, but there was no time to argue.

He huddled under the Grand Dragon's heavy cloak and tried to keep Oola under it, too. He heard a running commentary from the dragon, spoken in an almost whispered bass that reminded him of Admiral Yobo being discreet. If the Invaders didn't hear that, then perhaps the Grand Dragon was right and they couldn't sense deep tones.

"They're all over the Zoo, Jeff. Twelve of them, in assorted sizes. Now that I listen closely, I can hear them talk. Any-

way, I can hear a few words now and then in very bad Jamyn, and all very high-pitched. They're just tiny squeaks and that's probably all they can hear. Uh-oh, they're coming closer!"

The Grand Dragon was silent for a moment, and then she said in a barely audible rumble, "They've come to see me. I'm the newest zoo exhibit, I suppose. How humiliating."

"Maybe they think you are grand, majestic, and mighty, and have come to stare for that reason," said Jeff in a low, husky whisper.

"I'm afraid not," said the Grand Dragon mournfully. "From the squeaking I hear, I think they are—oh, the indignity of it—Jeff, they're laughing at me."

"You don't know their sounds. The sounds you hear might be gasps of awe at your magnificence."

Jeff wanted the poor dragon to retain her self-respect, but privately he hoped they *were* laughing. Any species of intelligent creature, however unreasonable and dangerous, is bound to seem less frightening if it displays a sense of humor. Laughter can be cruel, of course, but surely for the most part, it implies tolerance.

Besides, Jeff had himself thought that the Grand Dragon's display of jewels, especially those on her spines and fangs, was much funnier than magnificent.

"They've seen the food cube I used to prop open the cage top. I think they're having an argument over who gets it."

"Don't let them close the door entirely. I'm not sure I can find that dimple again from in here," said Jeff.

"Don't worry," said the Grand Dragon. "I have my methods." The dragon seemed to be having some sort of spasm, but she was merely pushing all her cloak on him. Why had she taken it off?

"They're leaving," she said. "Good riddance. Now we can get out of here."

Jeff threw back the cloak and sneezed. It was the Grand Dragon's best cloak, but it must have been kept in a dusty closet.

"How did you keep the door from sliding shut when they took the food cube?" he asked when he saw that she had opened it fully.

"I put the tip of my precious tail into the opening. Bear witness, Jeff, how much pain the Grand Dragon of Jamya is willing to suffer in the cause of freedom."

Jeff noted the protective ruby cap that ornamented the tip of her tail and decided not to ask the dragon if her procedure for keeping the door open had caused her any pain.

Restitching her cloak, the dragon picked up Oola in her left arm and put her right arm around Jeff.

"Hang on," she said, "and think 'flying.' "

In a few seconds she rose into the air with Jeff awkwardly clutched under her arm, his long legs dragging. As soon as she had cleared the top of the cage, the Grand Dragon spread her wings and flew out across the zoo.

"My, doesn't it look pretty," she exclaimed. "From my cage I couldn't view it properly."

"Watch out, ma'am, we're losing altitude," shouted Jeff.

"I am managing just fine," said the Grand Dragon, panting a little with her unaccustomed exertions and drifting distinctly lower. "I was coming down anyway. It's just a matter of deciding *where*—"

Her left wing snagged lightly on a tree branch, just enough to throw her completely off balance. She rolled upside down and plummeted, dropping Oola and Jeff in the process.

"Meowrrr!" said Oola, floating in the air as Jeff fell past her.

"You should have tried gliding instead of flying," said Jeff, a little exasperated, for he could see where his fall would end. He fell into the pond and landed on something uncomfortable.

Jeff swam to the surface, plucking from his forehead a sticky small creature with a bill like a duck and eyes on stalks like a snail.

"Worrrww?" said Oola, suspended in the air above him. She looked as worried as an all-purpose pet can look, and seemed to be wondering whether or not to turn into a fish and join him. Jeff grabbed her, and before she could protest his wet hands, thought "up" and rose.

There was a sound like a steam engine getting set to explode. Jeff looked back down and saw the Grand Dragon's head sticking out of the pond, draped in blue and yellow water plants.

"For the second time," she said slowly and with a deeply aggrieved air, "you have landed right on me!"

"I apologize again, ma'am," said Jeff, rubbing his bottom where it was sore. "Are you hurt?"

"My dignity is hurt." The dragon splashed to the edge of the pond and hauled herself out. "I did not intend to get wet. My best cloak is ruined."

"It's the second time I've taken a dip today," said Jeff. "But at least we're all out of the cage."

He and Oola descended to the Grand Dragon and sat beside her, while Oola licked Jeff's face until he put her down, saying, "I think I'll have a soggy brown cube. Would you like one, your Dragonship?" He extracted two from his

pocket and held them out to her, while tossing a green one to Oola.

The Grand Dragon took one of the brown cubes. "I suppose nourishment is called for if the pond water hasn't extracted all the vitamins. Now where do you suggest we look for Norby?"

"Those Invaders that were looking at you with awe while I was under the blanket—were they carrying anything?"

"No," said the Grand Dragon bitterly. "They were just laughing."

"Then we have to find the Invader who stole Norby from the prison cage. It was a rather small Invader."

"That is certainly an insufficient description," said the Grand Dragon. "There may be any number of rather small Invaders, and if we can't find Norby, I don't see how we'll ever get off this planet. Oh, if you had only brought ships with you when you came."

"But our ship goes through hyperspace only because Norby plugs himself into it. We would still need Norby."

The Grand Dragon wrung out her cloak. "Onward, then. There's no help for it. We must find Norby."

"I wish the Dookaza vine would speak to us. I'm sure it has useful information. It did seem antagonistic to robots, however."

"I'm antagonistic to telepathic vegetation," said the Grand Dragon, looking about at the quantities of vine in every direction.

In the distance, there was a sudden yowl, and Oola, who had been prowling through the underbrush sniffing various plants, came barreling toward them and leaped into Jeff's arms.

"There's Norby," said Jeff excitedly, "and there's the thief."

The small Invader was approaching quickly; Norby's plastic bubble was dangling from two tentacles, and its other tentacles were outstretched.

## 7

# The Small Invader

The Grand Dragon took a fighting stance and tried to breathe out flame but, thanks to her bath in the pond, only black smoke emerged. The methane simply would not oxidize completely.

"Go away!" she shouted, slashing at the Invader's tentacles with her claws, but it was no use. She was snatched up and held tightly with three tentacles.

Jeff couldn't run, because there was no place to go and because it would have been cowardly to leave the Grand Dragon. Going up in the air with Oola's collar was no use because the air was the Invader's element.

Holding Oola to himself with one hand, he leaned back against a tall, sturdy tree and waited. The Invader came closer, and Jeff kicked as hard as he could.

The Invader's pudgy side caved in for a moment as a puff of air blew against Jeff with a sound that resembled "oof."

"Help me, ma'am," gasped Jeff. "Kick it—bite it—"

"I'm trying," said the Grand Dragon, and she clamped all her teeth onto the nearest tentacle.

Jeff kicked again and the Invader backed off, then came forward again, trying to manage both the fighting dragon and the boy on the ground while at the same time carrying a heavy plastic bubble containing a closed-up barrel of a robot.

Three tentacles wound around Jeff, and suddenly he

heard words in his mind; words that were a somewhat distorted version of Jamyn. The Others had taught Jamyn to the dragons; perhaps they had taught it to the Invaders as well. The Dookaza vine had been able to understand both.

——Alien! [said the voice] Why do you not answer when I speak to you?

Jeff spoke out loud, so the dragon could hear as well. "Your Hleno speech is not audible to us. It is too high-pitched."

——Then why can I hear and be heard now? You creatures are dangerous. I was going to capture you and take you back to the spiky creature's cage, and perhaps be rewarded by the zoo manager. And now you are speaking like an intelligent being, and I am hearing you, but not with my ears.

"Jeff," said the Grand Dragon, hanging motionless in the Invader's tentacles, "you don't have to repeat that because I am getting the telepathic message, too. I think my bite turned this Invader into a touch-telepath like us."

——I don't understand. How could the spiky creature's bite have made me able to hear you—and what is telepathy?

"Hearing and speaking directly from mind to mind is telepathy," said Jeff. "And the bite of a Jamyn dragon automatically confers the ability, as long as you're touching the other person. It has something to do with hormones, I think, but I don't really know."

"This is all very well," said the Grand Dragon, "but suppose I'm poisoned from biting this awful creature? I do not feel well."

"That's because its tentacle is too tight around your waist. You have gained—grandeur, you know."

"Yes, but on brown cubes I will soon lose all that grandeur.  
I suppose I'm not poisoned. Tell it to put us down, Jeff."

——What does 'down jeff' mean?

"Jeff is my name. I'm the one in the wet red uniform. The spiky one is the Grand Dragon of Jamyn. And the bubble you are holding contains my friend Norby."

——How can a machine in a safety bubble have a name?

"Because it does. The machine is named Norby, and he's my robot."

——Robots are bad.

"They are not! You're an idiot to think so. My robot is not bad."

The Grand Dragon said, "Don't be angry, Jeff. Jamyn dragons and Terrans like robots, but these Invaders don't seem to use them."

Jeff shook his head angrily. "But they *do* use them! The Invaders have robots manufacturing their food for them, and there's a lot of complicated equipment keeping this undersea building going."

——Invaders? Is that the name you have given us?

"Yes," said Jeff. "You and your people invaded the privacy of a planet called Jamya, where the Grand Dragon here is ruler. You paralyzed the Jamyn robots, kidnapped the Grand Dragon and put her in a zoo, dumped me and my pet Oola into your ocean and, worst of all, stole my personal robot."

"Worst of all?" said the Grand Dragon. "Stealing Norby is worse than kidnapping the Grand Dragon?"

"Please let us go," said Jeff, wishing the tentacles around him would relax. He could see Norby still closed up in his barrel. "Please take Norby out of the safety bubble and give him to me so we can go back to our own planets."

——I can't do that. It would be against regulations. I must take you to the authorities and let them decide. I will have to put Jeff and the Grand Dragon back in the zoo. And the little animal, too.

"And what will they do to you, Invader, when you report all this?" asked the Grand Dragon. "Were you allowed to remove that robot from the cage?"

The Invader didn't answer, so Jeff tried something else. "We don't understand your Hleno culture. If you disapprove of robots, why did you take Norby?"

Again the Invader did not answer.

"Why?" asked the Grand Dragon. "Tell us why or I'll bite you again. My second bite could be poisonous."

——Don't bite me or I will be forced to treat you as creatures who resist capture.

"How?" asked the Grand Dragon before Jeff could stop her.

A vibration began in the tentacles that seemed to reach inside of Jeff's skull, and he felt himself blacking out. "Stop!"

Oola wriggled until she had part of a tentacle in view. Then she clamped her teeth on it.

"Stop, Oola," said Jeff, unclamping her jaws and stroking her. "If you tell us why you took my small robot, Invader, I won't tell anyone, and I will advise you how to keep out of trouble."

There was a long hesitation, and Jeff hoped the Invader was sufficiently frightened to talk, but not so frightened as to react violently. Finally, the telepathic voice spoke.

——I've been through the factory and the zoo and the prison many times, but I've never seen anything like this robot. It doesn't even look like a robot, but it must be one or it wouldn't be inside a safety bubble. I wanted to try opening

the bubble to investigate the robot. I was just curious. There's nothing wrong with being curious. You're *supposed* to be curious if you have brains. The trouble is I can't open the bubble.

Jeff frowned. There was something puzzling about that speech.

The Grand Dragon found something puzzling, too. "You mean *you* don't know how to open a safety bubble?"

—I don't. That's why I have to take it to the authorities. And if I don't keep you here in the zoo, I have to take you to the auth— (The Invader broke off and trembled violently.) Wha—at are you do—ing to me?

It writhed and jerked backward and forward.

—What is holding me?

"It's not our doing," said Jeff, squirming about so he could get a better view of the rest of the Invader. "You've just been attacked by the Dookaza."

A large section of the Dookaza must have crept through the trees from the wall. It was wrapping its coils around the Invader's bulgy body.

—But what's a Dookaza?

—I am the ruler of this zoo (said the Dookaza in all of their minds) and I have decided that you must all die. I could tolerate the presence of you aliens as long as I believed you would not be here long, but now you have made one of the Hleno telepathic and perhaps you will make them all telepathic, and that I cannot tolerate. I will choke you all and throw you into the pond. The other Hleno will assume it was a fight in which all died. Then I will be free to meditate in quiet.

As another section of the vine wrapped itself around him, Jeff struggled to keep breathing, pushing the vine down on

the Invader's tentacles, which were around his waist. He felt as if he were being crushed to death by different kinds of snakes.

The Grand Dragon did not hesitate. She attacked the Dookaza as it attacked her, and then belched smoke. "Ugh! This vine tastes terrible, and it's too tough even for my fangs."

"Then get your flame back," said Jeff.

"I'm trying. I'm trying."

Oola was also attacking the vine, but her teeth made no impression on it, and Jeff tried vainly to calm her down. She was the only one of them who could escape, at least temporarily, by elevating on antigrav. But either the Dookaza would eventually find her or the Invaders would capture her. Jeff realized that his pet might be allowed to live as another animal in the zoo, but Oola was designed for pethood, and she would be unhappy without an intelligent companion. She was unhappy now, unwilling to lose Jeff.

Jeff thought: And what would happen to Norby if the Grand Dragon and I die?

"Don't kill us," he said.

———I was not going to kill you (said the Invader).

———But I will (said the Dookaza, tightening its coils).

Fighting against the vine's strength, Jeff tried his last desperate move. Was Norby within reach?

Norby's bubble was still held by the Invader, whose tentacles were beginning to droop as the Dookaza squeezed. Norby was close up, so for the first time Jeff could see that Norby's sensor wire was almost but not quite touching the inside of the bubble. He must have just had time to do that before the stasis field in the bubble held him paralyzed in the center of the small space.

Softly, Jeff began humming the Space Command anthem, hoping that the surface distraction would prevent the Dookaza vine from overhearing his thoughts. Since Norby's barrel was held in place by thin plasti-force strands it would not take much distortion to force the sensor wire into contact with the bubble!

"Invader," gasped Jeff, "you said you didn't know how to open Norby's bubble. Did you try forcing it open by squeezing it?"

——Yes, I tried, but the bubble was too strong for my tentacles. Save me! I am being squeezed to death.

Jeff felt the Dookaza vine pause in its lethal striving. It was listening.

——Why do you ask about the robot? (said the Dookaza).

Jeff said, "I just wanted to make sure that Norby would be safe even if we were killed."

——Why should that matter, alien? (said the Dookaza). What difference does it make what happens to your robot? I will simply throw it into the pond with your bodies.

"Good, because then when the rest of the Hleno find us, they will also find Norby and remove him from the bubble."

——I don't care what they do with a robot. They put robots in prison.

"But they might first be changed by Norby. Then they will not put him in prison."

——Changed? How?

"My robot is telepathic. He will be able to teach all the Hleno to be telepathic, and then your killing this Invader and the Grand Dragon and myself will all be for nothing."

——A telepathic robot? (The Dookaza sounded agitated.) I cannot permit that. I will destroy the robot.

"You cannot," Jeff said deliberately. "Even the Invader couldn't break open the bubble."

The vine's coils around Jeff and the Grand Dragon and the Invader relaxed slightly as the Dookaza turned its attention and its strength to Norby. It sent a tendril about Norby's bubble, pulled it out of the Invader's grasp, then sent another tendril about it tightly and began to squeeze.

Jeff said, "By the way, Dookaza, you want to be alone in order that you might peacefully meditate, but you will never be alone again. You will always have those you killed filling your memory, troubling you with thoughts of the lives you cut off so viciously."

The Dookaza vine ignored the statement and went on squeezing the stiff plastic bubble, paying no attention to the fact that the sensor wire would soon be touching the wall of the bubble.

— I could not possibly care (said the Dookaza) about the lives of animals and machines.

"In our philosophy, it is held to be possible to live alone and remain sane only if one feels kindly toward the universe and everything in it."

— Your philosophy is for you. I do not want it.

"Norby! Norby!" shouted Jeff, as the wall of the bubble touched the sensor wire, which bent in a very slight curve on contact.

— You needn't shout, Jeff (came Norby's well-known thought-sensation in Terran Basic). I'm not telepathically deaf.

— You're alive, said Jeff in Terran Basic. Only they two would understand it.

— Of course I am, but I can't do anything from inside this bubble unless you can persuade that lout of a balloon to

hyperspace us out of here. (He switched to Jamyn.) Invader, can you hyperjump?

——I don't know how (said the Invader).

"Idiot!" said the Grand Dragon, "You Invaders do it all the time."

——Well, I never have, and I don't know how.

——Silence! (roared the Dookaza). Let me concentrate on breaking this robot in two!

"Invader!" said Jeff urgently, "join minds with my robot while he's still in contact telepathically! Let him show you how to hyperjump. You can do that, can't you, Norby?"

——Can do, Jeff! (said Norby). Hang on!

If Norby and the Invader worked together, where would they take them? What if each had a different destination in mind? What about the Dookaza? It was in contact. Would it come, too?

Jeff's thoughts stopped as a great tearing noise filled his ears and then grayness filled his eyes.

And then he was suddenly up to his chest in mud—wet again—and alone, except for an irate all-purpose pet clinging to his neck.

# 8

## In the Mud

Jeff began to sink in the mud, its brown ooze sliding around his armpits. In a panic he pushed down with outstretched arms, trying to keep from going under and suffocating.

"Meow!" said Oola, rising gracefully from his shoulders until she hung in the air above his head, peering down at him quizzically as if to say "How can you be so stupid?"

"I forgot," said Jeff, embarrassed. "Mud is so frightening, I couldn't think straight, but now you can rescue me again."

He clasped both hands around his pet and the antigrav collar. For a few minutes nothing happened as the weak antigrav struggled to lift him out of the clinging mud. "Up," he thought, as hard as he could. "Up." With a smacking sound, he came loose and was in the air, dripping mud and feeling filthy.

He looked around but could see no one else. About twenty meters away was a small island of vegetation that consisted of grasslike plants and taller tree-forms. At the horizon were several other islands, some of them much larger. And in the air was the faint sound of singing.

Jeff was horrified. "Melodia! We've come to Melodia! Why?"

Oola tugged to go in the direction of the island, so Jeff rummaged in his pockets and fed her a mashed green cube to distract her. He suddenly noticed that the mud was

moving in one area. While he watched, a shiny transparent bubble broke the glistening mud surface.

"It's Norby," Jeff cried out. "Down, Oola!" Awkwardly, Jeff waggled his body and arms until he was over the bubble and could pick it up.

"Norby?" Jeff said anxiously.

There was no answer in his mind, for the bubble had sprung back to its normal shape, and Norby's antenna no longer touched the side.

The surface of the mud below gyrated as if a volcanic explosion were about to take place and with a mighty heave, the Grand Dragon of Jamya pushed her head and wings above the surface of the mud and panted. "Get me out of here, Jeff! I refuse to drown in mud. It's undignified."

With Norby awkwardly clutched under one arm and Oola grabbing his shoulders, Jeff held out his other hand to the dragon.

The antigrav collar had reached its capacity and could not lift the dragon all the way out of the mud.

"Try flying, ma'am," said Jeff, thinking "wings" as hard as he could. Oola got the idea and grew some leathery flaps between her front and back legs. With the extra lift of Oola's flaps and with the Grand Dragon beating her wings for all she was worth, they were able to move.

"To the island," said Jeff. "Everyone try to move there."

They sloshed their way across the mud. The Grand Dragon's hind legs and her tail were under the surface. The tail rose every now and then to slap down on the mud, though whether for propulsive force or out of anger it was impossible to tell, for the dragon muttered and fumed the whole way. Oola flapped her wings and even Jeff tried flying motions to guide the antigrav effect of the collar.

They got to the island after what seemed like hours and collapsed on its grassy shore.

"My cloak is absolutely ruined," said the dragon.

Jeff was trying to wipe the mud off himself with swatches of grass. "These islands usually have a spring of water," he said. "We should try to find it, because we'll need water to drink—and to wash, too."

"It doesn't matter," said the dragon. "I think all the indignities I have suffered have driven me mad. Here I am on a planet of mud, and I think I hear beautiful singing. Or has someone told me about a planet like this, and am I only imagining I'm here?"

"You're not imagining," said Jeff.

"Is this part of your Earth, Jeff?"

"No. I'm pretty sure this is the planet Melodia. Your grandniece, Zargl, was here with me once, and she must have told you about it. The natives sing a lot, and it's a good thing none of them are here. I'd rather be on an uninhabited island."

"But if this is uninhabited, why do we hear singing?"

"There are islands all over Melodia's mud, and the bigger ones are inhabited. I hope we don't have to see any of the natives again or eat their uninspired food."

"Food?" The Grand Dragon sniffed and looked about.  
"Where?"

"See those yellow and blue and orange things hanging from the trees and bushes? That's fruit, all edible, but not very good."

Oola had already lifted herself to a small yellow fruit, snatched it from the branch with her jaws, and was back at Jeff's muddy feet, eating it with relish.

"Oola seems to enjoy it," said the Grand Dragon.

"Oola eats almost *anything* that's vegetation and likes anything she eats." Jeff wiped the mud off Norby's bubble and said, "Where do you suppose the Invader might be?"

"I've forgotten about it," said the Grand Dragon, not at all contritely. "I hope it smothered in the mud."

"Don't hope that," said Jeff. "Unless we can get Norby out of this bubble, the Invader's ability to travel in hyperspace is the only way we can get off Melodia, and I would rather be back under the sea of Nuhlenony than stay here."

"You are not encouraging me, Jeff," said the Grand Dragon, standing up and shaking mud in all directions. "I'm going to look for the spring you mentioned, and it had better be there because I'm thirsty." Scowling horribly and showing her fangs, the dragon stamped off through the grass.

Although Jeff was thirsty too, he sat on the grass and stared out at the mud, worrying about the Invader. It had to be under the mud, since only the Invader could have brought them away from Nuhlenony, although only Norby could have forced upon it the coordinates of Melodia.

Oola raised her head from the fruit she was eating, a piece of it dripping from her jaws. "Worrw," she said, placing the piece carefully on Jeff's shoe and stepping back as if she were a Terran cat who had just brought her master a juicy mouse.

Jeff picked up the fruit and munched on it, satisfying some of his thirst, and went on staring at the mud. Was the Invader under the mud surface and, if so, how long could he survive there?

As if in answer, the mud seemed to convulse and spray upward like a geyser. Hastily Jeff picked up Oola. Soothing her with soft cluckings as she began to protest, he removed her collar and fastened it tightly about his upper arm.

It was hard getting back to the section of mud where he'd

originally landed, but that was where it was heaving. He hovered over the area, got spattered by more wet mud, and finally saw a gray shape pushing up.

"Invader!" he called. Then he remembered that it couldn't hear his low-pitched sounds. He would have to touch it and transfer the message telepathically. When he tried to reach down to make contact, the Invader shot skyward, knocking him out of the way.

Around the Invader's body was what looked like an enormous snake whose tail disappeared into the mud. The Dookaza vine had also come along, and a branch of it swung out, aiming at Jeff, who twisted and turned in an attempt to avoid it.

Something else wound around his arm. It was a tentacle from the Invader, hanging on tightly. At once Jeff could make out the Invader's thoughts.

—The Dookaza is squeezing me, trying to pull me under the mud again. I will die if I go under once more, because there is no air to breathe and not enough water for my other breathing organs. Help me.

"Keep trying to rise, Invader. Perhaps only part of the Dookaza vine had come along. Perhaps it has no roots and will die—"

Jeff stopped speaking, for the utterly alien voice of the Dookaza spoke in his mind.

—I will not die, for my roots are here, even if most of my body is dying in the zoo back on Nuhlenony. I am getting stronger on this wonderful planet with its rich nourishing mud, its clean air, real sunlight, and good vibrations. You and the Hleno will serve to fertilize the mud about my roots, after they are well-planted in a place of my choice.

"Dookaza," shouted Jeff, knowing it would sense him

since both it and he were in physical contact with the Invader, "do not murder us. The mud of Melodia is rich enough for your growth as it is."

——It is not your fertilizing power alone. You are telepathic, and I cannot endure the minds of your kind, or of the Hleno who has come with you. Nor need I be further disturbed by your robot's telepathic powers. He is still imprisoned in the bubble, and there will be no Hleno to release him. If I leave him to himself, it will be to me as he were dead.

Oola was standing at the mud-shore of the island, snarling and hissing. The sounds of the angry all-purpose pet brought the Grand Dragon on the run. She had evidently found water for she looked free of mud and her cloak was dripping wet.

"Jeff!" she cried out. "You're in danger."

Jeff said, "I'm trying to save the Invader from the Dookaza vine. The Dookaza wants to kill us all."

——Help me [said the Invader]. I cannot fight the pull of the vine much longer.

Desperately, Jeff tried to pull the vine away from the Invader's body, but it was too firm in its hold. His attempt only immobilized him long enough to allow the Dookaza to throw a branch about him.

As the coils wound around his waist, Jeff quickly removed Oola's collar from his arm.

"Ma'am, try gliding out across the mud so that I can throw the collar to you. You are the strongest of us and might be able to handle the Dookaza."

"Coming, Jeff." The Grand Dragon might have been vain and self-absorbed, but no one could doubt her bravery. Casting aside her cloak, the dragon ran back into the grass of

the island and then ran forward at full speed. At the edge of the island she opened her wings fully and leaped far out over the mud.

She was too heavy. The glide lasted only a few seconds, and then she was down in the mud. "Jeff! Part of the vine has my left leg."

"Never mind. Keep moving those wings! Keep on the surface!" Jeff was finding it more and more difficult to breathe as the Dookaza squeezed. He managed, however, and then the dragon was directly below.

"Ma'am, take the collar!" He managed to drop it directly onto her claw, which curved shut, holding the collar fast. Now she had the antigrav of the collar plus the assistance of her own wings. Together a greater upward force could be exerted on the vine than Jeff could have managed.

The Grand Dragon lifted from the mud, dragging her section of the vine with her.

"I am going to teach this bully a lesson," said the dragon, clearing her throat and licking her lips, "a lesson it won't forget."

The Grand Dragon was not referring to her lifting power, as Jeff was assuming she was. She was dry enough and rested enough to do something more spectacular. She opened her mouth with all her fangs glistening. A tremendous roar vibrated the air and blasted Jeff's eardrums as the Grand Dragon's mouth shot out a hot blast of flame that struck the main stem of the vine.

The Dookaza crackled and blackened, and then the vine broke apart, the lower section falling back into the mud.

The Invader shook itself free of the dead remnant of the vine, and the dragon flew triumphantly away from the part that had been trying to hold her.

Jeff, in the meantime, had neither the collar nor the upthrusting vine to hold him up. He fell into the mud again, head-down this time.

Something dragged him out. When he wiped his eyes, he saw that he was suspended from a tentacle of the Invader, who was slowly moving over to the island, accompanied by the Grand Dragon, who was dipping and soaring as only a Jamyn dragon with large wings and an antigrav device in addition could do.

"The spring is over there," said the dragon solicitously, "with a small pool."

Wearily, Jeff picked himself up from the grass where the Invader had deposited him and went to wash. Overhead, brushing against the trees, came the Invader, while on the ground, brushing against Jeff's legs, was Oola, anxious to see he did not get into trouble again.

Jeff got clean—and wet, since there was nothing to dry himself with. He removed his boots and socks, hoping they might dry in the sun. It felt pleasant to wriggle his bare toes in the grass.

The Invader touched him with a tentacle.

—We Hleno need water to live in. I cannot live in this muddy world. I can stay in the air for a long time, but not forever. I want very much to go home. Please take me home.

"Only you can do that," said Jeff. "You have the power to travel through hyperspace, not I."

—But I've never learned how! Your robot did it through me and directed us to this awful planet. We must leave, for the Dookaza vine's roots are not dead and it will grow again.

"If that's so," said Jeff, "then there's all the more reason to get Norby out of his bubble."

——I don't know how to do that. And the bubble can't be forced merely by muscular strength. Even the Dookaza vine could only bend the bubble, not break it.

"Do you suppose a bit of dragon flame could melt a section of the bubble?" Jeff asked.

——I don't think so. The bubbles are highly resistant to heat. If that green animal could produce enough heat to break through the bubble, there would be enough heat to damage the robot inside.

"Comet tails!" said Jeff in discouragement.

He listened to the faraway music of Melodia as Oola went to sleep on the grass. The Invader swayed against the trees as if it were tired, too.

"What's your name?" asked Jeff suddenly, stroking the tentacle that was touching him.

——I am a Hleno. You call us Invaders.

"Yes, but I mean your own name. Don't each of you have a personal name that belongs only to you? My name is Jeff and that's Oola, my pet."

——My name is Uhfy. I am sorry I have caused you so much trouble. You and your friend, whom you call ma'am, saved my life and I thank you for it.

"We haven't saved your life yet. We have to get you away from this terrible world and take you home."

——You will do that? You don't hate me for the trouble I've caused you?

"One fits the universe best," said Jeff, "if one does not hate. I try not to." He felt in his pockets once more and found two brown cubes in terrible shape. "Are you hungry? Would you like these?" He held out his hand, and another tentacle whipped down to take them.

The food cubes disappeared into the creature's odd mouth and through the tentacle touching Jeff, Uhfy spoke.

—Thank you. I was growing faint with hunger.

Jeff was sleepy, but he felt that he must stay awake in case a living remnant of the Dookaza might still be capable of attacking them.

"Uhfy," he said, "Can you reach that orange fruit up there with one of your tentacles? I'm sure it will be sour, but I'm hungry enough not to mind."

While Jeff was eating, he decided that he and the Invader were now friendly enough for him to ask a question that still bothered him.

"Uhfy," he said. "Why did you really take Norby? I'm sure your doing so will get you into trouble, so why did you? It can't be just that you're curious."

—But it is. I was just curious. It is such an odd robot. I've never seen one like it. And I *will* get into trouble. My father will be furious.

"Your father?"

—He's a high official of the Hleno. And I'm his favorite son. Or I was. Now he won't like me as much.

"Uhfy, how old are you?" Rather overcome, Jeff was thinking of Uhfy's small size for an invader, of his curious way of speaking, the fact that he had not learned yet to indulge in hyperspace travel, and so on.

—I don't know how you measure these things in your world, Jeff, but I am only half as old as I must be to be considered an adult.

Younger than I am, thought Jeff, and here I'm treating him as though he were a grown-up villain.

"Uhfy," he said, "I can hear the Grand Dragon snoring,

and Oola's been asleep for quite a while now. You sleep, too, while I watch for the Dookaza or the Melodians. When I wake you, you can watch and I'll sleep."

—Very well, Jeff, but I don't like being unable to communicate with you. You and your friends have been a comfort to me.

"I'll be right here when you wake up, Uhfy. I can't go anywhere. I'm certainly not going into the mud."

—Thank you, Jeff. I know you'll think of a way of saving us.

The young Hleno withdrew his tentacle and floated over to the big patch of grass. With a sound like air whistling out of a balloon, he sank to the grass and lay there quietly.

"I wish I *could* think of a way of saving us," Jeff muttered to himself.

## 9

## The Mind of the Vine

Tired as he was, Jeff felt terribly restless. He walked back to the Grand Dragon, who was snoring loudly. He gazed out over the sea of mud but could see no break in the surface.

Norby's bubble still lay on its side at the edge of the island. Jeff carried it to a tree where the grass was shorter and softer and sat down with his arm around the bubble. Nothing was going to try to steal Norby without Jeff being made aware of it.

Just touching the bubble and knowing that Norby was alive and nearby soothed Jeff to the point where his eyelids kept closing. He forced them open time and again.

The sun of Melodia sank behind the horizon of mud and islands, and gradually the faraway singing of the natives died away as they went back into the mud for the night. There was only deep silence under the great bowl of the sky that was now filling with stars, not as numerous as in Uhfy's world, but not quite so sparse as the Earth's sky.

—Alien. Please listen to me.

"Whuuuh?" Jeff had fallen asleep after all, and now, with a feeling of shame, he came to with a start.

—I will not harm you. Listen.

Jeff looked about wildly, but there was no one visible. Then he became aware of something wet on his bare right foot. He looked down and could just make out, in the star-

broken darkness, that a thin tendril of vine, trailing from the mud, was delicately pressed against his foot, but not encircling it. The leaves of the vine were muddy and drooping.

Jeff said, "Now, look, Dakooza. If you try to drag me back into the mud, I will awaken the Grand Dragon, and she will finish burning you. She'll destroy every part of you, and you'll be dead forever."

Jeff was not sure how long it would be before the Grand Dragon would be able to flame again after her attack on the Dakooza, but the vine wouldn't know that. And, in fact, the thought processes of the Dakooza were mild and humble.

——I do not wish to oppose you again. I want only permission to rise above the mud and experience sunlight. I must have the sunlight for photosynthesis and energy. Please let me survive.

"You weren't going to let *us* survive."

——I crave your pardon for that. I was frightened, and perhaps I have not been entirely sane for many years.

Jeff said suspiciously, "I can't believe you think that. Are you going to tell me you've suddenly become sane?"

——I may have. At least I may have become a little less insane. The artificial light of the Nuhlenony zoo and the poor nutrition of the soil must have done me harm. The rich soil here seems to have cleared my mind already, and the good sunlight when it comes should help me even more. I think I will be different from now on—if you telepathic creatures will leave this planet.

"We plan to do that, but we'll need your help."

——How can I help?

"By squeezing Norby's prison bubble so I can communicate with him, and so he can join minds with the Hleno to hyperjump us away from here and away from you."

——I will try. I am weaker now, there is so little left of

me. Still, when the sun rises I will spread my leaves out to dry on the surface, and after I have absorbed enough sunlight, my remaining vine may be strong enough to squeeze the bubble. Meanwhile I will absorb nourishment from the soil through my roots.

Jeff relaxed against the tree. The Dookaza's thoughts seemed sincere. Surely it would be harder to lie in the mind than in words. The uneasy mind will give itself away, in a way that words would not. It might be wise to test the matter though.

"While you are nourishing yourself, Dookaza," said Jeff, "tell me more about yourself. You didn't want to before. You were friendly enough till I asked you where you came from, and you've been hostile ever since."

———I know. I didn't want to remember. It filled me with hostility.

"Please tell me of your past now."

———I will, but first I must warn you. I think you have made friends with the young Hleno who brought me to this wonderful planet, but when you go back to Nuhlenony you will not find it so easy to win the friendship of older Hlenos. And unless you can find someone else strong enough to help you make contact with your robot, you will be forced to stay there on Nuhlenony—and in the zoo, as I was.

"I know. I will think about getting away from Melodia, but it is important to think about the right things at the right times, my brother always says. It is time now for you to tell me your life story. It will help keep me awake."

———You may sleep. I will give you a story while you sleep.

*Give me a story? What an odd way of putting it. He could feel his mind whirling, and at once he tried to snap awake. How could he be that sure he could trust the Dookaza?*

Perhaps the Dookaza understood that.

———I will not try to harm you—Jeff.

The humility in the mind. The use of his name. Jeff thought: I must trust it. If I turn away from it now, it may lose its last chance at sanity.

"I will trust you, Dookaza."

———And will it be all right if you give me your knowledge?

"Knowledge?" Jeff yawned and found he could barely think, "I'm just a school kid. My older brother knows much more."

———But you have been to many places, and if I make your knowledge part of me, I will have been to those places, too. Open your mind to me, and I will give you my story as you give me yours.

Jeff yawned again, his eyes shut. "Okay, Dookaza. Give me—a story—"

*Dry land . . . good . . . roots in soil . . . rain . . . sunlight . . . good!*

*Jeff . . . Dookaza . . . Jeff . . . both!*

*Memories . . . back . . . beginning in ocean . . . long years . . . Nuhlenony turning around sun . . . sea filling with life . . . land rising above sea . . .*

*Dry land good . . . roots in soil . . . rain, sunlight . . . good!*  
*Stay here, no change now . . .*

*Other creatures changing . . . one animal grows intelligent, walks upright . . . cities . . . volcanoes destroy . . . They build again . . . They change some creatures . . . change—me!*  
*Me . . .*

*I am myself. I am I! They have bioengineered only me, no*

*other Dookaza vine. I, the only intelligent Dookaza on Nuhlenony, put part of my root system into a house They built for me. What do They want of me?*

*. . . I can communicate with Them now through touch, and I have learned They want nothing of me except that I exist and enjoy the universe in my own way. They have done this with other creatures on Nuhlenony and on other planets they visit. They are kind, and leave me alone to meditate, but I am not lonely. I am part of the cosmos and that is enough. . . .*

*The environment is changing and They are worried because their technology is to blame. The machines burn fuel and produce carbon dioxide which heats the atmosphere. The ice caps at the poles of Nuhlenony are melting, and the ocean is rising . . . rising . . .*

*Into the volcanoes! Danger! I have moved entirely into the building They said was mine, but it is mine no longer for They are bringing in specimens of all the animals, building more rooms and stronger walls to shut out the sea that creeps up over the land. . . .*

*While the ocean rose They went away for a long time, and now They are back, sad because the planet did not grow cooler and the sea level did not sink. The islands are forever gone under the ocean. Only our submerged building has land life, and in it I rule the zoo and remember sunlight and sky and freedom. I am unhappy. I do not like to be reminded of what I have lost. . . .*

*Primitive sea swimmers called Hleno live in the ocean, but They have bioengineered some Hleno to be intelligent, with abilities greater than mine; the planet now belongs to Hleno who swim in water, float in air, and eat food made in factory vats where only one-celled animals and plants must die to feed others. . . .*

*They have destroyed all of their artifacts except this building, and They are leaving Nuhlenony forever. I want to go, but there is no place for me in the starships. The Hleno call Them "the ancient ones" and say the ships will never return because the dry land will never come back. The Hleno say technology is dangerous and must be stopped everywhere. . . .*

*So much time has passed. I miss Them, the ancient ones, with their three eyes and six limbs, walking upright as the Hleno are not able to do.*

*. . . The Hleno have learned to leave the planet without ships. They bring back specimens for my zoo and also intelligent machines the Hleno fear and imprison. Is it true that intelligent machines will destroy any civilization?*

*. . . More and more captive machines arrive for the prison. The soil in the zoo grows weak and I feel strange. I do not think clearly. I cannot communicate with the Hleno to get their help. I understand what they say, but they do not hear me when I touch them and try to talk mind to mind. . . .*

*There is a new creature in the zoo! It walks upright like Them but has only two eyes, thin tendrils growing from the top of its head, and only four limbs—a weakling compared to Them. . . .*

*It can talk through the mind! It is intelligent! It even has a name—Jeff. It wants to find a robot, but there must be no more robots, no more technology. It asks about my past, and I do not want to remember. I am sick—I am unhappy—I want to be left alone—I must destroy the new creatures, this Jeff and the two others, green . . . I am sick. . . .*

*Why is there no one to give me freedom and a home?*

*What is freedom? I have forgotten. Is it dangerous?*

*Should I kill these creatures or do they know about freedom?*

\* \* \*

"Jeff! Jeff, wake up! It's morning and the Dookaza vine is around your foot!"

Jeff opened his eyes to sunlight and put his finger to his lips. "Shh, your Dragonship. I'm in communication with the Dookaza. The vine is friendly now."

"Don't trust it!" The dragon snorted and belched some dark smoke. "I'm not in firebreathing shape yet, and it's our only weapon."

"Wait. I have to communicate some more."

"Do you mean talk? Why are you using a big word?"

"Because it hasn't exactly been talking. I mean, we haven't really exchanged words, even telepathically. I was inside the Dookaza's mind, feeling its emotions, and thinking its thoughts through a series of memories that go back so far my mind boggles at it. Please let me close my eyes and concentrate once more, and please go get Oola—I can hear her meowing. She may be up a tree after some more fruit and unable to get down. You still have her collar."

"I am taking good care of it, and I will return it in time," said the Grand Dragon stiffly. "And I will go where I am wanted. Dear Oola, at least, appreciates me."

Jeff smiled at her scaly back as she walked away. He knew that the Grand Dragon knew he liked her a great deal, but her dignity wouldn't let her admit it.

He settled back against the tree, holding the vine's tendril in one hand and placing his other over Norby's bubble. He closed his eyes.

—Dookaza (said Jeff in his mind, not talking out loud), I have lived your life with you. Have you experienced my memories?

—I have, young Terran. You come from an interesting

planet with interesting creatures, but do not tell them about Melodia because I would prefer not to have visitors. (The Dookaza stopped for a moment and then continued.) Only you, Jeff. And I suppose you'll have to come with your robot if he ever gets out of that bubble.

—That's the only way I can travel through hyperspace. It is Norby who makes it possible.

—I will enjoy seeing you once in a while. Not often.

—I understand, Dookaza, you like being alone and, as long as you are on Melodia, I will like leaving you alone.

The Dookaza vibrated and it seemed to Jeff it was laughing.

—You are sadly lacking enough eyes and limbs, but you have goodness. I am glad now I did not kill you. In this beautiful place you and your robot found for me, I feel better than I have for many long years, as if a sick excess of myself has been burned away. I have freedom and good soil here. I will not bother the natives I can hear in the distance, and they will not bother me. I am grateful to you, young Terran, because you trust me even though I tried to kill you. It has taught me the importance of trust and love, and the evil of hate. Perhaps some day my old masters, *They* of Nuhlenony, will visit this planet. And perhaps the young Terran will visit, and we will tell each other what we have learned since our parting.

"Thank you, Dookaza," said Jeff aloud. "I will remember. My life is short, and as long as you have a safe planet, you are immortal. Yet I think I will live in your memory long after my body returns to the basic structure of the universe. Cling to your faith in the value of love over hate."

—I will remember you. But get the Hleno ready for traveling, because I now feel strong enough to try to com-

press your robot's bubble, so that you can communicate with him.

Even as the Dookaza thought this, Uhfy sailed overhead and sank close beside Jeff, one tentacle reaching out to touch his arm.

——Greetings, Jeff (said Uhfy). The Grand Dragon woke me. She fears the Dookaza might harm you and she says you are too stubborn to accept protection. Is everything all right?

"Yes, Uhfy. I'm going to take you someplace where my friends might be able to get Norby free."

——Do you understand, Norby? (Jeff added in Terran Basic).

The Dookaza, with many turns of the tendrils that still existed, had compressed the plastic, and Norby's sensor antenna was now touching it.

——I understand (said Norby, also in Terran basic). I gather you have made friends with this peculiar vine that's making it possible for us to talk, and now you want me to take the Hleno to Earth.

——Let's go to our apartment. Uhfy—that's his name—will fit into it.

——No, he won't. He'll knock things over. How about the roof? Anyone passing in an air taxi will just think we've got a gray balloon up there.

——Hurry (said the Dookaza in its Nuhlenonian version of Jamyn). I cannot maintain this pressure for long.

"Your Dragonship," shouted Jeff in Jamyn. "Bring Oola and hang on to Uhfy's tentacles. We're leaving."

Uhfy grasped the Grand Dragon, who was holding Oola (who didn't want to leave because she was in the middle of eating another fruit). He also wrapped a tentacle around Jeff,

who held Norby; the bubble bent by the strength of the Dookaza.

——Dookaza (said Jeff), one more thing. The ancient ones who developed civilization on your planet, Nuhlenony, must have had a name for themselves. What was it?

——I cannot pronounce it. Neither can the Hleno.

——Think the name and perhaps I will sense it.

The Dookaza thought, recapturing the name as *They* spoke it.

I'll never be able to pronounce it either, thought Jeff.

The Grand Dragon, also receiving, said, "I've heard that before."

——So have I (said Norby) but it's time we left. Open your mind, Uhfy, because I've got to direct your hyperdrive to the right place.

——If we go to my home (said Uhfy) my father and the others might not agree to let you go free.

——That's why we're not going there (said Norby). Come on, Jeff, concentrate on those coordinates! I need your help! Let's go!

——Good-bye, Dookaza (said Jeff).

——Good-bye, young Terran (said the Dookaza).

The vine slipped out of his hand and off the bubble and withdrew to the surface mud just as Melodia disappeared.

Jeff found himself in hyperspace.

# 10

## In Manhattan

Jeff had the natural impulse to scold Norby for the mixed-up way in which he had brought them home but, of course, he couldn't. As soon as the Dookaza had let go, Norby's sensor wire no longer touched the bubble so communication was lost. Besides, Norby *had* brought them back to Earth. He had even brought them back to Manhattan.

The trouble was that he had brought them back to the middle of Fifth Avenue and the skycars were gathering to see what was causing a commotion on an important thoroughfare of the sovereign state of Manhattan, North American sector of the Terran Federation.

"But, officer," said Jeff as softly and politely as he could, "I didn't mean to make trouble—"

"Listen, kid," barked the policeman, "you and your friend here in the dragon suit had better use an air taxi when you go to a party. Do you have a license for this balloon with which you knocked over a citizen."

"But, officer, the lady attacked the balloon with her umbrella and let out some of his air. It was only self-defense—I mean she just bounced off the balloon and sat down. If you'll just call Police-Lieutenant Albany Jones, I can explain everything to her."

"Lieutenant Jones? Are you a friend of hers?"

"I'm Jefferson Wells. My brother is Fargo Wells."

*"That troublemaker?"*

"Please call Lieutenant Jones. I really need help with my—uh—computerized balloon. I've got to take it to the roof of my apartment, and I don't know if it can rise now."

——Jeff (said the Grand Dragon, holding Jeff's arm and trying to control a squirming Oola), I can't understand a word you are saying. Don't your Earthpeople understand simple Jamyn?

——No, they don't (said Jeff), and Uhfy, please try rising. I'm sorry one of our citizens let out some of your air.

——I am not really hurt (said Uhfy). Is this creature in blue dangerous? Shall I fall on him and knock the breath out of him?

——No!

"Listen, Wells," said the policeman, "don't give me that empty stare. Are you listening to voices or what? You're a little young to be drunk, aren't you?"

Jeff swallowed. "I'm not drunk, officer. Please call Lieutenant Jones."

Jeff explained to an indignant Grand Dragon, mind to mind, that she was to pretend to be a human being dressed up in masquerade, and to a totally puzzled Uhfy that he was to sway like a balloon.

The crowd around them was as solemnly curious as a crowd could be, and it was growing larger.

"Mister," said a boy to the Grand Dragon, "why did you paint your cat green, and where did you get that dragon suit? It looks nifty."

Jeff said, "My friend can't talk while he's in the suit, and the cat is green because it's part of the story—"

"Ah," said the policeman, returning. "I get it. This is a

holoTV show, isn't it? You're all going to be in some movie. Do you have a permit to shoot here in Manhattan?"

"Well—" said Jeff, hesitating.

The boy shouted, "It's a movie, everybody. Look, Mom—actors. They've even got a plastic bubble with a big cookie barrel in it. Are those cookies for giving out? Can I have one?"

The boy crowded up to Norby's bubble, and Jeff snatched it away.

"Don't fool around with the movie props, kid," said Jeff.

Another skycar zoomed over the trees of Central Park from the park precinct station house. Albany ran out of the car as soon as it stopped.

"Hi, Jeff! What's the matter?" she called out.

"See," said a young man in the crowd. "It's like I tell you. The movies have no sense of realism. Real cops aren't that beautiful."

"Lieutenant Jones," said the first policeman, trying to keep order. "These actors are using this balloon, and I don't think it's safe—"

"Of course it is, Officer. If Jeff says it is, it is. I'll show you. Jeff, can the—uh—balloon rise with me? Where do you want me to take it?"

"To the roof of our apartment house," Jeff said as casually as he could. "We actors will just walk up the stairs. Just grab one of these ropes." He held out one of Uhfy's tentacles to her. "And tell it to move according to your directions."

"Certainly," said Albany, who was never afraid of anything. She let Uhfy's tentacle wind about her waist, and then her eyes widened so that Jeff knew she was receiving a telepathic message from him.

There were numerous policemen present now, busily dispersing the crowd.

Albany said, "Well done, officers. I will take over. I know something about this enterprise."

She and Uhfy rose gently into the air and soared toward the apartment house where Jeff and Fargo lived.

Norby's barrel, especially inside the thick plastic bubble, was heavy when the robot's antigrav wasn't lightening the load. Jeff shifted it from one arm to the other, sighed, and started walking toward the apartment, followed by the Grand Dragon, who cradled Oola and reached out to touch Jeff.

"All those two-legged monsters—no offense, Jeff—were so surprised to see me. Don't they know about Jamyn dragons?"

"Not very much," said Jeff. "Perhaps they were awed by your dignity and regal bearing."

"Ah!" said the Grand Dragon, lifting her head higher.

It was not until they were back in the apartment that Jeff could let himself relax. The two days they had spent away from home seemed like two years, and he wanted to take a shower.

Once out of the shower and in fresh clothes, Jeff felt almost normal as he took the elevator to the roof where the *Hopeful* was docked and where, he hoped, Uhfy and Albany Jones were safely ensconced.

They were, and Fargo was on the ship, too, staring at Norby's plastic bubble. With the Grand Dragon, Oola, Uhfy, and Albany all present, Jeff had a little trouble getting in.

Fargo looked up at Jeff and said, "Well, little brother, you've really managed to mess up this time. What do we do with this thing? Acid won't touch it, hammering just makes

noise; the drill slips off without leaving a mark. Nothing seems to work."

Uhfy squeezed himself into a corner and let out a good deal of air in order to take up less room. The Grand Dragon, on the other hand, sat proudly on her haunches taking up all the room she could. Oola, who was at home everywhere, chased her tail in happy circles. Albany, who sat at the control board, said sweetly, "How about something simple? Have you tried a can opener?"

Fargo glared at her. "We'll have to throw a chain around it, stick a rod through the links, and twist. Jeff, get to the nearest hardware store and buy a length of chain and an iron rod if they have one. Heavy-duty. I'll pay you back later."

When Jeff got back, Fargo grunted his thanks and threw the chain around the bubble. He twisted the rod while Jeff and the Grand Dragon held the chain steady at either end.

Fargo grunted, "I hope this thing doesn't crack suddenly and kill us all."

Jeff said, "You're just doing what the Dookaza vine did, and it didn't crack then."

Nor did it now. It compressed in the middle till Norby's sensor touched the plastic and, at once, Norby's indignant thoughts filled the minds of those who touched the bubble.

——How inept can you be! I thought once you got me back to Earth you could figure out some way of getting me out of this thing. What about that air-filled child there? This is a product of his people. Can't he open it?

——No (said Jeff), he doesn't know how. He's only a child. We have to do it ourselves.

——Have you tried a laser knife?

"Have you still got your laser knife, Fargo?"

Fargo hesitated. He had bought one during his sculptor-

phase when he was working in steel. "That's a dangerous tool, Jeff."

"But we've got a desperate problem."

Fargo took the instrument out of its locked container, after taking some time to find the key. "At least it's charged up."

He worked away at one end of the bubble, since he didn't want to bore through the plastic and melt away part of Norby before he could stop. He didn't have to fear. The laser had *some* effect on the plastic, at least it left an opaque spot, but it didn't cut through.

"It's not powerful enough," Fargo said. He was sweating a little, and he hated to sweat. He thought everything should be simple and easy, even when it was exciting and adventurous.

"What about the water knife?" asked Jeff, rubbing the opaque spot on the bubble absently.

"How can that work when the laser doesn't?" said Fargo sarcastically.

"It just seems to me that the plastic bubble was made on a water world, and the Invaders must make use of water-based technology more than we do." He seemed to wither under Fargo's scornful glance. "Well, it was just a suggestion."

———Try it, you nincompoop (yelled Norby).

The water knife, which Fargo had also bought during his sculptor-phase when he was working in rock-salt, used a very narrow stream of water under enormous pressure. It was in its way as dangerous as the laser knife.

As Fargo hooked it up, Jeff said, "By the way, how long have Norby and I been gone?"

"Two days our time," said Albany.

"Two days our time, too," said Jeff, relieved.

"We were getting quite worried," said Albany, "and Fargo tried to get Admiral Yobo to let him have the experimental hyperdrive ship to go after you."

"The ship's not finished," said Fargo gloomily. "I suspect it never will be."

"Well, let's hope the water knife works," said Albany.

"No chance," said Fargo. "It won't."

But he was wrong. He directed the thin, nearly invisible stream of water toward one end of the bubble, and it promptly sliced it off—like uncapping the end of an egg with a knife. Indeed, once the plastic bubble was punctured, the whole structure was instantly interlaced with fine cracks. These widened so that the entire bubble came apart in shreds.

"It took you long enough," said Norby, his head popping up under his hat. He pointed at Uhfy, touching him so he'd understand, "And it's all your fault."

——I beg your pardon (said Uhfy).

"It's not his fault," said Jeff, outraged, "and don't start blaming everybody. Uhfy had nothing to do with the bubble. In fact, he rescued you. If it hadn't been for him, you'd still be in the robot prison."

"Well, it was his people. And nobody seemed to use any brains about getting me out."

Fargo said, "We did our best, and we *did* get you out. And it was Jeff's suggestion that did it. You had no ideas yourself, except to yell."

"What's happening?" demanded the Grand Dragon. "Talk Jamyn!"

Jeff explained in Jamyn, and the Grand Dragon said, "The question of who put Norby into the bubble or who took him out is totally unimportant. What *is* important is that he must

take me home at once. The Jamyn will be lost without my strength and wisdom, and the Mentors must be released from paralysis."

"That's true," said Jeff, "but it won't do any good to release the Mentors, even if we knew how. The Invaders—I mean, the Hleno—might just return and do it all over again. They have this horror of technology—and, in a way, I can't blame them considering what it did to their planet—so they want to stop it everywhere. We've got to go back to Nuhlenony and figure out some way of getting them over their technology-phobia, before we can do anything else."

The point was clear and beyond argument. Nuhlenony it was.

Norby went to the control board and plugged in. Anyone looking at the roof of the Wells' apartment house might have noticed, at that moment, that a ship suddenly disappeared.

# 11

## On Nuhlenony Again

The planet, Nuhlenony, seen from orbit, was beautiful. The blue-green ocean stretched from pole to pole, lighter in areas where the sunken land was closer to the surface.

"You've done well, Norby," said Fargo, taking over the controls. "We didn't know the coordinates of this world."

"I didn't either," said Norby, "but I got enough information out of this Invader child to be able to work them out. I'm very good at hyperspatial mathematics."

"Obviously," said Fargo, "but I trust that in addition to bringing us to the right place, you've also brought us to the right time."

"*I always*—" began Norby, and then seemed to think better of it. "Well, anyway, I brought you to the right time *this* time." He waved his two-way hand at the viewscreen. "Take us down, Fargo. I have a bone to pick with the Hleno."

—Oh, my (said Uhfy, who had been timidly touching Norby, since the robot had demanded all the astronomical information from him that he had learned at school). You seem very annoyed. Are you armed? Will you hurt my people?

—We mean no harm, Uhfy (said Jeff, who had been stroking him), unless we are forced to defend ourselves. And even then we'll try not to. We come in friendship to all intelligent beings and to all life.

Five minutes later, Jeff was a little less certain about how far this attitude of universal benevolence ought to go. A platoon of Hleno surrounded the *Hopeful* as soon as it had entered the lower atmosphere. Their tentacles grabbed any part of the ship that was grabbable. They hung on while Fargo tried to shake them off but, with numerous buoyant "balloons" attached to the *Hopeful*, maneuvering of any kind was sluggish and difficult.

"What do we do?" asked Fargo. "They don't respond to any attempts at communication. Do you suppose your Hleno friend can try?"

—Can you talk to your fellow-beings, Uhfy? (asked Jeff.)

The young Hleno wagged his tentacles in despair.

—My method of speech does not work with your devices. Can you let me out of the air lock?

Unfortunately, before Jeff could respond, everyone in the control room, including Uhfy, was moaning with pain. The Hleno outside the hull were causing vibrations that made Jeff feel as if his brains were frying.

Fargo said, "We can't stand this," and sent the ship shooting upward. The Hleno were forced to drop off.

"Let's leave," said Norby, and the ship winked out of normal space.

"No, Norby," said Jeff, "we can't leave Nuhlenony. We've got to reason with them."

"They are not reasonable," said Norby. "They are dangerous, and I don't want to go back there."

"I thought you had a bone to pick with them," said Fargo slyly.

"And I'll pick it as soon as I come back with Admiral Yobo and a fleet of ships," said Norby.

"Are we leaving Nuhlenony?" asked the Grand Dragon,

who couldn't understand the Terran Basic that was being spoken. "How do we get Uhfy to find out how to release the Mentors?"

"You are right, my dear Majesty," said Fargo in Jamyn. "We must go back, Norby. I'll try reasoning with them."

It was true, thought Jeff, that Fargo could outtalk almost anyone, but he had the feeling that the Hleno would not stop to listen even if they were telepathic, which they were not.

"I think we ought to go back," said Albany, "but stay in the upper reaches of the atmosphere where the Hleno can't reach us. Perhaps we'll find some way of communicating with them, or some way of going down just far enough to let Uhfy out to plead our case."

"And Uhfy will probably get spanked by his father," grumbled Norby, "and be sent to bed without supper because no one will listen to a kid. Still, I'll try it even though I'm still dizzy from that vibration. Here goes."

The grayness disappeared and was again replaced by a view of a beautiful planet.

It was not the same view.

"Norby, you're mixed-up," said Fargo. "That's not Nuhlenony."

"It is so. It's the same coordinates."

Jeff stared at the strangely-shaped islands dotting the shining blue-green ocean. "It's Nuhlenony, I think, but in the past, before the ice caps melted and the sea level rose above the land."

"It's not my fault," said Norby promptly. "I told you I was still dizzy, but no—you had to make me do it."

"How do you know we're in the past?" asked Fargo, ignoring Norby.

"I learned it from the Dookaza vine that I told you of. The

dream I had was like living the Dookaza's life, so I know the history of Nuhlenony." He held Uhfy's tentacle as he repeated that history as briefly as he could.

—Some of this I know (said Uhfy) but I never heard that the Dookaza was bioengineered by the ancient ones. We were taught in school that only the civilized Hleno were bioengineered and that's why the planet belongs to us. I hope my father doesn't mind when he finds out about the Dookaza. He is a very proud Hleno.

Below them the planet gleamed in the sunlight, and no troops of Hleno rose this time to confront the *Hopeful*.

"Maybe the ancient ones are still there," said Albany. "Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could see them?"

Fargo said, "They might come to see us. They might be no more friendly than the Hleno are, and they might be even more dangerous."

Jeff stirred uneasily. He had not told anyone what the ancient ones looked like, and he wasn't sure he wanted to meet them.

"However," Albany said firmly, "let's go down and see."

And Fargo, who would do anything that seemed risky, said, "Sure thing," and down they went.

"I wish the Dookaza were with us," said the Grand Drag-on. "I detest intelligent vegetables and that one was most unpleasant, but it could tell us whether or not the islands are the same as they were when the ancient ones lived on Nuhlenony."

Jeff studied the viewscreen. "Fargo, take us on a different orbit, over the poles."

"Good idea," said Fargo, who saw the point.

After a while, Jeff said, "See the polar ice caps frozen thickly onto dozens of islands? We *are* back in Nuhlenony's

distant past, before the ice caps melted at all. The ancient ones must be down on the islands in the warmer parts."

———Please (said Uhfy suddenly) let us land on an island right now, and make it near the shore. I must have water. I've had no water since we left Melodia—well, I had the mud there and it was wet—and my skin is beginning to feel funny. We're water-creatures, you know, and can't stay away from water too long.

"Uhfy's right," said Albany in concern. "His skin is blotchy."

Jeff sighed. They would have to go down since they couldn't risk Uhfy's health. He decided to make the best of it.

"It would be exciting to take a look at the civilization of the ancient ones. According to the Dookaza, it was wonderfully advanced, with magnificent cities—"

"No cities," said Norby, as they dropped lower toward the surface of the planets. "There are no lights on the dark side. No electricity. As far as I'm concerned, no civilization."

"I want to go home," said the Grand Dragon. "I'm not interested in strange civilizations, even if they're *not* there. We've got to find the method of freeing the Mentors so that I can return to Jamya with it."

Uhfy began to whimper.

———I want to go home, too. I want my father. And I want water to swim in.

"You'll have water," said Jeff, "just as soon as we land."

They landed on the edge of a small island, and Jeff and Fargo helped maneuver Uhfy out of the air lock and onto the shore.

Uhfy rolled on the wet sand back and forth, then made a complete sideways somersault, and circled into the water.

Farther and farther out he went, then rose to the surface, his tentacles waving.

"I can't hear what's he's saying, but I guess he's okay," said Jeff.

Fargo frowned. "He speaks ultrasonically, doesn't he?"

"Just barely," said Jeff. "Sometimes you can hear him squeak when he is speaking as low as he can."

"You know, I think there's a way to fix up the computer to shift the pitch of sound waves. If it can receive ours and send it out at the Hleno range, and receive theirs and send it out at our range, we'll be able to talk Jamyn to Uhfy. More important, we can speak to the adult Hleno and maybe get somewhere with them."

"That would be great," said Jeff. "How long would it take you to do that, Fargo?"

"Half an hour, perhaps, if my idea is correct. Otherwise, I might not be able to do it at all." He sat down excitedly at the computer.

Albany whispered, "If Fargo's going to get all computerized, I'd better consult with Norby about getting back to our own time. He's a little cranky after being imprisoned for two days, and I suspect he doesn't enjoy your spending all your concern on Uhfy."

"But I've *got* to be friendly with Uhfy. He might be the key to the Hleno."

"Yes, but you know Norby," Albany's whisper was even lower. "If I don't smooth him down, he might *never* manage to hit the right time." She disappeared down the corridor.

Jeff waited at the air lock, feeling miserable and swinging his feet as he sat at the rim, watching Uhfy cavort in the water.

"What's the matter, Jeff?" asked the Grand Dragon, coming out of the air lock and blinking in the sunlight. Oola was at her feet, stretching and yawning.

"Well, if you want me to give it by the numbers, your Dragonship, then: one, I hate being lost in time because I'm always afraid we'll be stuck there; two, I wish I were home; and three, I'm hungry. This is my third day without a decent meal."

"There's nothing to be done at the moment about getting you to your right time and place, Jeff," said the Grand Dragon, "but at least you can eat. I will make a snack with my own claws."

"That will make it taste all the better, ma'am," said Jeff politely. "Could you make something for Uhfy, too? Something like those green or brown cubes the Hleno eat?"

"Ugh," said the dragon. She went off quickly and returned quite soon with a peanut butter and jelly sandwich on protein bread for Jeff and a large hunk of protein bread for Uhfy.

"Hey, Uhfy," she yelled in the highest note she could reach.

The young Hleno, who had just popped to the surface again, looked up, and she threw the bread. He caught it easily, ate it quickly, and waved at her.

"I guess he likes it," she said.

Jeff chewed away hungrily at his sandwich. It wasn't the most sophisticated food in the world, but it tasted like heaven to him. He was astonished to find that putting just a little of it in his stomach eased his longing for home perceptibly.

Oola, with a thoughtful meow, was watching Uhfy cavort-

ing in the water. Bunching her feet, she jumped into the air, was carried over the water by her collar, and dropped into the ocean. She came up dog—or rather cat-paddling.

"I didn't know Oola could swim," said the Grand Dragon.

"She can do more than that," said Jeff proudly. "She turned into a fish when we first got to this planet and saved my life that way."

It was warm in the sunlight and, with his stomach crammed with bread, peanut butter, and jelly, Jeff felt himself beginning to drop off. Maybe they were so far back in time that the ancient ones had not yet had a chance to develop a civilization. He slept with his head on the Grand Dragon's shoulder. She slept, too, and was snoring.

Jeff dreamed he was the Dookaza vine, watching the early efforts of those who became the ancient ones. *They* were primitive, but *They* built little huts and cooked their food and made boats for fishing. *They* had not yet trained the Hleno to do their fishing for them—

He thought he felt someone brush past him, but he resisted waking and kept seeing *Them* in his mind, tall and slim and strange—

"Jeff! Help!"

He woke with a start and looked down at the water. Fargo's head was there, and around him underwater were Hleno but so near the surface that their shapes were visible. They were very small, much smaller even than Uhfy, and as sleek as sharks!

"They're circling me," Fargo called out, "and they're not friendly. They are primitive Hleno, and there's no intelligence here to speak of." He threshed and kicked at the small Hleno.

The Grand Dragon was awake. "I'll tell Norby to bring the

ship closer so we can get him up. What's he doing in the water anyway? And where's Uhfy? And Oola?" Then, with astonishment, she called out, "—Look, Jeff!"

In the distance, but coming rapidly closer, was a fleet of boats shaped something like long canoes, with tiny outrigger floats lashed to boards that crossed the center of each boat. Tall, slender creatures that vaguely resembled human beings were paddling the canoes toward the *Hopeful*.

Albany came running with a stun-gun in her hand. "Fargo! If you can get a little distance away from then, I'll stun every last one of them."

"Wait," said Jeff, "they may not be dangerous. Let's not use any weapons unless we have to." He put his hands to his mouth, "Fargo! Oola's out there. Find her and come back using her collar."

"I can't find her anywhere and I'm getting tired of fighting off these creatures."

The canoes were still far away, and Jeff didn't know whether they were full of additional enemies or of possible friends. He stood up, ready to dive to his brother, when the *Hopeful* lurched and began to move. Jeff caught the side of the air lock as the ship drew so close to the surface that each small wave wet his shoes.

Fargo swam toward Jeff's outstretched hand, but the small Hleno were also reaching for him, and he suddenly yelled and went under.

"They've got him trapped under water," said Jeff. "Get Norby! The ship has to get to him. Meanwhile—"

"Don't jump," said Albany, getting a firm grip on his pants. "You'll be caught, too. I'll fire at them."

"But you might stun Fargo and then he would drown for sure."

Fargo's head broke the surface again, and he took a deep breath. "One of them has his tentacles around my legs, but I gave him a karate chop and he's not pulling me under at the moment. They haven't got the kind of mouths they can bite with, fortunately, but if they keep pulling me under the water—Well, isn't anyone going to help me? Where is Norby, the rescuer?"

"I'm trying!" called out Norby's voice through the ship's speaker system. "The Hleno keep moving you just as I am about to maneuver the ship over you. Can't you keep still?"

Fargo's head went under, and he came up again sputtering. "No, I can't. Now another one's got hold of me."

"Well, look at that," shouted the Grand Dragon.

Beside the lead canoe was a gray shape racing through the water. It pulled ahead of the canoe, plunged so deep that Jeff couldn't see it anymore, and then the water around Fargo began to froth.

"Hot dog!" yelled Fargo, swimming free just as Norby brought the *Hopeful* directly over him again. Jeff leaned down and pulled his brother back to the air lock. Except for a few marks on his legs, Fargo was intact.

Waves heaved up to splash everyone at the air lock, and the Uhfy rose from the water, shaking assorted primitive Hleno who dropped to speed away through the water.

"What were you doing in the ocean, Fargo?" demanded Jeff.

"I wasn't there to fool around," said Fargo. "I went to give Uhfy my new gadget."

Uhfy floated to the air lock and held on to the edge with a tentacle, while another touched Fargo.

——If I'd known you were planning to go swimming, Fargo, I'd have warned you about the primitives.

Jeff reached down to touch Uhfy and said, "Where's Oola?"

—I can't find her, Jeff. She was swimming with me in the water when the Hleno arrived and then she disappeared. I thought she went back to the ship.

"She didn't," said Jeff, feeling heartsick.

At that point, the canoes arrived, and the lead paddler raised his paddle in what must have been a greeting.

"Here, Uhfy," said Fargo. He unclipped a small metal box from his belt and pulled out two cords. He fastened the box to Uhfy's throat, tying it around with the cords. "Try this."

"Greetings, stranger," said the creature in the canoe. His reddish-purple skin was smooth, and it bulged with muscles. He had three eyes, a short neck that flowed down from a bulbous head, and two sets of arms that were not joined the way human arms are.

"I can hear them!" shouted Uhfy. His voice, through the speech box, was high and tinny, but it could be easily heard by human ears.

"Can you hear us?" asked Fargo, not touching Uhfy.

"Yes! Yes!"

"I can hear you, too," said the being in the canoe. "Your language is understandable, but your accent is vile. I do not understand why you do not return my greeting. Why are you involved with this large Hleno?"

"We do not mean to be impolite to you, sir. You catch us, however, in what is part of a long, complicated story," said the talkative Fargo, drawing a deep breath.

"Which we won't bore you with," said Jeff, kicking Fargo. "This Hleno is from another place, where the Hleno are civilized and can fly." It was impossible to say more than that. They were in the past, and Jeff knew that any knowl-

edge they imparted now might result in changes in the future—their own present. Fargo would think of that in a moment, Jeff was sure.

"Excellent," said the native. "He seems to be a variety we can hear easily. The others we cannot."

"This one has a hearing aid," said Albany. "A hearing and speaking aid."

"Interesting," said the native. "You seem to be intelligent, so it is puzzling that you cannot speak the language any better than you do. It grates on the ear as you pronounce it. Nevertheless, if you would like to visit our village, we will make you welcome."

"No," said Norby's voice. "We don't want to."

"What we mean to say," said Jeff politely, "is that we would dearly wish to, but we have important work that must be done first. We regret this very much."

"Yes," said Fargo, switching to a whisper in Terran Basic. "We'd better return to our own time before we louse up all of history."

"We still can't go," said Jeff out of the corner of his mouth. "Oola is missing."

"Jeff," said Norby's voice, "I have been scanning the canoes with our sensors. I suggest you ask the chief or whoever that is to give you back your property. I think it's in the last canoe. I saw them pick up something from the water on the way over here."

"What property?" asked the chief suspiciously.

Uhfy let go of the *Hopeful* and sailed out over the last canoe, whose occupants cowered in fear. Uhfy descended, plucked something out of the canoe with his tentacles, and sped back to the ship.

"Is this what Norby means?" asked Uhfy, handing it to Jeff.

It was a short, broad, leathery green cylinder, rather like a hassock, except that it had prickly spines upon it.

Jeff said with delight, "That's Oola. That's the form she takes when she's in danger. She must have grown spines to make sure the primitive Hleno didn't eat her." He would have hugged her but for the spines.

"Odd," said the chief. "You refer to that object as 'she.' Is it a stage in the life-cycle of your people? That is possible, I suppose. Anything is possible, since there are no people like you on the world. We know that, for we have explored every island. Unless you come from under the ice."

Jeff said, "We come from—elsewhere."

The chief thought about that. Then he said, "I think perhaps I see what you mean. This is a world and we call it Nuhlenony, and it is ours. There is the large light in the sky that we call our sun, and at night there are many small lights. Why should not the small lights be suns, far away, with other worlds around them? We have reasoned this out, and I think you must come from another such world and, if so, that proves our reasoning is correct."

Jeff listened to the other's musical, elaborate version of Jamyn with admiration, but he said in a low voice. "I think he's already learned a dangerous amount from us. We must leave."

"Good," said the Grand Dragon. "Let's go to our own time."

"Yes," said Fargo, "since Oola's back."

They all stepped back into the ship and helped Uhfy struggle aboard.

"Farewell," Jeff shouted to the chief, still standing proudly in his canoe. "What is your name?"

The name rolled out of the chief's mouth, many-syllabled, musical, unpronounceable by any human.

"Thank you," said Jeff. "I am Jeff."

"Will you return to visit our village, strange Jeff?"

"Perhaps not. But I think some day you will visit other worlds. I wish you well."

The air lock closed and the ship took off.

"Thanks for saving Fargo's life, Uhfy." said Jeff.

"I was glad to do so, Jeff. You and the Grand Dragon recently saved mine. If you have forgotten, I have not."

Once again, Norby threw the *Hopeful* into hyperspace.

# 12

## The Hleno

Nuhlenony was, once again, an all-water planet. The *Hopeful* had to orbit it a number of times before Jeff, watching the viewscreen intently, could locate the lighter patch of ocean where the underwater building sent its black air vents up from the water.

Once more the Hleno rose from the water with their tentacles ready to meet the ship as it sank downward, but this time the *Hopeful* was ready—and so was Uhfy.

With the speaker apparatus around his neck and the *Hopeful's* communication system adjusted, Uhfy spoke to his kindred.

"Hello, father," said Uhfy in a rather diffident tone. "This is your son, Uhfy. I was rescued by these kind and civilized creatures who have gone through a great many perils and dangers to bring me safely home. Please don't attack the ship because the creatures here don't deserve it, and because the vibrations injure me, too."

His own speech was broadcast outside by the ship's communication system and was, at the same time, deepened in pitch inside for the rest of the *Hopeful's* occupants to hear.

"Uhfy! My son! Your mother and I thought you were dead when we found you gone and the Dookaza vine ripped from the soil of the zoo."

Uhfy's father's voice was picked up by the ship's adjusted sensors and given to the control room at two pitches of

sound, one for Uhfy and one for the others. Uhfy's father spoke in rolling tones like high thunder.

"I will explain everything, father, if you let us join you in the recreation room. These creatures cannot breathe under water so we must meet them there, where everyone can be comfortable."

"We will accede to your request, my son, but request these creatures to bring no mechanical devices with them. We cannot permit technology upon this planet."

"Tell your father," said Fargo grimly, "that we can't possibly swim to the air lock of your building without our scuba equipment."

"And I cannot go without Norby," said Jeff.

While Uhfy attempted to explain this to his father, Fargo said, "Listen, Albany dear, you stay aboard the *Hopeful*. You can navigate her reasonably well, and if we have to run—uh, swim for it, you can pick us up."

Albany frowned. "Am I being left behind because I'm a woman? You'll need me down there."

"Let's not argue, Lieutenant. I outrank you. This is an order."

"Who outranks whom? I'm higher up in the Manhattan police force than you are in Yobo's secret service."

"Please, Albany," interposed Jeff. "If you don't stay, Fargo will have to, because we have to get Norby into that building, and Norby won't come without me. And if Fargo stays behind, he'll sulk, and you know him—if he sulks, he will probably decide not to pick us up if we try to leave in a hurry."

Albany smiled. "Your argument is a good one, young Jeff. In view of Fargo's childish personality, we'd better let him have his way."

"Childish personality?" began Fargo indignantly, but Uhfy interrupted.

"I'm not getting very far with my father," said Uhfy. "He's a *very* proud Hleno."

Uhfy's father's voice sounded at this moment, "You may bring your equipment that will keep you alive, aliens, and you may bring your pet robot, but you will have to stand trial for your earlier invasion of the zoo."

"No trial," said Fargo, "or we stay here and keep your son."

Uhfy began to cry at this, great tears gushing out of his yellow eyes. "My father is so proud," he whimpered.

"Don't cry, Uhfy," said the Grand Dragon, rubbing him gently with the scales of one arm. "I will talk to your father. I can't stand people who are proud without reason. It isn't as though *he* is Grand Dragon of Jamya. You there, Hleno. Are you the chief? What's your name?"

"I am Sector Chief of this portion of Nuhlenony, alien, and my name is Buhlric. Release my son."

"Do not take the liberty of giving me orders, miserable Sector Chief of a minor planet. You are speaking to the Grand Dragon of Jamya, the world you raided without warning and deprived of its Mentor robots in a barbaric manner. I will puncture your windbags and scorch your hides if you don't learn some manners. The ancient ones were far better mannered than you are."

Fargo had been making violent gestures at the Grand Dragon to speak more gently, but he might as well have waved at a thunderstorm.

Buhlric, however, in markedly softer tones said, "The ancient ones? Have you indeed seen them?"

Fargo took advantage of the change in attitude at once. He

said, "We have indeed seen the ancient ones, and they have treated us well—as they should, since we are related."

There was a great stir among the Hleno at this. They withdrew some meters and clustered together, vibrating as though engaged in a great and solemn discussion.

Jeff whispered to Fargo, "How can you say that, Fargo? There's no relation at all among us."

"The Hleno don't know that. So far all they've seen is the Grand Dragon. No Hleno but the one who brought you here—and Uhfy, of course—ever saw you. Your kidnapper was probably only a common soldier who knew nothing about the ancient ones, and Uhfy's only a kid. Now we're dealing with at least one important official, maybe others."

"Yes, but—"

"Never mind the 'buts.' We stand upright and have a head and arms and eyes in the right place. We're short an eye each and two arms, but they won't notice that. They'll just see a resemblance to the ancient ones. I'm going to open the air lock and let them see us. Jeff, you get the scuba equipment for yourself and me and the Grand Dragon."

"There are only two sets," said Jeff. "The Grand Dragon will have to stay here."

"Not at all," said Norby. "I can protect Jeff in my personal field as we go through the water. The two sets can be for Fargo and her Dragonship. The only thing is—is it safe for me? Even if those horrible beings think you're some version of the ancient ones, they have this barbaric dislike for robots and they may put me in prison again."

"I don't think Uhfy would allow that," said Jeff uneasily.

"Buhlic himself won't allow that," said Fargo, with an air of perfect confidence. "Not after he gets a good look at us. They have looked up to the ancient ones as the beings who

made them intelligent and gave them civilization. Even though they destroyed the planet with their technology in the end, the Hleno still venerate them. Look at how they reacted when they thought we only *saw* the ancient ones."

"Well," said Jeff, still uncertain, "let's show ourselves to the Hleno and see how they react. And Albany, please take care of Oola while we're gone. I don't know how long she'll stay in her hassock form."

Fargo had opened the air lock and stepped out to its rim. He hunched up his shoulders to make it look as if he had no neck, and he held his arms diagonally upward to emphasize their presence, even though he was too short. "Stand behind and to my right, Jeff," he said, and Jeff did so.

The Hleno reacted as Fargo had predicted. Their tentacles splayed out stiffly on all sides from their heads, and slowly, tail first, they sank downward till they almost touched the water.

"That's probably their gesture of abasement," said Fargo, grinning.

"I hope so," said Jeff.

There was no question about it once Buhlric spoke. His voice no longer sounded like high-pitched thunder. It was mild and slow. He said, "Aliens, we give you all respect and ask your pardon for any threats we may have made. You are representations of the ancient ones, and you will all be safe with us. We will take no exception to the machines you need for life or even—even the small robot you bring, if you will do us the great courtesy of holding it tightly at all times and taking it with you when you go."

"That we will guarantee," said Fargo and, adjusting the scuba apparatus, he dropped into the water.

Jeff helped the Grand Dragon with her scuba gear and

said, "Your most graceful jump, your Dragonship."

She jumped, and Jeff, holding Norby tightly, jumped without any apparatus at all.

When they were all in the recreation room of the underground building, the Grand Dragon, Fargo, and Jeff (holding Norby tightly) were standing near the pool. Uhfy floated very near them, protectively, while his father Buhlric faced them all head on, with several other Hleno in respectful positions to his rear.

Uhfy had finished telling his story, and there was silence—as far as human ears could tell—while the Hleno talked among themselves. Then Uhfy handed his communicator to his father and helped him put it on.

Buhlric said, "We never realized the Dookaza was either intelligent or dangerous. We are glad that it is gone and that my son has been rescued from it. We will not forget that you are the agents of that rescue. How is it, though, that my son has become able to understand speech that is not said aloud—what you call telepathic?"

"Telepathic only when touching another who is telepathic," said Jeff. "We human beings are telepathic only because we are friends with the dragons. If you let the Grand Dragon take a small bite of you, then you will become telepathic also."

Buhlric looked at the Grand Dragon and didn't move.

Uhfy took back the communicator and said, "It won't hurt, father. The Grand Dragon is very friendly. She stroked me when I was unhappy. Isn't that so, your Dragonship?"

"That is so," said the Grand Dragon solemnly. But, of course, Buhlric, without the communicator, could not hear her.

Nevertheless, he held out a tentacle toward the Grand Dragon.

Delicately taking it in her claws, the Grand Dragon poked at it with one front fang, just enough to penetrate slightly. Then she tilted her head at the Hleno, turned away, and said, "It didn't work, Fargo. I thought at him and he didn't respond."

For a moment, the brothers were silent, and then Jeff said, "Don't dragon teeth have a tiny core in them with fluid that seeps into the bloodstream of anyone bitten?"

"That's quite true," said the Grand Dragon.

"Well then, the diamond caps on your queenly fangs, ma'am, may prevent the fluid from entering Buhlric."

"I think Jeff is right," said Fargo. "Try again with one of your back teeth, Stately Monarch."

"I love the way you talk," said the Grand Dragon. Taking up Buhlric's tentacle again, she punctured it again with her back teeth.

Buhlric's response was noiseless, but the blast of thought entering the Grand Dragon made it plain that he was now telepathically gifted—and also outraged.

——Sorry (said the Grand Dragon), I didn't know my own strength.

She turned to Fargo and Jeff. "I did it that time, but I think he's just a little annoyed."

Jeff walked up to Buhlric and put his hand on the Hleno's broad back.

——Can you hear me, Buhlric? I speak to you with my mind alone.

——I hear you, human being! What a marvelous thing! We must all have it.

"He wants the Grand Dragon to bite the other Hleno present. I think we had better, Fargo."

"Hmm," Fargo hesitated. "I'm willing, but will he expect the Grand Dragon to come back every once in a while for

further inoculations till the entire world is telepathized? And will he expect to have the Grand Dragon come back and bite any new babies that are born?"

"I think that's a problem we'll have to take up only when it arises. Perhaps the Hleno won't like telepathy after a while and want no more. Perhaps their children will inherit it automatically, as is true in the case of the Jamyn dragons. And, if not, they have hyperspatial travel, and they can bring their children in for biting. The dragons can do it in return for peace with the Nuhlenonians, who will be Invaders never again."

The Grand Dragon was tired by the time she finished, but the Hleno who had accompanied Buhlric experienced their new gift with excitement and delight.

"After this gift to us," said Buhlric, "we grant you freedom forever."

"Thank you, but I'm afraid we need more than that," said Fargo, with his most charming smile. "You have taken the work robots from Jamya and imprisoned them here. You have also paralyzed the Mentor robots who are still on Jamya, perhaps because they were too heavy to carry easily. We must have the work robots back and the Mentors restored to activity."

Buhlric gazed at Norby and shuddered. "Robots! Yes, the ancient ones thought they were essential, too. They thought all of technology was essential and allowed it to destroy their own civilization on Nuhlenony. After the ancient ones left, we Hleno made a vow never to use technology again except to keep this museum and food factory going. What is more, we have solemnly vowed to save other planets that we come across in our search for the ancient ones. We destroy their wicked and harmful technology for their own good."

"But that is wrong," said Jeff. "Technology cannot be totally abandoned. You are civilized because you do not hunt the ocean for food the way your primitive relatives do. You depend on the food factory, which is run by robots. That is technology, and it is that which gives you spare time for thought and culture, without which intelligent life is not worth living. It is not technology itself that is harmful, but the unwise use of it. You cannot correct this by wiping out technology and destroying civilization. Correction comes when you learn to use technology moderately and with wisdom."

"Father," said Uhfy. "This human creature is being logical. We need technology to stay civilized."

"But we are trying to keep faith with the ancient ones," said Buhlic angrily. "Someday they will return, and we must show them we have learned the lesson: that we have not ravaged the planet the way they did; that we have preserved it so that they may correct the past mistakes and live upon it again in better fashion."

"Think about what you have just said," said Fargo. "They can't restore the planet without using machines and, as we know, they have never actually abandoned technology."

"How would you know that? Uhfy tells me your visit to them was in the distant past. How do you know what happened to them after they left Nuhlenony?"

"In our own exploration of the universe we have come across their traces. They went to other planets, but never stayed. They sometimes didn't change anything, but merely took specimens of animal life. That is what they did on my planet, Earth. On Jamya, they bioengineered the dragons, just as they did you Hleno here on Nuhlenony. They also left Mentor robots to teach the dragons—the same Mentor ro-

bots you paralyzed. Do you call that keeping faith with the ancient ones—destroying what they have made?"

"How do you know it was the ancient ones who made the Mentor robots?"

"Because the Mentors *look* like the ancient ones," said Fargo gravely. "We saw the ancient ones, and we could not help but note the resemblance. You see, sir, the Mentors have not abandoned technology, but labor to use it wisely as the ancient ones taught them to do."

The Grand Dragon turned to Fargo. "I was struck by the resemblance, too, Fargo. When I saw the six limbs and three eyes, I thought of the Mentors at once. The ancient ones are the Others, aren't they?"

"I think that must be so."

"How curious," said Jeff. "We've gone searching for the Others several times and ended with nothing. This time, when we weren't searching for them at all, we came across them."

Buhlric frowned in deep thought and finally said, "Can you tell whether the ancient ones, or the Others as you call them, are still alive today? Can you tell whether they still use technology?"

"We can't say," said Fargo. "Like you, however, we search for them, and we think we will find them someday. Meanwhile, give us back the robots you have taken from Jamya. Reactivate both them and the Mentors that are still on Jamya."

Buhlric hesitated. "I feel myself experiencing the impulse to do as you say and let you have your robots, but we do not know how to undo what we have done. When we vibrate our tentacles in a certain way to produce intense ultrasonic sound, we can damage or even destroy both organic and

mechanical organisms. However, we do not know how to undo the effects once they go so far as to produce paralysis or deactivation."

Jeff said quickly, "That is why I have brought Norby. I ask that he be allowed to study the robots and make use of your computer. He is, in some ways, cleverer than we are, and he may be able to find ways of restoring the robots."

"Is that absolutely necessary?" asked Buhlric, pained. "Despite everything you say, it is hard for us to let a robot move about freely on this world."

Fargo said, "Wait, Albany is trying to reach us from the ship—Albany, I'm receiving you. What's wrong?"

Albany's voice sounded. "Fargo and Jeff, there's a kind of crisis here. Oola's hassock, or whatever you call it, was thinning, cracking, and beginning to be absorbed."

Jeff said, "Oh, that's all right. Usually it takes a certain melody to stimulate the opening of Oola's security form, but it can happen by itself."

"That's not the crisis," said Albany, "I was watching the process with interest, and then Oola emerged and, before I could do a thing to stop her, she leaped through the open air lock into the ocean. She's gone."

## 13

## The Egg

The intercom was silent and Jeff said, his voice cracking, "Can you see where Oola is, Albany? Can you see her swimming?"

"No, I don't see a thing. Shall I jump in—"

"No!" shouted Fargo. "Stay in the ship. *Someone* has to."

"I'll go, Jeff," said Norby, making choking gestures with his hands. "I'll find that insufferable, unintelligent pet that you obviously think more of than you do of me."

"When you find her, be gentle," said Jeff. "I do *not* think more of her than I do of you."

"Hah," sulked Norby. "I'm going out into the ocean."

He didn't have to. There was a commotion at the far end of the recreation hall, and a couple of Hleno came in through the door that Oola and Jeff had once used. They conferred with Buhlric, who spoke through the communicator so that all could hear.

"An animal has come into the air lock, one that had gills upon entering and now does not."

Jeff sighed with relief. Obviously, Oola had merely wanted to join them. "It's my pet, Oola," he said. "Please bring her to me."

She was brought in, held carefully in a Hleno's tentacles. She looked quite lively and well, though she was wet, of course, and seemed considerably thinner. She was carrying

something that would ordinarily be too large for her jaws, but she had enlarged those jaws somewhat to allow them to do the job.

"That animal!" said Norby with disdain. "Next time we'll leave her in Manhattan. She's incredibly disobedient."

Oola paid no attention to Norby nor, after she was released, did she do more than glance at Jeff. She went from one low-hovering Hleno to another, sniffing, until she found Uhfy, and then she dropped her burden at his tentacles.

It was a miniature hassock, green and leathery.

"How do you like that?" said Fargo. "She's produced an egg."

"But what is it?" asked Uhfy plaintively. "What am I supposed to do with it?"

"It's something out of which another all-purpose pet will come. It's Oola's child, and I think she wants you to have it, Uhfy."

"Is the child inside this object?"

"Yes," said Fargo, clearing his throat. "I will now sing you the all-purpose pet's hassock-opening song, in perfect pitch. He proceeded to sing the whole thing through without a mistake.

Yet nothing happened. Oola's egg stayed shut.

"Perhaps it's not ready yet," said Fargo, a little disconcerted. "Don't hens sit on eggs for days before they're ready to hatch?"

"Oola isn't a hen," said Jeff. "I don't know what's wrong." He added in Terran Basic, "Norby, think of something. The Hleno are getting restless."

"I don't trust them," said Norby. "They said we were free and that they were grateful to us for the telepathy, but I don't like the way they look at me. I think they hate me. I want to go home."

"It is impolite to speak in another language that we do not understand," said Buhlric, "and it is a poor return for our willingness to tolerate you. What are you plotting against us?"

"Absolutely nothing," said Jeff quickly. "We're only conferring on how to open Oola's egg."

"I don't see why it's important to do so," said Uhfy's mother haughtily. "I think my husband is too ready to treat you aliens as friends. We have no use for a green, air-breathing animal, except as an exhibit in the zoo, and I, for one, have no use for any of you and especially not the robot."

"But they're all my friends," said Uhfy and began to cry. His mother swatted him with a tentacle.

"I dislike these Hleno more and more," said Norby.

Jeff squatted down to pet Oola, whose fur was still wet. She seemed awfully pleased with herself, rolling onto her back to have the underside of her chin scratched. He kneaded the soft fur and whispered, "Oola, shall we take the egg with us to the *Hopeful* or leave it here?"

Jeff knew that an all-purpose pet understands no language, not even Terran Basic, but Oola was made to be very responsive to the wishes of her owner. However, she gave no sign—but merely purred as if Jeff's anxiety was of no consequence.

Buhlric said, "You see, then, that there is a limit to what we can do for you creatures who resemble the ancient ones only slightly. We will not return to Jamya, or destroy the technology on any planet. We promise you that much. However, we cannot help you with the Jamyn robots we have removed or deactivated. That is done and cannot be undone, so you might as well leave this planet now. We give you permission to do so."

Fargo said, "We can't very well leave till our robot, Norby, determines how to undo what you call done."

"If I explore this building," said Norby, "I'll find a computer. It doesn't make sense for a building like this not to have one."

"You'll do no exploring without me," said Jeff.

"He will do no exploring at all," said Buhlric, more angrily than before. "Leave at once."

"Father," cried Uhfy with a wary eye on his short-tempered mother, "don't do this. These are my friends. They helped me, even when they thought I was an enemy. They were very kind to me, and I promised them that we Hleno would restore their robots to them in working order."

Buhlric shook all his tentacles at Uhfy. "My son, you should not make promises to aliens you can't keep. It is because they were kind to you that we have set them at liberty and given them permission to return to their own planets. We can do no more."

Jeff shook his head and murmured to Oola, whom he was still stroking. "See what you've done, Oola. If you hadn't delayed us and complicated things by bringing that egg . . ."

"Meow?" said Oola, getting to her feet and lashing her tail. She picked up her egg in her jaws, walked to the Hleno swimming pool, stuck her head out over the water, opened her jaws, and dropped the egg into the pool.

"Hey!" shouted Jeff. "I didn't mean for you to *destroy* it."

And at that moment, a very wet Albany Jones burst into the recreation room with scuba equipment slung around her neck and brandishing two stun devices.

"What are you doing here?" asked Fargo. "Why aren't you in the ship?"

"I've put the ship on automatic pilot," Albany said, "I just couldn't stand not knowing what was going on."

"But how did you get in?" asked Jeff.

"I remembered your telling us how you did. I found the two dimples in the door and pressed them both at the same time. Are you in trouble? I don't think these dirigibles look friendly."

Buhlric burst out, "You continue to speak an incomprehensible language. That cannot be endured. Nor has this new creature been given permission to enter. Seize her."

Two of the nearest Hleno extended their tentacles toward her, but the gun Albany held in her hand fired. The Hleno were hurled backward and, after a pause, drifted upward, rubbing their heads with their tentacles.

Jeff shouted in Jamyn, "Don't do that anymore, Albany." Turning to Buhlric, he said, "That was a very mild stroke. We have dangerous weapons designed by our ancestors who used technology unwisely at times. We have tried to deal with you kindly and not threaten you with such weapons. You see that if we had done so, you would be in great danger, but we do not wish to put you in danger. Can't you treat us with similar generosity?"

At that moment, Oola stopped the proceedings by yowling in a high pitch so that reverberation filled the room.

"She's safely here," Albany said joyfully as she noticed the all-purpose pet for the first time. "Well, that's a relief. But why is she screaming like that?"

Jeff pointed to the pool where the hassock was floating on the water and slowly splitting open. Something came out, and Oola stopped yowling at once. She sat down to wash herself as if absolutely nothing had happened.

"What is polluting our pool?" demanded Uhfy's mother.

The head of the creature from the hassock could be seen clearly above the surface of the pool. It looked exactly like Oola in one of her thinner cat phases, only miniature.

"Ooff!" said the creature.

"Wowrr," said Oola, getting up, bending over the pool, and hauling up her offspring by the scruff of its neck.

Oola's baby had a full set of gills, powerful back flippers, and little front flippers. It sat on the hind ones and looked up at the Hleno, making tiny little yowls almost too high to hear.

"It must have lungs, too," said Fargo in an awestruck voice. "It's breathing air."

"Just like me," said Uhfy. "I can breathe in air or water. I've always wanted a pet like this."

"She's yours," said Jeff. "Oola must have wanted you to have her, because she brought her to you. Except that the other Hleno may be wanting her as well."

The Hleno had crowded around, reaching out tentacles toward the little thing. Even Uhfy's mother seemed interested.

Uhfy charged in, squeezing between the various bodies, pushing tentacles aside and lifting the little creature in his own. "She is mine. She is a gift from the strangers. If you want to touch her, you'll have to be kind to the strangers."

Buhlric said, "My son is right. We cannot take without giving." He pointed to Jeff with a tentacle. "You and the robot may explore the building, but I do hope you will not take long."

The only way down from the recreation room was by way of a narrow stone staircase that wound downward into such darkness that Norby had to turn on the light in his hat. Their footsteps echoed, and the air smelled damp.

At the very bottom was a series of rooms, filled with machinery, some of which was still working.

"The stuff in this room is for air circulation," said Norby, "and there's no computer. We'll have to go on."

Norby led the way. Jeff was glad because he felt more than uncomfortable. He wished he'd asked Fargo—or better yet, Albany and her gun—to come along. He was ashamed of himself, but he didn't like the feeling that he was walking through the distant past of Nuhlenony, a past forgotten and now perhaps dying out completely.

They entered another room which seemed larger than the first. It did not have much equipment in it, and one wall looked as if pieces of stone and rubbish had been piled against it.

"Jeff! I feel something! There's a machine back there. We'll have to remove all this junk to get at it."

Jeff and Norby worked to take away what had been piled against the wall. Norby had it the easier because, with antigrav, he simply took hold of an object and sailed over to another corner with it. When they were finished, Norby shone his light on the bared wall.

"It looks like the front of a strange computer," said Jeff.

"Not so strange," said Norby. "It's like a much more primitive version of the computer on Jamya in the Mentor's castle. The Others—I mean the Nuhlenony ancient ones—must have made the one on Jamya much later than this one."

"Of course," said Jeff. "Nuhlenony was where they started, after all. Just think, Norby, this may have been the one computer they left running when they abandoned the planet to the Hleno. Is it dead now?"

"Not completely, but it seems to be partly turned off. I hope the data banks are intact." Norby moved slowly through the air, passing over the entire surface of the computer wall, studying the ridges, dents, and other aspects of the surface that were part of any Terran computer.

"Norby!" said Jeff. "I hear something. Listen!"

After a moment, Norby said, "It's just water dripping."

"But that might be bad for the computer."

"It's not here, Jeff. It must be in the far room. Go and look."

"How? I can't see anything in the dark."

"Just a minute. I think I can fix that." Norby played his hands over the surface of the computer, and suddenly the room lit up. It was appallingly dirty with fungus growing over everything.

The next room seemed to be lighted also, so Jeff clamped down on his nervousness and walked into it. It was a vast room of many levels, some below the one on which he was standing. There was water everywhere, almost up to Jeff's feet, and he could see it dripping slowly from side beams in the wall. He ran back to Norby.

"The building is leaking! And I bet the Hleno don't know how to repair it."

"Of course they don't. They can't repair anything," said Norby contemptuously. "They've destroyed or paralyzed all the robots who could have kept this place going."

"Like the many I saw in that prison behind the zoo," said Jeff. "I wonder if any of them still work?"

"Why not? I did, when you got me out of the bubble," said Norby. He began jiggling on his two-faced feet. "I've got it! I've found out how to turn on the computer fully! Keep quiet, Jeff, while I see if there's a data bank and anything useful in it."

While Jeff waited, the dripping water sounded loud and ominous. Unless the building were repaired, the sea would eventually possess it completely; the last building of the Others would be lost, and with it all the land plants and creatures preserved in the zoo.

Just when the wait began to seem interminable, Norby said, "I've finished, Jeff. Let's go." Norby took Jeff's hand,

elevated, and pulled Jeff through the air, all the way up the winding stairs to where the rest of them were waiting.

Norby insisted on doing the talking. "That bag of wind has to learn how to be polite to me," he said. Just the same, when he spoke to Buhlric, he was careful to be tremendously polite himself.

Norby said, "It is clear, sir, that the building must be repaired or it will be destroyed. The walls have deteriorated to the point where there are numerous leaks, and eventually the machinery will be brought to a total halt. My suggestion is that several of you journey to Jamya and bring back a few reactivated Mentor robots. They will help you fix it. Meanwhile, you can reprogram the worker robots locked up in your prison. They will also help so that repairs can be made quickly, and all of the robots can be returned to Jamya with, I hope, your thanks and gratitude."

Buhlric's tentacles hung down despondently. "I see you are correct in saying intelligent species must keep their technology or become primitive once more. We no longer know how to reactivate the robots, so we can't carry out the repairs. And who knows what will become of us? The last building of the ancient ones is doomed."

"Not at all," said Norby. "I found the instructions for reactivation in the data banks of the computer in the base of the building. After all, the robots were manufactured by the ancient ones, you know. And so was part of me."

"Will the robots punish us?" asked Buhlric a bit timorously.

"Certainly not," said the Grand Dragon, "but I hope they will teach you a few things about tolerance and open-mindedness." She sniffed, breathed out a tiny flame just to emphasize her remarks, and stalked toward the air lock exit.

## 14

## Back Home at Last

Some Mentor robots had already gone to Nuhlenony, stolidly suffering themselves to be carried in the tentacles of the visiting Hleno, who had apologized over and over to the Jamyn dragons. The lights were on in the Mentors' castle, and everyone was celebrating the liberation of Jamya.

"I wish Uhfy's mother had let him come to Jamya with us," said Jeff.

"I think that the all-purpose pet baby will console him," said Norby. "You can be friends with me instead."

"I'm always friends with you, Norby," said Jeff. "There's no one else like you."

"I am very glad to be freed from paralysis," said Mentor First. "It was a most unpleasant experience. And as soon as all the robots come back, Jamya will return to normal."

Fargo stretched and said, "I feel as if I've been exerting myself excessively. I think I'll just relax and make up a few new songs in praise of the Grand Dragon. What's more, I do not plan to go swimming for a long, long time."

"*You don't?*" said Jeff indignantly. "I was dropped into the ocean on Nuhlenony twice and into the mud on Melodia twice. Which reminds me, Norby, what possessed you to take us to Melodia anyway? I should think you'd never want to see that dreadful place."

"It wasn't my fault," said Norby. "I was in the bubble, and

I only had contact with you for a few seconds. And, in the hurry and excitement, the only coordinates I could remember were Melodia's. It's *your* fault for letting me be trapped."

"I wouldn't mind relaxing for a while," said Albany, stroking Oola. "When we get back to Earth, though, let's go to the water carnival in Hawaii that you were talking about, Fargo."

"I've changed my mind," said Fargo, shuddering. "No water."

"Well, I've got to get back to the space academy!" said Jeff. "For the last few days everyone has been wanting to go home. First Zargl, then the Grand Dragon, then Uhfy, then Norby. Everyone is home now except us, and it's my turn. *I want to go home.*"

"We'll all go home," Fargo reassured him. "Let's just have some rest and relaxation first."

Zargl flew into the Great Hall, landed in front of her great-aunt, and said in excitement, "Ma'am, there's a ship outside."

Everyone rushed out and gazed upward—and then downward, because the very small ship wobbled in the air and slowly fell partway down the hill in front of the castle. It dented its nose only slightly.

"What are those strange markings on its side?" asked the Grand Dragon.

"What do you know!" said Fargo in amazement.

"Is that what it says?"

"No," said Jeff. "It says 'Property of the Terran Federation.' I think my species has just reinvented the hyperdrive."

The air lock of the ship opened, and a familiar bald, black head appeared. He craned his neck to get a good view of everybody, said "Huh!" loudly, and the rest of him emerged, resplendent in his best uniform.

"None of you looks in any danger whatsoever," said Admiral Yobo. "I needn't have taken the trouble to come here to rescue you."

"No, sir," said Jeff, "but welcome back to Jamya anyway. We're having another banquet tomorrow and . . ."

The admiral groaned. "Nothing I'd like better. I love Jamyn food, but I can't stay. We can't stay. You, young Wells, are overdue at the academy, and you, Lieutenant, have used up your vacation time, and you, Farley Gordon Wells, have been given a new assignment. Come along, all of you. Get into your ship and we'll go home."

Fargo scowled. "You realize, Admiral, that you're spoiling a very good time. How were you going to rescue us in that ship anyway? It's obviously big enough only for you and no one else. Were you going to do it all by yourself?"

"This ship," said Yobo, "has plenty of room for two people—three, if they're skinny. As it is, I am alone, but I can run the ship myself, and I am all that is required for any rescue. And now, with my regrets to you, ma'am,"—he bowed to the Grand Dragon—"we must go *home!*"

It was not that easy, however. The admiral's little ship refused to budge. Not even Norby could do anything with it.

"It's not my fault," said Norby. "I don't even know how it works. The admiral knows, and he should fix it."

Yobo scratched his head. "It worked perfectly coming here."

"Well, we'll have to attach it to the *Hopeful*," said Norby, "and I'll tow it home."

"What!" said Yobo in an indignant roar. "No ship I have ever commanded has had to be towed."

"There's always a first time, Admiral," said Albany cheerfully.

Jeff put his hand on Norby's hat and spoke telepathically.

—Norby, are you sure the Admiral's ship will come along when you take the *Hopeful* home?

—Absolutely, positively sure, Jeff. Almost.

Jeff shook his head and said gently, "Maybe we should leave your ship here, Admiral, and you can board the *Hopeful* with us."

"Impossible!" said Yobo. "I can't come back without the ship. Have you any idea what the *Hyperspace 1* has cost? I shouldn't have risked the ship just because you've all been missing for a month—"

"A month?" they all yelled.

"Certainly. You didn't think traveling with Norby was safe, timewise, did you?" Yobo shook his head. "Let's go."

They attached the *Hyperspace 1* to the *Hopeful* with a thick cable, and Yobo, surveying it, muttered, "It'd better work or you'll all have to come back and rescue me, and we can't keep on rescuing each other forever."

Slowly the *Hopeful* rose on its antigravity, and slowly the *Hyperspace-1* rose with it.

The Grand Dragon followed the ships up into the atmosphere, shouting, "Good-bye, and thanks for rescuing me."

"Thanks for all *your* help and your unfailing, heartening courage, your Dragonship," said Jeff through the communicator.

Norby said, "If everybody's through saying good-bye, we're leaving. I *hope* we're leaving. I've got wires running along the cable attachment from our computer to the admiral's computer, and I hope that that serves to reactivate his stupid hyperdrive. That will make it easier than towing, I hope. Now, we're going *home*."

Jeff looked at the viewscreen to make sure the admiral was well. He insisted on sitting in the tiny control-room of the

*Hyperspace-1*. "A Yobo," he had said, "never abandons ship."

Then suddenly, they were in hyperspace, judging from the familiar gray in the viewscreen.

——Norby (said Jeff), is the admiral with us?

——The computer says his stupid ship is here as well as ours, so I think he's all right.

——I hope so.

And then they came out of hyperspace, and it was possible to see something on the viewscreen besides gray. The admiral was there, large and formidable, and Jeff heaved a sigh of relief.

"There," said Norby grandly. "We're *home!*"

"Cadet," said Yobo ominously, "look at *my* viewscreen!"

Over the admiral's shoulder was his viewscreen and in it was a fish.

"Are we in the Pacific Ocean? Are we on Earth at all?" shouted Yobo.

"Norby," asked Albany with a frown, "where are we?"

Norby said, "We're right here on Earth. We're right here in Manhattan. We just happen to be on a rock in the boating lake in Central Park, and the *Hyperspace-1* is behind us, under water. And it's not my fault. The computer got a little mixed-up trying to handle both ships at once and it missed the top of our apartment house by a few blocks. I'll readjust the computer, but if you don't want to wait, just get out and walk home. It's only a little lake and it's raining, anyway. You'd have gotten wet even if I had landed on the roof."

"Wet," said Fargo. "Not soaking."

Yobo rose, removing the jacket of his uniform. "I, for one, will not wait. If I do, who knows where Norby will take us next? Now I'll have to get wet, and I *hate* getting wet."

"But, Admiral," said Jeff, "you don't have to get wet at all."

Albany can call police headquarters and have them send out a tow-flitter. It would handle us just like a broken-down air taxi."

"No!" said Yobo, "My ship is not to be treated like a broken-down air taxi."

"I was just making an analogy. Your ship would be treated with the utmost respect, I'm sure."

"No, Jeff, the truth is that I would prefer not to call attention to the *Hyperspace-1*. I took it in a rather irregular fashion in my eagerness to rescue you."

"He means he stole it," whispered Fargo, opening the *Hopeful's* air lock, which was just above the water's surface.

Just then a rowboat charged toward them from under Bow Bridge. One man rowed, three others huddled in the stern with evil-looking devices, and a fifth sat in the prow, looking angry.

"Get that thing out of here!" shouted the man in the prow.

"What's he saying?" asked Yobo, tuning in through the *Hopeful's* computer.

"It's English," said Fargo. "It's a kind of cousin to Terran Basic."

"I'll speak to him," said Albany, smoothing her golden hair. "I speak perfect English, being a native Manhattanite."

"I'm a native Manhattanite, too," said Jeff.

"Albany has more than linguistic power," said Fargo. "Let her."

"We've had a little accident," said Albany, beaming at the rowboat from the open air lock. "We'll leave as soon as possible."

"I don't want you to leave soon, I want you to leave *now*. I've got to get on with the shooting while the rain has

stopped. Look, lady, I rented every boat in the boathouse so that no one else will use the lake, and my permit for shooting in the park expires tomorrow—”

“Shooting?” asked Jeff in a low voice.

Albany fingered the stun-gun she had at her waist. “See here, buddy, no one is allowed to shoot anything in Central Park.”

“Oh, yeah? I’ve got a permit. I’m shooting a guy and a gal in a love scene with rain threatening, and you’ve got to get out or I’m going to sue.”

Fargo said, “I get it. They’re shooting for holoTV.”

“We’re not shooting for holy TV. We’re shooting legitimate *film*, and the money involved is plenty holy. One last time—get out of here.”

At that moment, it began to rain hard again, just as Jeff was staring at the Fifth Avenue skyline, looking toward his own apartment building.

The man in the prow cursed, shook his fist at the sky, and ordered himself rowed back to the boathouse at the other side of the lake.

“Reprimed for a moment,” said Albany and called out, “Norby, are you finished? We’re in a hurry to get home.”

“Wait,” shouted Jeff. “The apartment house *isn’t there*. The whole skyline is wrong. We’re not home at all. We’re in the past. No wonder the lake is so dirty and the park is so littered.”

“In that case,” said Fargo, “I guess part of the litter is what used to be called a newspaper.” He dashed across the rocks through the rain and picked up a soggy paper. He glanced at it and came back groaning. “We’re in the twentieth century!”

“The *late* twentieth century,” said Norby plaintively. “I

found that out from the computer, and that's what's taking me so long. It's not my fault if I have to drag along two ships instead of one."

"I want to go home," said Albany, her usual cheerfulness dimmed. "I prefer a century that knows how to keep the air and water clean, and where people take care of their environment."

"I don't mind Jamya," said Fargo morosely, "but I certainly mind the twentieth century. I want to go home, too."

"Well, I'm *trying*," said Norby, "and you just make it worse by getting me upset. And besides that stupid Oola just jumped out of the air lock and is chasing seagulls. You shouldn't have left it open."

By the time Jeff came back with Oola, he was soaking wet, but Norby only said, "Jeff, I think you'll have to link minds with me. I can't do it myself."

"Go ahead, link minds," rumbled Yobo, "and if you fail this time, don't think I'm just going to smash you into scrap. I'll also take away your honorary cadethood."

"Yes, sir," said Norby. "I mean no, sir. I won't fail, I hope."

Jeff sat at the control board and touched Norby.

———You've been trying, Norby, I know that. And I know you do your best, even if you do get mixed-up now and then. Just the same let's try especially hard now, because I *really want to go home*.

They concentrated.

"All right, then, we're *here*," said Norby. "I got everything to where all I needed was another mind. We're in our own time *exactly*."

"Good," said Yobo from the viewscreen. "I'll just run down to your apartment and notify the lab that the *Hyper-*

space 1 worked fine on the trial run and that they can pick it up on your roof—”

“Well, Admiral, that’s the only thing,” said Norby. “We’re still in the water in Central Park. *Cleaner* water.”

“That does it,” roared the admiral, “Norby, I’m going to—”

“Now, Admiral,” coaxed Albany, “it could be worse. We could be in a twentieth century jail trying to explain what we’re doing here, without giving away anything that would change history. Thanks to the rain, I’m sure our exit was unnoticed.”

“There’s one other little problem,” said Jeff, looking into the *Hopeful*’s viewscreen.

“What?” demanded Yobo, glowering in the viewscreen when Jeff turned it back to the interior of the *Hyperspace-1*.

“The pond, having been dredged and cleaned many times since the twentieth century, is much deeper. *Both* ships are completely under water so we’ll have to lift off—”

“We can’t,” said Norby. “I fixed part of the computer so we got here through time, but ordinary travel is out. It’ll just take a day or two to fix. . . .”

“What! I’m due at an important meeting at Space Command!”

“I’ll take you, Admiral,” said Norby. “I’ll whisk you through hyperspace. . . .”

“Never!”

“Admiral,” said Jeff, “if we both swim to shore and go to my apartment, you can call for an air taxi to take you to the nearest transmitter. Albany and Fargo and Oola can stay in the ship while Norby repairs it.”

“Good,” said Fargo. “Albany and I need a little time together. We’ll plan which waterless desert to visit on our next vacation.”

Jeff swam out of the *Hopeful's* air lock and met Yobo plowing through the water like an angry whale.

"I'm sorry you had to get wet, Admiral," said Jeff.

The admiral slapped him on the back so hard he thought he'd drown. "Cheer up, cadet. I should have known that adventures with Norby are like this."

"Wet?"

"No. In spite of everything, we always get back *home*."



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Janet and Isaac Asimov have collaborated on several books. Mrs. Asimov, professionally known as Dr. Janet Jeppson, attended Wellesley College, graduated from Stanford University, and received her M.D. from New York University College of Medicine. She is also a graduate of the William Alanson White Institute of Psychoanalysis and is a practicing analyst. In addition to the Norby series, she is the author of two novels and a number of short stories, and is also the co-editor with her husband of *Laughing Space*, an anthology of humorous science-fiction stories and cartoons. Isaac Asimov, a leader in the field of science fiction, is known for his many books on this subject and in other fields. His works cover every branch of science as well as history, humor, biography, and autobiography for adults and young people.

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