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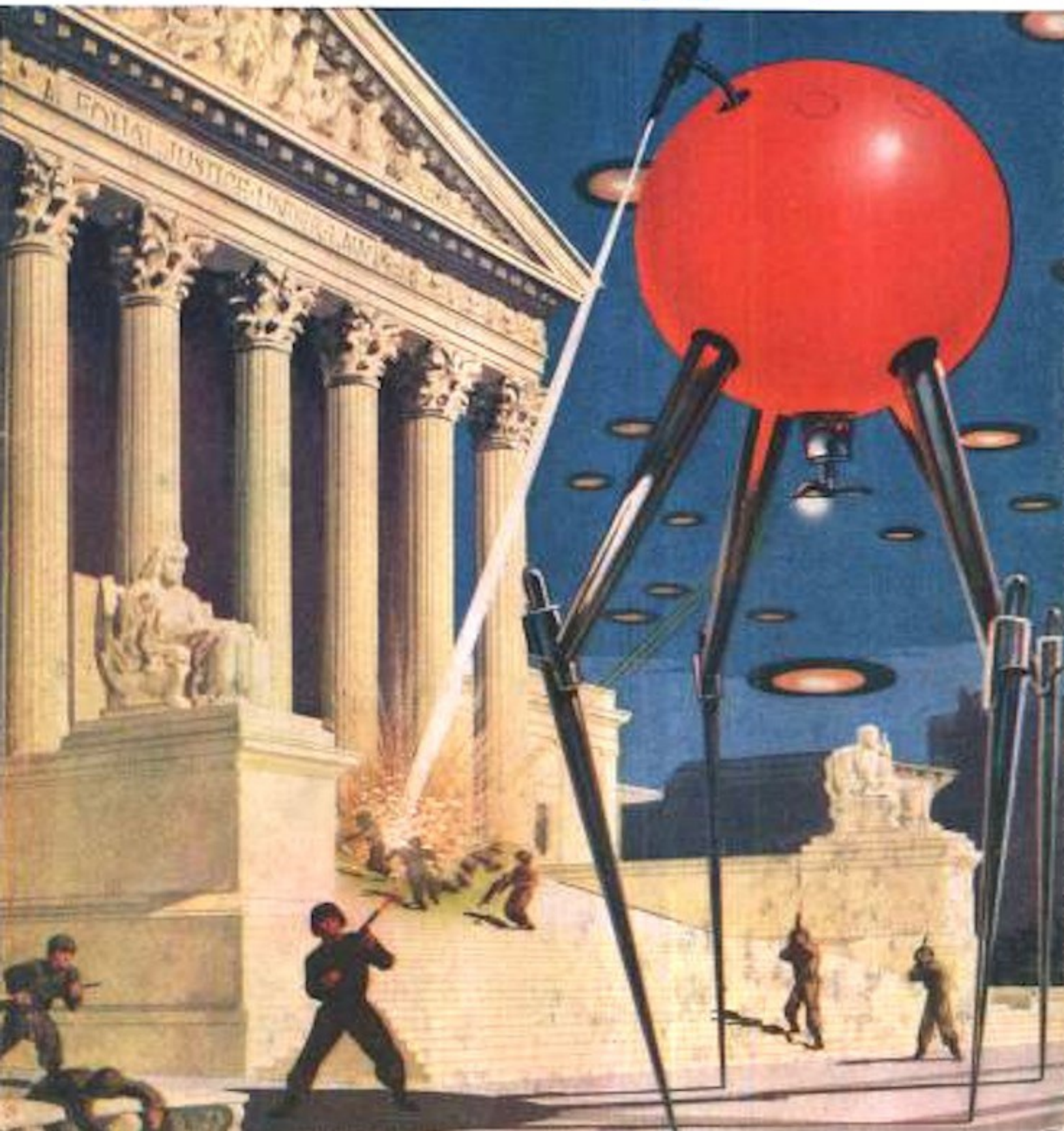
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FEBRUARY, 1958
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THE COSMIC LOOTERS

by Alexander Blade

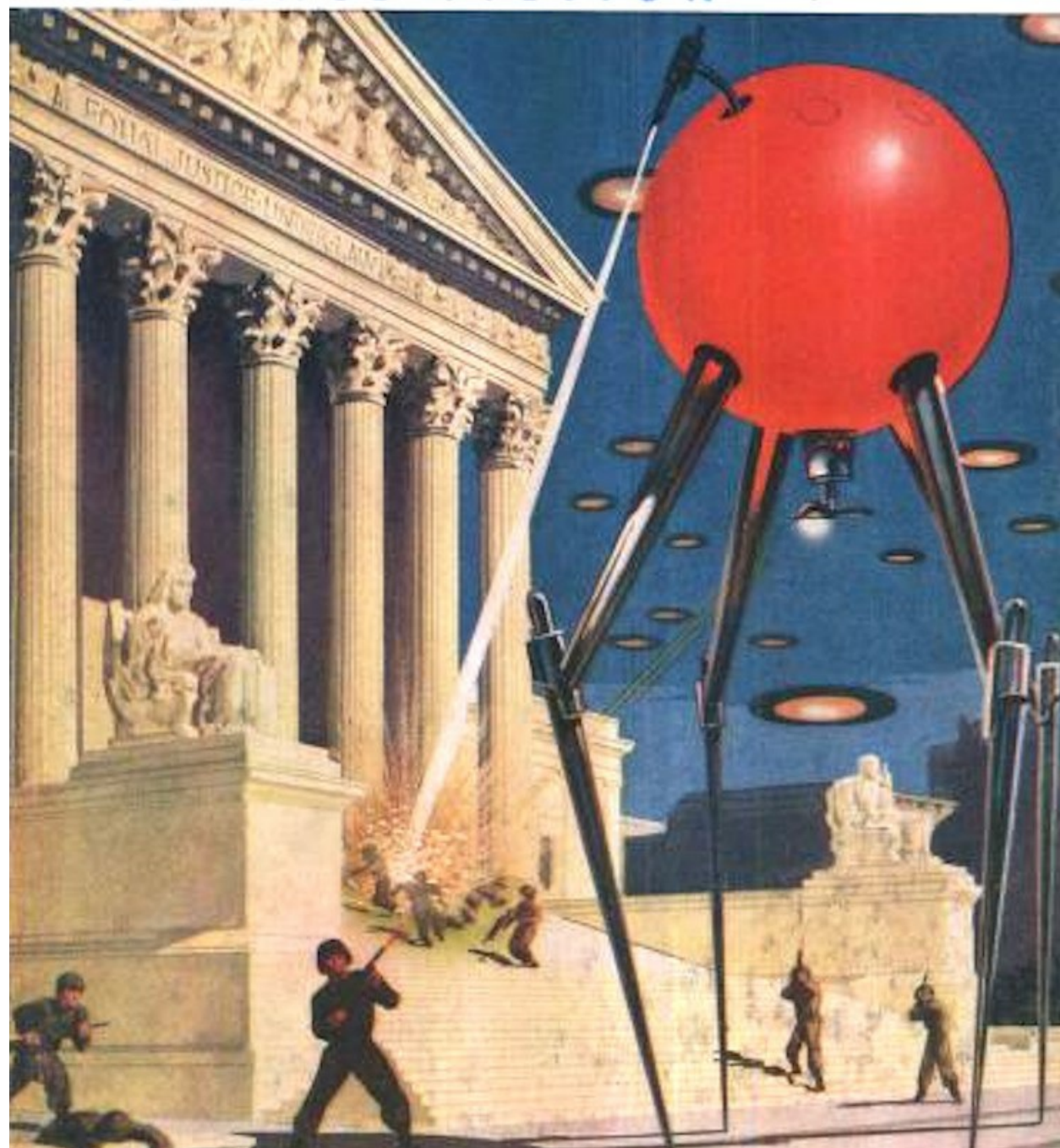


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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK NEVER TRUST A
THIEF! ***

**Kiley felt all-powerful with the alien
guiding him in the looting of a world. Now the
whole galaxy was his if he could remember to—**

Never Trust A Thief!

By Ivar Jorgensen

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Kiley took one last, fond look at the glittering heap of jewels in the back of the spaceship, nodded happily to himself, and began to set up a blastoff orbit. Somewhere down on the field far below, he could see dot-like figures—spaceport attendants, all firmly convinced that this was an authorized flight.

He chuckled. *This is the right way to pull a job*, he thought contentedly. *Hypnotize 'em silly and then walk in and take what you want.*

His fingers skipped lightly over the control panel as he readied the ship for blastoff. For the first time in his life he felt truly happy. Two million stellors of rare gems in the back of the ship, and even after cutting Thaklaru in for his share, that still left a million. A million stellors! Lord, that sounded good!

Well, Kiley, are you going to spend all day dreaming? I'm waiting for you!

The rolling thunder of Thaklaru's voice in Kiley's mind jolted him back to reality. "I'm on my way," he said out loud, knowing that the alien was listening. "I've got the stuff, and I'll be there before you know it."

Good. I'm anxious to see those jewels.

"Don't worry about it, Thaklaru."

I'm not worrying. But I know you'd be quite willing to blast off in the other

direction and keep them all for yourself.

Kiley grinned. "Nothing's secret from you, eh, Thaklaru? You don't miss a thing."

I can't afford to, the alien's telepathic voice said. The first rule in thievery is never to trust an accomplice.

"That makes sense," Kiley admitted. "Only there's no way I can escape you—not when you can telepath anywhere in the galaxy. How do I get to your planet?"

Don't trouble yourself. Simply blast off and I'll assume mental control of your ship once you're out in space. I'd prefer that the location of my world remain a secret even to you.

Kiley shrugged. "Okay. I won't argue. I'm blasting off now."

He jabbed down on the firing stud.

The stolen spaceship sprang up into the void, and Kiley felt the alien's mental emanations enfolding him, seizing control of the ship, guiding it—just as, a month before, similar emanations had come to him in the darkness of a jail cell in the Under-Dungeon of Alpheraz VII.

They had nailed him for a bungled burglary—he'd have made it, all right, except that he hadn't foreseen one of the new-model psionic alarms—and, since he was a four-timer, they'd stuck him in solitary deep in the dank heart of the planet.

The guard, a thick-muscled Alpherazian with three cold, slitted eyes, had hurled him into the cell, thrown him sprawling against the slimy stone.

"That ought to hold you, Kiley!" the Alpherazian growled. "You've stolen your last jewel, Earthman."

"Get out of here!" Kiley said thinly. "Don't stand here and gloat. I'd be free and out of here if that crazy alarm hadn't popped off."

The guard chuckled. "Relax and cool off, Kiley. You've got plenty of time to get used to your new home."

The door clanged shut. Kiley spat in the darkness as he heard the bolt slipping home—the unbreakable, foolproof bolt of the escape proof Alpheraz

jail. And then—

How would you like to be free in five minutes? a voice asked.

"Huh? Who's there?" Kiley looked around, narrowing his eyes to see in the foggy blackness, but there was no one within sight.

Don't strain your eyes, the voice said—and Kiley realized it was an unspoken voice in his mind. *I'm a thousand light-years away. The name is Thaklaru.*

"Who are you? What are you?"

That doesn't concern you. I need your professional services, and I have a proposition to make.

"Go ahead," Kiley said, mystified.

You're a jewel-thief—and a good one. I can aid you in such a way that you'll be a perfect one.

"What do you mean?"

How would you like the power of instant hypnosis? the alien asked. *You could go anywhere you liked—simply by convincing people you belonged there. My mind, projected out through the focus of yours, could do this thing. We could work as partners, and divide fifty-fifty.*

"Hold on," said Kiley suspiciously. "What do you need *me* for, then? If you've got this power, why not just rob whatever you want yourself?"

There was the voiceless equivalent of a chuckle. *I do not like to leave my home world. You will act as my travelling—ah—agent.*

"Sounds good to me," Kiley said. "I've got nothing to lose, anyway. But how do I get out of here?"

A simple matter. Just be patient.

Kiley waited. A few minutes later, the Alpherazian jailer showed up—but the look of scorn was gone from his eyes.

"Dreadfully sorry, Mr. Smith," the guard said humbly. "There's been some mistake here—we thought you were someone else. Naturally, we'll indemnify you for this inconvenience."

"That's all right," Kiley said casually. "Mistakes *do* happen, you know."

"This way, please. We're terribly sorry about the whole affair."

Kiley smiled as the guard led him out of the cell-block to freedom. *You're a man of your word, Thaklaru*, he thought. *It's a deal.*

Once free, Kiley had spent a very pleasant three weeks on Alpheraz VII. Thaklaru's mind was with him at all times—and with his power of instant hypnosis, all doors were open to him. It was a simple matter.

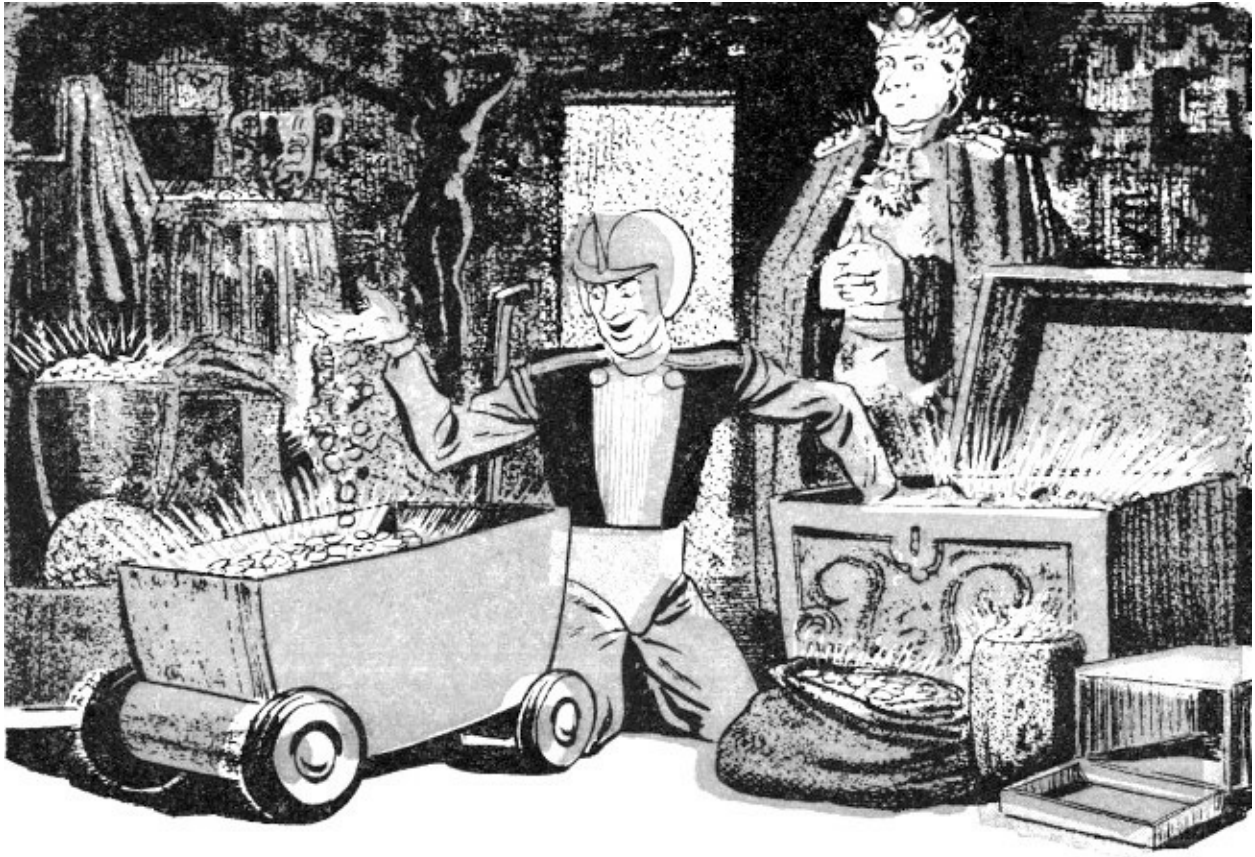
The big coup came when Kiley grew tired of the planet's pleasures. He travelled to the Emperor's palace.

The guards bowed to him as he approached. "Good afternoon, your majesty!"

Kiley smiled politely and kept on going. He walked quickly through the palace, stopping only to ask a butler where the jewel-room was.

As it turned out, the Emperor himself was in the jewel-room. "Pardon me, your majesty," Kiley said. "I'll have to have some of these, I'm afraid."

The monarch looked up, met Kiley's eye, and froze. "Of course," he said politely. "Go right ahead." And he stood to one side while Kiley plundered the crown jewels.



From there, he travelled to the spaceport outside the city, where he commandeered a small one-man ship by asking its pilot to leave. Guided by Thaklaru, he arranged for clearance and blasted off.

It had been simple. Terribly, terribly simple—almost dull, Kiley reflected, as his ship sped through space toward Thaklaru's home world. He wondered idly what his partner-in-crime looked like. A grotesque pulsating slug floating in a bath of some slimy fluid, perhaps? It would have to be something along those lines, Kiley thought—something that would keep Thaklaru from entering the worlds of the galaxy by himself and taking whatever he pleased.

"We make a good team, Thaklaru," Kiley said aloud.

True, the alien said. With my power and your agility, we could steal anything the galaxy contained.

Kiley turned and looked at the heap of jewels again. Two million stellors!

Quickly, he computed the value in Earth currency, and gasped. The haul was worth nearly ten billion dollars!

Perspiration broke out all over him. He tried frantically not to think what he was thinking, but there was no way to keep the thoughts from flooding into his mind.

He heard Thaklaru chuckling. *No, Kiley. There's no way you can cheat me of my share of the wealth.*

"Dammit, Thaklaru, do you have to keep listening to my mind? Can't I have a little privacy?"

Don't fear, Kiley. Your reaction is a perfectly understandable one, and I hold no rancor against you for desiring great wealth. I expect you to think that way—which is why I keep listening to you. I never trust an accomplice, remember.

A new thought entered Kiley's mind. "Say—what do you *need* these jewels for? Seems to me you could have anything you wanted, money no object—so why do you want to be rich?"

Rich? I do not want to be rich. The jewels are pretty, though—and I like beautiful things. I covet them for purely esthetic reasons.

"Okay with me," Kiley said. "I have more practical ends in mind."

It is understandable. Ah—you are approaching my home world now. Please prepare for deceleration.



An hour later, Kiley stood on the soil of Thaklaru's planet and looked around.

Welcome, the alien's voice said.

Kiley stood by the side of his spaceship and stared at the awesome sight. A vast chain of naked mountains sprang up like a row of gigantic teeth to the east—bare, jagged peaks stretching up into dim immensity, twenty and thirty and forty thousand feet in air. Wild savage-looking vegetation swept fiercely around him, trees well over a thousand feet high and looking to be a block wide at their base. Just at a distance of a few feet, a monstrous cliff reared

straight upward toward the swirling black-and-gold clouds. It was a strange and utterly primitive world.

"Okay, I'm here!" Kiley shouted. "Where are you?"

I will be with you soon, the alien responded. *Take the jewels from the ship.*

"How do I decide which are yours and which are mine?"

Take them all. We will decide once they are out of the ship.

A sudden ripple of terror ran through Kiley, turning the little jewel-thief cold. He felt dwarfed by the sheer magnitude of Thaklaru's world. He wondered where the alien was, what sort of creature he might be.

Your curiosity will soon be ended, Thaklaru said. *When you have brought the jewels out, I will appear.*

Kiley shrugged and started to climb the catwalk that led into the ship. There was little sense in trying to argue with Thaklaru's abilities; if he didn't go willingly, the alien would only force him. He gathered the jewels into a double handful and brought them back outside, dropping them onto a bare patch of reddish-green soil. Returning, he brought the rest of them out.

"Okay," he said. "They're all there."

Good. They are lovely.

"Suppose you show up and let's divide these things," Kiley said. "I'm tired of your mental voice—let's hear the real thing."

Very well.

A clap of thunder seemed to split the sky—a deafening, booming noise that made the ground quiver. Kiley cowered in fright as the sound was repeated—and this time, he was able to detect words.

"I am Thaklaru!"

"Where are you?"

"Look upward!" the booming voice cried.

Hesitantly, Kiley turned his gaze upward—and gasped. The "cliff" he had thought stood next to him was no cliff at all. It was a vast alien creature, stony and terrifying, whose head vanished in the fuzzy clouds far overhead.

Again came the booming noise: "I am Thaklaru!"

"I see why you needed an accomplice," Kiley said in a weak voice. "Something—someone of your size—"

"Yes. I could never venture into anything as tiny as one of your cities."

Kiley licked his lips nervously. "Well—here are the jewels. Let's—let's divide them!"

"One bit of business first," the alien's thunderous boom came. "You have served well—but you cannot live."

"What?"

"It is necessary, Kiley. There are ways of extracting information from a man's subconscious—and I would not have my existence known."

Suddenly the sky was black. Kiley looked up and saw what could only be a foot—a monstrous, horrible foot—blotting out the sunlight overhead.

"I warned you, Kiley—never trust an accomplice. And *I* was your accomplice."

The sky rang with the gigantic alien's cosmic laughter. Kiley covered his ears to blot out the hideous sound. Tears of rage flooded his eyes.

"It's not fair! It's—"

"Sorry, Kiley."

Like an ant, the thief thought bitterly. *I'm dying like an ant*.

And then the great foot came down.

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