

BUZZ OFF

Contact has been made.

BY JOHN GRANT

Out of the bowels of space they came, the myriad ships of the greatest exploratory force the galaxy had ever seen, their sleek hulls glinting in the furtive starlight.

The Sgrin'th fleet eased gently into orbit around the blue, watery third planet of a moderate-to-small yellow star, reflector screens raised to make the arrival undetectable to the instrumentation of those on the world below. For the Sgrin'th had been able to tell from many light years away that this was indeed the home of a technological civilization — although not, of course, whether it would survive long enough still to be there when the fleet arrived. So many technological civilizations foundered young.

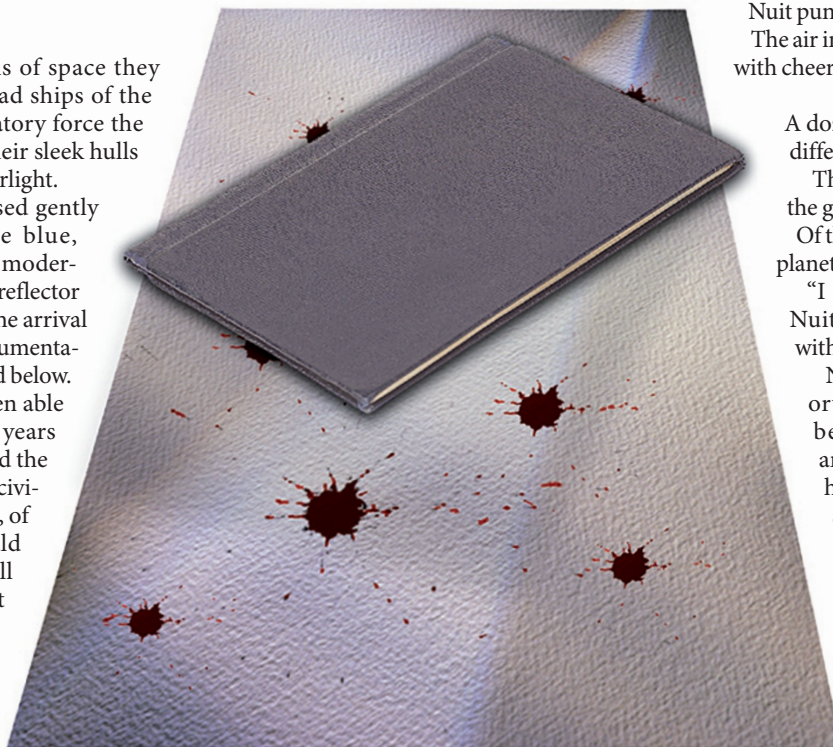
This one, however, was still extant — although only just. Cultural infantilization and deteriorating climate, the two deadly coupled factors that had accounted for so many civilizations, were well under way. The Sgrin'th preened themselves that they had arrived in time to save this one. They had been able to save many in similar situations before.

Those successes made the pain of the rare failures easier to bear.

The Sgrin'th knew better than to reveal immediately to the inhabitants of this world the glory of the interstellar fleet. Too many bellicose cultures would respond with pointless use of weaponry. Others would sink into apathy at the sight of technologies so very much in advance of their own.

There had also been the unique case of the nnHHptuths of Mondriodo XII, but the Sgrin'th never talked about *that* humiliating experience. Supernovae can happen for a diversity of later undiagnosable reasons.

To avoid future such unfortunate incidents, the method the Sgrin'th had devised over some billions of years was to send down individual emissaries to make telepathic contact with individuals in the highest echelons of power, so that it would be the aboriginals, not the



Sgrin'th, who made the first steps towards clearing up the mess and graduating to membership of the Galactic Fellowship.

The Sgrin'th expedition leader, Nuit, called the appointed volunteer emissaries to the command bridge. Through the curved plexiglass viewports they could see the crowds of Sgrin'th ships hanging in hidden space.

"The aboriginals seem," said Nuit, "an ideal species for salvage. Most certainly they offer no threat to the rest of the Fellowship, and perhaps they could contribute much to the welfare of our galaxy-wide community.

"Even so, they might be dangerous."

What the fleet had been able to observe from orbit — able to observe with no great difficulty, in fact — was that the individuals of this planet's dominant species were far larger than Sgrin'ths. This was nothing new. The forces of evolution being what they are, some intelligent creatures are bigger or smaller than others. The nnHHptuths of Mondriodo XII, for example ... but, wait, we don't want to talk about *them*.

"The atmosphere," continued Nuit, "is easily breathable by our kind, and none of the planet's microorganisms represent a threat. There seems no reason at all why our expedition to this world should be anything other than a resounding success!"

Nuit punched the air with a mandible.

The air in the command bridge was filled with cheers.

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A dozen orbits later, everything was different.

The command bridge had about it the gloom of a mortuary.

Of the original 4,096 emissaries sent planetside, exactly four still lived.

"I don't understand it!" wailed Nuit. "We have never before met with such hostility!"

Nuit called up on the memory screen a typical encounter between a Sgrin'th emissary and one of the aboriginals — or humans, as they called themselves. The four emissaries clustered around Nuit knew already what they'd see, but their leader felt the need to show them again in the hope that someone might have a bright idea on how to deal with the crisis.

On the screen, they saw a young Sgrin'th approach

a far larger human.

"We come to help you," telepathed the Sgrin'th by way of introduction.

The human picked up from its desk an artefact that was, in the local lingo, called a book.

There was a horrific squelching noise, and the picture faded to black.

"Is there any rational explanation?" cried Nuit into the silent echo of that terrible sound. "Never in all our billions of years of galactic exploration have we encountered such immediate hostility as this! Can anyone give me good cause why we shouldn't ...? Well, I'm not mentioning Mondriodo here, but you can surely understand my drift."

No one had a reply.

"It's just so," said Nuit, wriggling its long, pointed, yellow-and-black-striped abdomen and buzzing its wings vexedly, "so *unreasonable*!" ■

John Grant is the author of more than 60 books, both fiction and nonfiction — the latter including such works as *Discarded Science*, *Denying Science* and (with John Clute) *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*. He has won the Hugo (twice), the World Fantasy Award and a bunch of other awards.

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