

# **Little Fuzzy**

**by**

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Jack Holloway found himself squinting, the orange sun full in his eyes. He raised a hand to push his hat forward, then lowered it to the controls to alter the pulse rate of the contragravity-field generators and lift the manipulator another hundred feet. For a moment he sat, puffing on the short pipe that had yellowed the corners of his white mustache, and looked down at the red rag tied to a bush against the rock face of the gorge five hundred yards away. He was smiling in anticipation.

“This’ll be a good one,” he told himself aloud, in the manner of men who have long been their own and only company. “I want to see this one go up.”

He always did. He could remember at least a thousand blast-shots he had fired back along the years and on more planets than he could name at the moment, including a few thermonuclears, but they were all different and they were always something to watch, even a little one like this. Flipping the switch, his thumb found the discharger button and sent out a radio impulse; the red rag vanished in an upsurge of smoke and dust that mounted out of the gorge and turned to copper when the sunlight touched it. The big manipulator, weightless on contragravity, rocked gently; falling debris pelted the trees and splashed in the little stream.

He waited till the machine stabilized, then glided it down to where he had ripped a gash in the cliff with the charge of cataclysmite. Good shot: brought down a lot of sandstone, cracked the vein of flint and hadn’t thrown it around too much. A lot of big slabs were loose. Extending the forward claw-arms, he pulled and tugged, and then used the underside grapples to pick up a chunk and drop it on the flat ground between the cliff and the stream. He dropped another chunk on it, breaking both of them, and then another and another, until he had all he could work over the rest of the day. Then he set down, got the toolbox and the long-handled contragravity lifter, and climbed to the ground where he opened the box, put on gloves and an eyescreen and got out a microray scanner and a vibrohammer.

The first chunk he cracked off had nothing in it; the scanner gave the uninterrupted pattern of homogenous structure. Picking it up with the lifter, he swung it and threw it into the stream. On the fifteenth chunk, he got an interruption pattern that told him that a sunstone—or something, probably something—was inside.

Some fifty million years ago, when the planet that had been called Zarathustra (for the last twenty-five million) was young, there had existed a marine life form, something like a jellyfish. As these died, they had sunk into the sea-bottom ooze; sand had covered the ooze and pressed it tighter and tighter, until it had become glassy flint, and the entombed jellyfish little beans of dense stone. Some of them, by some ancient biochemical quirk, were intensely thermofluorescent; worn as gems, they glowed from the wearer’s body heat.

On Terra or Baldur or Freya or Ishtar, a single cut of polished sunstone was worth a small fortune. Even here, they brought respectable prices from the Zarathustra Company's gem buyers. Keeping his point of expectation safely low, he got a smaller vibrohammer from the toolbox and began chipping cautiously around the foreign object, until the flint split open and revealed a smooth yellow ellipsoid, half an inch long.

"Worth a thousand sols—if it's worth anything," he commented. A deft tap here, another there, and the yellow bean came loose from the flint. Picking it up, he rubbed it between gloved palms. "I don't think it is." He rubbed harder, then held it against the hot bowl of his pipe. It still didn't respond. He dropped it. "Another jellyfish that didn't live right."

Behind him, something moved in the brush with a dry rustling. He dropped the loose glove from his right hand and turned, reaching toward his hip. Then he saw what had made the noise—a hard-shelled thing a foot in length, with twelve legs, long antennae and two pairs of clawed mandibles. He stopped and picked up a shard of flint, throwing it with an oath. Another damned infernal land-prawn.

He detested land-prawns. They were horrible things, which, of course, wasn't their fault. More to the point, they were destructive. They got into things at camp; they would try to eat anything. They crawled into machinery, possibly finding the lubrication tasty, and caused jams. They cut into electric insulation. And they got into his bedding, and bit, or rather pinched, painfully. Nobody loved a land-prawn, not even another land-prawn.

This one dodged the thrown flint, scuttled off a few feet and turned, waving its antennae in what looked like derision. Jack reached for his hip again, then checked the motion. Pistol cartridges cost like crazy; they weren't to be wasted in fits of childish pique. Then he reflected that no cartridge fired at a target is really wasted, and that he hadn't done any shooting recently. Stooping again, he picked up another stone and tossed it a foot short and to the left of the prawn. As soon as it was out of his fingers, his hand went for the butt of the long automatic. It was out and the safety off before the flint landed; as the prawn fled, he fired from the hip. The quasi-crustacean disintegrated. He nodded pleasantly.

"Ol' man Holloway's still hitting things he shoots at."

Was a time, not so long ago, when he took his abilities for granted. Now he was getting old enough to have to verify them. He thumbed on the safety and holstered the pistol, then picked up the glove and put it on again.

Never saw so blasted many land-prawns as this summer. They'd been bad last year, but nothing like this. Even the oldtimers who'd been on Zarathustra since the first colonization said so. There'd be some simple explanation, of course; something that would amaze him at his own obtuseness for not having seen it at once. Maybe the abnormally dry weather had something to do with it. Or increase of something they ate, or decrease of natural enemies.

He'd heard that land-prawns had no natural enemies; he questioned that. Something killed them. He'd seen crushed prawn shells, some of them close to his camp. Maybe stamped on by something with hoofs, and then picked clean by insects. He'd ask Ben Rainsford; Ben ought to know.

Half an hour later, the scanner gave him another interruption pattern. He laid it aside and took up the small vibrohammer. This time it was a large bean, light pink in color, He separated it from its matrix of flint and rubbed it, and instantly it began glowing.

“Ahhh! This is something like it, now!”

He rubbed harder; warmed further on his pipe bowl, it fairly blazed. Better than a thousand sols, he told himself. Good color, too. Getting his gloves off, he drew out the little leather bag from under his shirt, loosening the drawstrings by which it hung around his neck. There were a dozen and a half stones inside, all bright as live coals. He looked at them for a moment, and dropped the new sunstone in among them, chuckling happily.

Victor Grego, listening to his own recorded voice, rubbed the sunstone on his left finger with the heel of his right palm and watched it brighten. There was, he noticed, a boastful ring to his voice—not the suave, unemphatic tone considered proper on a message-tape. Well, if anybody wondered why, when they played that tape off six months from now in Johannesburg on Terra, they could look in the cargo holds of the ship that had brought it across five hundred light-years of space. Ingots of gold and platinum and gadolinium. Furs and biochemicals and brandy. Perfumes that defied synthetic imitation; hardwoods no plastic could copy. Spices. And the steel coffer full of sunstones. Almost all luxury goods, the only really dependable commodities in interstellar trade.

And he had spoken of other things. Veldbeest meat, up seven per cent from last month, twenty per cent from last year, still in demand on a dozen planets unable to produce Terran-type foodstuffs. Grain, leather, lumber. And he had added a dozen more items to the lengthening list of what Zarathustra could now produce in adequate quantities and no longer needed to import. Not fishhooks and boot buckles, either—blasting explosives and propellants, contragravity-field generator parts, power tools, pharmaceuticals, synthetic textiles. The Company didn't need to carry Zarathustra any more; Zarathustra could carry the Company, and itself.

Fifteen years ago, when the Zarathustra Company had sent him here, there had been a cluster of log and prefab huts beside an improvised landing field, almost exactly where this skyscraper now stood. Today, Mallorysport was a city of seventy thousand; in all, the planet had a population of nearly a million, and it was still growing. There were steel mills and chemical plants and reaction plants and machine works. They produced all their own fissionables, and had recently begun to export a little refined plutonium; they had even started producing collapsium shielding.

The recorded voice stopped. He ran back the spool, set for sixty-speed, and transmitted it to the radio office. In twenty minutes, a copy would be aboard the ship that would hyper out for Terra that night. While he was finishing, his communication screen buzzed.

“Dr. Kellogg’s screening you, Mr. Grego,” the girl in the outside office told him.

He nodded. Her hands moved, and she vanished in a polychromatic explosion; when it cleared, the chief of the Division of Scientific Study and Research was looking out of the screen instead. Looking slightly upward at the showback over his own screen, Victor was getting his warm, sympathetic, sincere and slightly too toothy smile on straight.

“Hello, Leonard. Everything going all right?”

It either was and Leonard Kellogg wanted more credit than he deserved or it wasn’t and he was trying to get somebody else blamed for it before anybody could blame him.

“Good afternoon, Victor.” Just the right shade of deference about using the first name—big wheel to bigger wheel. “Has Nick Emmert been talking to you about the Big Blackwater project today?”

Nick was the Federation’s resident-general; on Zarathustra he was, to all intents and purposes, the Terran Federation Government. He was also a large stockholder in the chartered Zarathustra Company.

“No. Is he likely to?”

“Well, I wondered, Victor. He was on my screen just now. He says there’s some adverse talk about the effect on the rainfall in the Piedmont area of Beta Continent. He was worried about it.”

“Well, it would affect the rainfall. After all, we drained half a million square miles of swamp, and the prevailing winds are from the west. There’d be less atmospheric moisture to the east of it. Who’s talking adversely about it, and what worries Nick?”

“Well, Nick’s afraid of the effect on public opinion on Terra. You know how strong conservation sentiment is; everybody’s very much opposed to any sort of destructive exploitation.”

“Good Lord! The man doesn’t call the creation of five hundred thousand square miles of new farmland destructive exploitation, does he?”

“Well, no, Nick doesn’t call it that; of course not. But he’s concerned about some garbled story getting to Terra about our upsetting the ecological balance and causing droughts. Fact is, I’m rather concerned myself.”

He knew what was worrying both of them. Emmert was afraid the Federation Colonial Office would blame him for drawing fire on them from the conservationists. Kellogg was afraid he'd be blamed for not predicting the effects before his division endorsed the project. As a division chief, he had advanced as far as he would in the Company hierarchy; now he was on a Red Queen's racetrack, running like hell to stay in the same place.

"The rainfall's dropped ten per cent from last year, and fifteen per cent from the year before that," Kellogg was saying. "And some non-Company people have gotten hold of it, and so had Interworld News. Why, even some of my people are talking about ecological side-effects. You know what will happen when a story like that gets back to Terra. The conservation fanatics will get hold of it, and the Company'll be criticized."

That would hurt Leonard. He identified himself with the Company. It was something bigger and more powerful than he was, like God.

Victor Grego identified the Company with himself. It was something big and powerful, like a vehicle, and he was at the controls.

"Leonard, a little criticism won't hurt the Company," he said. "Not where it matters, on the dividends. I'm afraid you're too sensitive to criticism. Where did Emmert get this story anyhow? From your people?"

"No, absolutely not, Victor. That's what worries him. It was this man Rainsford who started it."

"Rainsford?"

"Dr. Bennett Rainsford, the naturalist. Institute of Zeno-Sciences. I never trusted any of those people; they always poke their noses into things, and the Institute always reports their findings to the Colonial Office."

"I know who you mean now; little fellow with red whiskers, always looks as though he'd been sleeping in his clothes. Why, of course the Zeno-Sciences people poke their noses into things, and of course they report their findings to the government." He was beginning to lose patience. "I don't see what all this is about, Leonard. This man Rainsford just made a routine observation of meteorological effects. I suggest you have your meteorologists check it, and if it's correct pass it on to the news services along with your other scientific findings."

"Nick Emmert thinks Rainsford is a Federation undercover agent."

That made him laugh. Of course there were undercover agents on Zarathustra, hundreds of them. The Company had people here checking on him; he knew and accepted that. So did the big stockholders, like Interstellar Explorations and the Banking Cartel and Terra Baldur-Marduk Spacelines. Nick Emmert had his corps of spies and stool pigeons, and

the Terran Federation had people here watching both him and Emmert. Rainsford could be a Federation agent—a roving naturalist would have a wonderful cover occupation. But this Big Blackwater business was so utterly silly. Nick Emmert had too much graft on his conscience; it was too bad that overloaded consciences couldn't blow fuses.

“Suppose he is, Leonard. What could he report on us? We are a chartered company, and we have an excellent legal department, which keeps us safely inside our charter. It is a very liberal charter, too. This is a Class-III uninhabited planet; the Company owns the whole thing outright. We can do anything we want as long as we don't violate colonial law or the Federation Constitution. As long as we don't do that, Nick Emmert hasn't anything to worry about. Now forget this whole damned business, Leonard!” He was beginning to speak sharply, and Kellogg was looking hurt. “I know you were concerned about injurious reports getting back to Terra, and that was quite commendable, but...”

By the time he got through, Kellogg was happy again. Victor blanked the screen, leaned back in his chair and began laughing. In a moment, the screen buzzed again. When he snapped it on, his screen-girl said:

“Mr. Henry Stenson's on, Mr. Grego.”

“Well, put him on.” He caught himself just before adding that it would be a welcome change to talk to somebody with sense.

The face that appeared was elderly and thin; the mouth was tight, and there were squint-wrinkles at the corners of the eyes.

“Well, Mr. Stenson. Good of you to call. How are you?”

“Very well, thank you. And you?” When he also admitted to good health, the caller continued: “How is the globe running? Still in synchronization?”

Victor looked across the office at his most prized possession, the big globe of Zarathustra that Henry Stenson had built for him, supported six feet from the floor on its own contragravity unit, spotlighted in orange to represent the KO sun, its two satellites circling about it as it revolved slowly.

“The globe itself is keeping perfect time, and Darius is all right, Xerxes is a few seconds of longitude ahead of true position.”

“That's dreadful, Mr. Grego!” Stenson was deeply shocked. “I must adjust that the first thing tomorrow. I should have called to check on it long ago, but you know how it is. So many things to do, and so little time.”

“I find the same trouble myself, Mr. Stenson.” They chatted for a while, and then Stenson apologized for taking up so much of Mr. Grego's valuable time. What he meant was that his own time, just as valuable to him, was wasting. After the screen blanked, Grego sat



looking at it for a moment, wishing he had a hundred men like Henry Stenson in his own organization. Just men with Stenson's brains and character; wishing for a hundred instrument makers with Stenson's skills would have been unreasonable, even for wishing. There was only one Henry Stenson, just as there had been only one Antonio Stradivari. Why a man like that worked in a little shop on a frontier planet like Zarathustra....

Then he looked, pridefully, at the globe. Alpha Continent had moved slowly to the right, with the little speck that represented Mallorysport twinkling in the orange light. Darius, the inner moon, where the Terra-Baldur-Marduk Spacelines had their leased terminal, was almost directly over it, and the other moon, Xerxes, was edging into sight. Xerxes was the one thing about Zarathustra that the Company didn't own; the Terran Federation had retained that as a naval base. It was the one reminder that there was something bigger and more powerful than the Company.

Gerd van Riebeek saw Ruth Ortheris leave the escalator, step aside and stand looking around the cocktail lounge. He set his glass, with its inch of tepid highball, on the bar; when her eyes shifted in his direction, he waved to her, saw her brighten and wave back and then went to meet her. She gave him a quick kiss on the cheek, dodged when he reached for her and took his arm.

"Drink before we eat?" he asked.

"Oh, Lord, yes! I've just about had it for today."

He guided her toward one of the bartending machines, inserted his credit key, and put a four-portion jug under the spout, dialing the cocktail they always had when they drank together. As he did, he noticed what she was wearing: short black jacket, lavender neckerchief, light gray skirt. Not her usual vacation get-up.

"School department drag you back?" he asked as the jug filled.

"Juvenile court." She got a couple of glasses from the shelf under the machine as he picked up the jug. "A fifteen-year-old burglar."

They found a table at the rear of the room, out of the worst of the cocktail-hour uproar. As soon as he filled her glass, she drank half of it, then lit a cigarette.

"Junktown?" he asked.

She nodded. "Only twenty-five years since this planet was discovered, and we have slums already. I was over there most of the afternoon, with a pair of city police." She didn't seem to want to talk about it. "What were you doing today?"

"Ruth, you ought to ask Doc Mallin to drop in on Leonard Kellogg sometime, and give him an unobstusive going over."

“You haven’t been having trouble with him again?” she asked anxiously.

He made a face, and then tasted his drink. “It’s trouble just being around that character. Ruth, to use one of those expressions your profession deplors, Len Kellogg is just plain nuts!” He drank some more of his cocktail and helped himself to one of her cigarettes. “Here,” he continued, after lighting it. “A couple of days ago, he told me he’d been getting inquiries about this plague of land-prawns they’re having over on Beta. He wanted me to set up a research project to find out why and what to do about it.”

“Well?”

“I did. I made two screen calls, and then I wrote a report and sent it up to him. That was where I jerked my trigger; I ought to have taken a couple of weeks and made a real production out of it.”

“What did you tell him?”

“The facts. The limiting factor on land-prawn increase is the weather. The eggs hatch underground and the immature prawns dig their way out in the spring. If there’s been a lot of rain, most of them drown in their holes or as soon as they emerge. According to growth rings on trees, last spring was the driest in the Beta Piedmont in centuries, so most of them survived, and as they’re parthenogenetic females, they all laid eggs. This spring, it was even drier, so now they have land prawns all over central Beta. And I don’t know that anything can be done about them.”

“Well, did he think you were just guessing?”

He shook his head in exasperation. “I don’t know what he thinks. You’re the psychologist, you try to figure it. I sent him that report yesterday morning. He seemed quite satisfied with it at the time. Today, just after noon, he sent for me and told me it wouldn’t do at all. Tried to insist that the rainfall on Beta had been normal. That was silly; I referred him to his meteorologists and climatologists, where I’d gotten my information. He complained that the news services were after him for an explanation. I told him I’d given him the only explanation there was. He said he simply couldn’t use it. There had to be some other explanation.”

“If you don’t like the facts, you ignore them, and if you need facts, dream up some you do like,” she said. “That’s typical rejection of reality. Not psychotic, not even psychoneurotic. But certainly not sane.” She had finished her first drink and was sipping slowly at her second. “You know, this is interesting. Does he have some theory that would disqualify yours?”

“Not that I know of. I got the impression that he just didn’t want the subject of rainfall on Beta discussed at all.”

“That is odd. Has anything else peculiar been happening over on Beta lately?”

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