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THE CARNIVORE

Why were they apologetic? It wasn't their fault that they came to Earth much too late.

The beings stood around my bed in air suits like ski suits, with globes over their heads like upside-down fishbowls. It was all like a masquerade, with odd costumes and funny masks.

I know that the masks are their faces, but I argue with them and find I think as if I am arguing with humans behind the masks. They are people. I recognize people and whether I am going to like this person or that person by something in the way they move and how they get excited when they talk; and I know that I like these people in a motherly sort of way. You have to feel motherly toward them, I guess.

They all remind me of Ronny, a medical student I knew once. He was small and round and eager. You had to like him, but you couldn't take him very seriously. He was a pacifist; he wrote poetry and pulled it out to read aloud at ill-timed moments; and he stuttered when he talked too fast.

They are like that, all fright and gentleness.

I am not the only survivor—they have explained that—but I am the first they found, and the least damaged, the one they have chosen to represent the human race to them. They stand around my

bed and answer questions, and are nice to me when I argue with them.

All in a group they look half-way between a delegation of nations and an ark, one of each, big and small, thick and thin, four arms or wings, all shapes and colors in fur and skin and feathers.

I can picture them in their UN of the Universe, making speeches in their different languages, listening patiently without understanding each other's different problems, boring each other and being too polite to yawn.

They are polite, so polite I almost feel they are afraid of me, and I want to reassure them.

But I talk as if I were angry. I can't help it, because if things had only been a little different ... "Why couldn't you have come sooner? Why couldn't you have tried to stop it before it happened, or at least come sooner, afterward...?"

If they had come sooner to where the workers of the Nevada power pile starved slowly behind their protecting walls of lead—if they had looked sooner for survivors of the dust with which the nations of the world had slain each other—George Craig would be alive. He died before they came. He was my co-worker, and I loved him.

We had gone down together, passing door by door the automatic safeguards of the plant, which were supposed to protect the people on the outside from the radioactive danger from the inside—but the danger of a failure of politics was far more real than the danger of failure in the science of the power pile, and that had not been calculated by the builders. We were far underground when the first radioactivity in the air outside had shut all the heavy, lead-shielded automatic doors between us and the outside.

We were safe. And we starved there.

"Why didn't you come sooner?" I wonder if they know or guess how I feel. My questions are not questions, but I have to ask them.

He is dead. I don't mean to reproach them—they look well meaning and kindly—but I feel as if, somehow, knowing why it happened could make it stop, could let me turn the clock back and make it happen differently. If I could have signaled them, so they would have come just a little sooner.

They look at one another, turning their funny-face heads uneasily, moving back and forth, but no one will answer.

The world is dead.... George is dead, that thin, pathetic creature with the bones showing through his skin that he was when we sat still at the last with our hands touching, thinking there were people outside who had forgotten us, hoping they would remember. We didn't guess that the world was dead, blanketed in radiating dust outside. Politics had killed it.

These beings around me, they had been watching, seeing what was going to happen to our world, listening to our radios from their small settlements on the other planets of the Solar System. They had seen the doom of war coming. They represented stellar civilizations of great power and technology, and with populations that would have made ours seem a small village; they were stronger than we were, and yet they had done nothing.

"Why didn't you stop us? You could have stopped us."

A rabbit one who is closer than the others backs away, gesturing politely that he is giving room for someone else to speak, but he looks guilty and will not look at me with his big round eyes. I still feel weak and dizzy. It is hard to think, but I feel as if they are hiding a secret.

A doelike one hesitates and comes closer to my bed. "We discussed it ... we voted...." It talks through a microphone in its helmet with a soft lisping accent that I think comes from the shape of its mouth. It has a muzzle and very soft, dainty, long nibbling lips like a deer that nibbles on twigs and buds.

"We were afraid," adds one who looks like a bear.

"To us the future was very terrible," says one who looks as if it might have descended from some sort of large bird like a penguin. "So much— Your weapons were very terrible."

Now they all talk at once, crowding about my bed, apologizing. "So much killing. It hurt to know about. But your people didn't seem to mind."

"We were afraid."

"And in your fiction," the doelike one lisped, "I saw plays from your amusement machines which said that the discovery of beings in space would save you from war, not because you would let us bring friendship and teach peace, but because the human race would unite in *hatred* of the outsiders. They would forget their hatred of each other only in a new and more terrible war with us." Its voice breaks in a squeak and it turns its face away from me.

"You were about to come out into space. We were wondering how to hide!" That is a quick-talking one, as small as a child. He looks as if he might have descended from a bat—gray silken fur on his pointed face, big night-seeing eyes, and big sensitive ears, with a humped shape on the back of his air suit which might be folded wings. "We were trying to conceal where we had built, so that humans would not guess we were near and look for us."

They are ashamed of their fear, for because of it they broke all the kindly laws of their civilizations, restrained all the pity and gentleness I see in them, and let us destroy ourselves.

I am beginning to feel more awake and to see more clearly. And I am beginning to feel sorry for them, for I can see why they are afraid.

They are herbivores. I remember the meaning of shapes. In the paths of evolution there are grass eaters and berry eaters and root diggers. Each has its functional shape of face and neck—and its wide, startled-looking eyes to see and run away from the hunters. In

all their racial history they have never killed to eat. They have been killed and eaten, or run away, and they evolved to intelligence by selection. Those lived who succeeded in running away from carnivores like lions, hawks, and men.

I look up, and they turn their eyes and heads in quick embarrassed motion, not meeting my eye. The rabbit one is nearest and I reach out to touch him, pleased because I am growing strong enough now to move my arms. He looks at me and I ask the question: "Are there any carnivores—flesh eaters—among you?"

He hesitates, moving his lips as if searching for tactful words. "We have never found any that were civilized. We have frequently found them in caves and tents fighting each other. Sometimes we find them fighting each other with the ruins of cities around them, but they are always savages."

The bearlike one said heavily, "It might be that carnivores evolve more rapidly and tend toward intelligence more often, for we find radioactive planets without life, and places like the place you call your asteroid belt, where a planet should be—but there are only scattered fragments of planet, pieces that look as if a planet had been blown apart. We think that usually ..." He looked at me uncertainly, beginning to fumble his words. "We think ..."



"Yours is the only carnivorous race we have found that was—civilized, that had a science and was going to come out into space," the doelike one interrupted softly. "We were afraid."

They seem to be apologizing.

The rabbit one, who seems to be chosen as the leader in speaking to me, says, "We will give you anything you want. Anything we are able to give you."

They mean it. We survivors will be privileged people, with a key to all the cities, everything free. Their sincerity is wonderful, but puzzling. Are they trying to atone for the thing they feel was a crime; that they allowed humanity to murder itself, and lost to the Galaxy the richness of a race? Is this why they are so generous?

Perhaps then they will help the race to get started again. The records are not lost. The few survivors can eventually repopulate Earth. Under the tutelage of these peaceable races, without the stress of division into nations, we will flower as a race. No children of mine to the furthest descendant will ever make war again. This much of a lesson we have learned.

These timid beings do not realize how much humanity has wanted peace. They do not know how reluctantly we were forced and trapped by old institutions and warped tangles of politics to which we could see no answer. We are not naturally savage. We are not savage when approached as individuals. Perhaps they know this, but are afraid anyhow, instinctive fear rising up from the blood of their hunted, frightened forebears.

The human race will be a good partner to these races. Even recovering from starvation as I am, I can feel in myself an energy they do not have. The savage in me and my race is a creative thing, for in those who have been educated as I was it is a controlled savagery which attacks and destroys only problems and obstacles, never people. Any human raised outside of the political traditions that the race inherited from its bloodstained childhood would be as friendly and ready for friendship as I am toward these beings. I could never hurt these pleasant, overgrown bunnies and squirrels.

"We will do everything we can to make up for ... we will try to help," says the bunny, stumbling over the English, but civilized and cordial and kind.

I sit up suddenly, reaching out impulsively to shake his hand. Suddenly frightened he leaps back. All of them step back, glancing behind them as though making sure of the avenue of escape. Their big luminous eyes widen and glance rapidly from me to the doors, frightened.

They must think I am about to leap out of bed and pounce on them and eat them. I am about to laugh and reassure them, about to say that all I want from them is friendship, when I feel a twinge in my abdomen from the sudden motion. I touch it with one hand under the bedclothes.

There is the scar of an incision there, almost healed. An operation. The weakness I am recovering from is more than the weakness of starvation.

For only half a second I do not understand; then I see why they looked ashamed.

They voted the murder of a race.

All the human survivors found have been made sterile. There will be no more humans after we die.

I am frozen, one hand still extended to grasp the hand of the rabbit one, my eyes still searching his expression, reassuring words still half formed.

There will be time for anger or grief later, for now, in this instant, I can understand. They are probably quite right.

We were carnivores.

I know, because, at this moment of hatred, I could kill them all.

—G. A. MORRIS



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