The young subaltern showed himself to be a coward on Lodan; of course, with a proper trophy he might be able to convince himself that he had performed reasonably and well, once he returned to safe Earth.

THE HILLS OF LODAN

by Harold Calin

It was an hour after dark now and they sat close by the fire. They had not spoken since they returned. Although operating procedure dictated that all personnel be restricted to interior compounding in alien areas after dark, still they remained outside. The interior areas as described and called for by the manual actually did not exist here. There were only three light dural huts, one of which served to house the survey gear, the two others as sleeping quarters. None of the three by the fire was sleepy. Too much had happened. There was, too, just the idea of being outdoors, even if it was on an alien world. It was a luxury too great to resist after fourteen weeks in space.

Of the three men who sat by the fire, one was quite dark-skinned and much bigger than the two others. He wore the same uniform as the others, the tan of the Pioneer Brigades, but a strip above the brigade patch bore the name “Mars.” He wore the brevets of the rank of first subaltern as did one of the other two, who were Earthmen. The third man, the youngest, was a new subaltern on his first tour of duty. The dark man, whose name was Dekker Barents, put his dinner plate on the ground.

“You want me to light you a cigarette, Harry?” he said.

“No,” the one called Harry said.

“How’s the arm?”

“I’ll live.” He had managed his dinner with one hand, holding the plate between his knees. He felt the arm now. The pain was lessening, and he felt the pain only because he thought about it.

The third man, the young subaltern, who had not spoken at all, stood.

“ Aren’t you going to have any dinner, Robert?” Dekker asked him.
He said nothing.
"You should eat something,"
Harry said.
"I'm not hungry," Robert Leader said. He sat down again.
Dekker looked at Harry. "What did you tell Stone?" he asked.
"I told him we made contact,"
Harry Jackson said.
"And?"
"And nothing. That's all we did."
Robert Leader looked up. "Did you tell him what happened?"
"No," Harry said. "What did happen?"
"Nothing," Robert said. "Nothing happened."
Dekker laughed then, and Harry Jackson looked at him quickly.
They were quiet for a time, then, and Harry smoked a cigarette and looked at the small hand axe lying on the ground next to Robert Leader.
"That could be an ancient American Indian hatchet," Harry said. "Except for what it's made of. I think they called them tomahawks."
"I'm tired," Robert said, and he stood again. He picked up the axe and walked away from the fire. He had sat with the men to whom he had shown himself very obviously, earlier that day, to be a coward, and he had thought that if he sat with them now, something would make it all right. But nothing had happened, and he got up and left. He had not eaten because he knew that if he did, he would be sick.
Earlier that day he had been with Harry and Dekker Barents into the hills beyond the perimeter to make contact with the aliens whose fire they had seen the night before. It had been a long expedition, in the almost unbearable heat of the twin suns of this world, and they had not returned until just before dark. Robert now entered one of the dural huts, placed the axe on the ground under his bunk, and lay down. He stared at the ceiling and knew that he would not be able to sleep.

Harry Jackson had never seen a planet like this before, and in the beginning it was a very great and quiet thing. But they had been there fifteen days now, this team taking cores from a fourth camp site already, and the almost lunar landscape was no longer very great, or very quiet. And it would never again be anything new. Dekker Barents had asked about his arm and now he was thinking about it again, having watched Robert Leader leave the fire and then looked into the flame until his eyes no longer focused and his mind achieved that state of complete sanity in detachment from himself.

"He don't have much stomach," Dekker said, suddenly.
"Neither do I. Not for what you showed me today."
"What did I show you today?"
"Nothing."
"You don't like me, do you, Harry?"
"Maybe I've known you too long," Harry said.
"Why didn't you tell Stone what happened today?"
"What would that accomplish? The less we talk about that, the better I'll like it."

First Subaltern Jackson, Pioneer Corps, United Nations Space Service, Harry thought, reciting his full rank and service to himself. What am I doing here? A glorified armed guard to an organized crew of vultures, bleeding every livable or breathable planet dry to enhance a culture devoted to gracious living. It's a purpose, I suppose.

And there was the girl who had lived in Tien-sin. That was in Howell's office on Vigo Street, and she had left before Howell came back from the Foreign Office. Howell had told him about the first expedition—how long ago had that been, eight years?—and now a lark had become a profession. He wondered how long the girl had waited that night in the bar at the Dorchester, or whether she had showed up at all. He threw the end of the cigarette into the darkness where he knew the first shift of the double watch was already posted. How many times had he thought about that girl? On how many planets, in how many camp sites just like this, with how many fellow officers like Barents?

The arm was better now, but it had hurt enough in the beginning, after the first shock. Then the pain got so bad on the way back, that when the sled dipped once he almost passed out. Now it was better. It was dressed and he could use the arm. The blouse was blackened, with two tiny holes, but no hole in the arm—only a gash. And the pain was going away.

"Dekker, have you really got a bottle of cognac?" Harry asked.
"Yes," Dekker said.
"Get it."
"What for?"
"I want to drink to the aliens. The natives, really. We're the true aliens here, you know."
"To the aliens?"
"To my arm then. Get the bottle."
"Later."
"Get it now."
"Your arm is hurting bad again, Harry."
"No."
"What if I don't have a bottle?"
"You've got it."
"Maybe I've drunk it all up already."
"You don't drink alone, Dekker. And nobody in this crew likes you enough to fight with you after the bottle's empty."
"Except you, Harry."
Harry laughed. "That's right, Dekker. Except me."
Dekker Barents laughed. “I’ll be right back.”

Dekker went to the cluster of huts. Harry watched him go. Me and a Martian, he thought. Drinking up a storm way the hell and gone across the universe. What an idiotic world. A bottle of cognac, cheap stuff probably. First subalterns’ benefits aren’t the world’s best, of course. He didn’t like cognac. Now here’s just a place to become particular, Harry, old boy. Tell the man scotch, with a twist of lemon peel and just the slightest dash of bitters. Anything for the boys.

“All right, Harry,” Dekker said. “But let’s do it quietly.”

“All right.”

Dekker Barents squatted next to Harry and set down the familiarly labeled container carefully in front of him. He laughed.

“What’s so funny?” Harry asked.

“Look. The cap is equipped to insert sippers. Imagine drinking this in free fall.”

“Open it up.”

Dekker picked up the container and struggled with the cap a minute. “I can’t get it open, Harry.”

“Then crack the top off,” Harry said.

“Don’t kid me.”

“I’m not kidding you, Dek. Crack the top off. Then we’ll have to drink the whole thing.” Harry picked up the bottle and read the label.

“Don’t, Harry. You couldn’t finish the whole bottle.”

“Tired of standing still. Then he turned his attention back to Dekker and watched him struggle the cognac open.

Subaltern Robert Leader lay on his bunk in the hut, his eyes closed, breathing quietly. He opened his eyes and saw the flicker of reflected firelight through the translucence of the dural hut side. He wiped his face and closed his eyes again, and he thought of the Martian who had driven the sled, and of Harry Jackson, and then he heard laughter. That’s Harry, he thought. He lay still then, and did not think about anything, and listened for more laughter. He did not hear it again. He did not hear anything more until something touched his arm. His body stiffened.

“I say, Leader, are you asleep?”

“No.” Leader said, then twisted his head and saw the face of Captain Stone, commander of the survey crew, and of the camp. “Sir,” he added softly.
“Can we talk for a moment?”
“Yes, sir. Of course.” Robert sat up.

“Just what happened to you three today?” Stone asked.

“Why don’t you ask Barents?” Robert said.

“Jackson told me you’d made contact, nothing more. You didn’t start anything with them?”

“I didn’t.”

“I’m not asking that, dammit. Jackson comes to me, his arm a perfect mess, and tells me sorry old man, nothing more than routine contact. And by the way, shouldn’t we be doubling the watch tonight? The flagship is beyond our zone of screening, you know, and our own scanners cannot be depended upon on alien worlds. Something about ionization jamming up signals. Well, not quite like that, he let the M. O. dress the arm. But that’s all I know.”

“Why not ask them?”

“I don’t know,” Stone said. “I’ve a feeling you’d be the only one to tell me.”

“Why?”

“I told you I don’t know, Leader.”

Robert turned away. “We found them, all right. Hardly made contact, though. Barents drove them off and burnt a hut of theirs or something. Made of cloth. He fired at them too.”

“What? Why didn’t you stop him?” Stone’s voice rose slightly.

“The bloody fool. What’s the matter with you?”

“We tried,” Robert Leader said softly. He turned away again.

“They defended themselves, of course.”

“No. They ran.”

“Then how did Jackson get hurt?”

“Dekker.”

“Dekker?”

“It was an accident,” Robert said stiffly.


“Captain?”

“Yes, Leader.”

“Do you think there will be trouble?”

“I doubt it. The expedition reports describe the natives as a nomadic people. Agricultural mainly, but they have metals and very primitive firearms. Jackson is no fool and he seemed quite unconcerned about it. But it is a devil of a way to treat natives. You should have stopped them.”

“I tried, sir.”

“You’re worried, Leader. What about?”

“Nothing.”

“Come now, let’s have it. This isn’t a maneuver, you know. Did you notice anything? You were thoroughly briefed before all this.”

“I don’t know anything about this planet.”

“Neither do any of us. Their clothes. They dressed in black, men as well as women?”
“No,” Leader said. “I think there were only men. They were wearing helmets. Metal helmets.”
“Yes?”
“That’s all. That’s all I saw.”
Captain Stone was quiet. He studied Leader’s face, but he was not really thinking about Leader. “How many did you see?” he asked.
“Four.”
“Good night, sir.” Robert Leader rolled over on the bunk as acknowledgement of the end of the conversation. He heard Stone’s boots on the dry ground as he walked off, then he didn’t hear anything more.

“Drink, Harry, it cleans out the insides.”
Harry Jackson looked at the bottle on the ground before him, then at Barents.
Dekker Barents smiled. “What’s the matter, Harry, you lost your big thirst?”

“No.” Harry raised the container and drank. Then he lowered it and read the label again slowly. Dekker took it from his hand.
“Let’s drink to space, Harry. I’m an original spaceman, you know. I was born on Mars. That’s why I’m black and half again as big as you are. You know that? My grand parents were real pioneers. They just call us pioneers. But they’re the real goods. They were in the first colony on Mars. True pioneers.”
Harry looked up at Barents. “Your grand parents were the first modern age suckers, Dek. They bought the lies right out of the sunday supplements and climbed aboard for a trip to their own private dust bowl.”
“You’re wrong, Harry. That’s just nature. Until man turns his hand to it, all nature is chaos. You see this planet? A bloody desert, you know. We could make it a jungle if we wanted to. A nicely landscaped one too.”
“Yes,” Harry said. “And what happened to your man-made paradise in the dust storms twenty years ago? They practically evacuated Mars.”
“Yes, I know. I know. I was on Earth four years. Children evacuated first. I don’t know why. Children have very little to lose.”
“Except their lives.”
“That’s the cheapest commodity in the universe, Harry. Take it from me. You know where they
sent me? They sent me to the southern United States of America. Me, a Martian refugee. Placed in a special school and everything. They used to bring delegations of ladies from the charities out to see us. One once had a camera and asked me to pose for a picture with her. She seemed sort of disappointed we didn’t have three heads or something. Ever had your picture taken as a Martian refugee, Harry? All done up in native costume and everything?”

“No.”

“It makes you feel great.” Then Dekker raised the bottle and drank again, not lowering the bottle until he began to cough, and cognac spilled from the bottle as his hand shook. “Great, you hear?”

“Quiet, Dek,” Harry said.

“Quiet? Listen to me, First Subaltern Jackson, you don’t whisper great exultation. You shout it.” He rose to his feet, the bottle in his hand, and turned to face the barren hills of the planet Lodan, black now, and the stars that were dimmed in the light of the fire. “You know what shouting is?” he called to the hills. “You think you’re dead? Maybe you were once. But we’re here now. The professional life extractors. We will effect a glorious transformation. We will turn your disorder into an architectural masterpiece of colossal garbage heaps. You hear? You hear?”

Dekker Barents turned from the silence that was his only response and looked at Harry. He squatted by the fire again. “You’re all right, Harry. The only man in a thousand light years worth drinking with. You proved it today. And I’m all right too.” He stood again, raising the bottle to his lips. He did not see Captain Robin Stone kneel where Harry was sitting.

“What did you do out there today?” Stone asked Harry.

Dekker looked down. “We ran onto a couple of women, and one of them twisted Harry’s arm,” he said and laughed. He put down the bottle. “Stone, I say, Captain Stone. You are a most splendid executive officer. And it is your great privilege to be served by the team of Jackson and Barents, atrocity-makers at law. I hereby tender myself to be placed on the carpet for drinking on an alien world. Most wretched example to place before the natives, I must admit. Mustn’t you?”

“Stop him, Jackson.”

“You stop him,” Harry said.

“You’re the only one can handle him.”

“Me?”

“Would you care to join two lonely extra-territorial officers in a drink, Captain Stone?” Dekker said.

Stone looked up a moment, then returned his attention to Harry. “The group you made contact with, Harry. What were they?”
"How would I know? We didn’t get to speak to them."
"Leader said they wore helmets."
"What?"
"Metal helmets."
"Go ask him again."
"Look, Harry, helmets might imply a military unit," Stone said. "Might also be the latest Lodan fashion," Harry said, smiling.
"The expedition report spoke nothing of military units. They covered the whole planet. How would you explain no mention of helmets?"
"Like I said, they weren’t in fashion yet."
"Listen, Harry," Dekker said. "I’ve got three brand new Martian suits. Let’s all get dressed up and pose for the ladies. The latest mode in fattened up refugees. What do you say, Captain?"
"Jackson," Stone said. "Do something with him."
"Let him ride himself out. It won’t take long."
"Get him quiet, then. Get him ready."
"Ready for what?"
"Good Lord, man. For anything that might happen. I’m sure you didn’t effect the friendliest contact today."
"Don’t report it to the flagship," Harry said. "You’ll make a fool of yourself."

Stone was quiet a moment. "All right. But we must take precautions here, nonetheless. Do something."

"Nothing will happen, Captain. There were only four of them."
"Well, get him quiet."
"I’ll even get him ready, if you want." Harry looked at Dekker. Dekker Barents sat on the ground. "What’s that?"
"Are you ready, Dek?" Harry asked.
"For what?"
"Nothing. Just ready."
Dekker became quiet then, and set down the almost empty bottle. He looked at Harry. "Yes," he said, "I’m ready. Let’s go to sleep."

For a time, since it started, Robert Leader had felt shame. But the fear had returned and it was still there, this time not be replaced by shame or sleep or hunger, but by the mental alteration of truth that only time and a different proximity could bring. Sit tight until this tour of duty is over, he thought. That’s all. If he would be lucky, that was. Captain Stone said not to worry. But how did one go about doing that? He didn’t want to worry or feel all this, but he wanted that axe and not all the rest that went with the axe. And throwing the thing away would not ever make it all right either. This was stupid to begin with, he thought. But it isn’t stupid now. Not since it started.

It had started the night before, shortly before first light. Leader had wakened early to see the rise
of the twin suns and he lay in his bunk. Then he heard the guard come off the last watch and speak with Captain Stone. The guard had seen a fire off in the hills. A small fire. There were twelve crews conducting this survey. The flagship had not dropped any crew as close as this to where they were. They made contact with the flagship and reported. On a world of advanced civilization, formal contacts were protocol. On planets such as Lodan, they were rarely bothered about, only to quell any disturbances. The flagship commander operated from the findings of the first expeditionary report and instructed Stone to make contact if he deemed it advisable. This did not warrant dropping out of orbit. Stone, being an ambitious officer, had decided to establish contact as a furtherance of operational procedure. It might make up for the lack of findings of his survey team. This planet was turning out to be as barren as it looked. Stone chose Barents to make the contact. Barents would require Jackson. “We’ve worked as a team before, sir, you know,” he’d said. “And mightn’t it be an interesting bit of experience for the new Subaltern? Leader?”

They left the camp an hour after midday, and Robert Leader had long now lost track of where they were. He sat in the right front seat of the air sled, its pressure-cabin top removed in deference to the breathable atmosphere, a replica of Earth’s. He looked at the gray hills and depressions that were the same as all the land he had seen for fifteen days, and watched the double shadow of the sled skip over the rough ground three feet beneath them. His hands were wet. He did not look at Dekker Barents who sat at his left, in the driver’s seat.

“Are you sure you know where we are?” he asked.

“Sure, kid, don’t worry,” Barents said.

Robert continued to look at the hills, wiping his hands on his uniform, holding his weapon tightly.

They came to a rise between two low hills and the sled dropped to the ground.

“There,” Dokker said. He pointed across a stretch of flat land, past a low hill, to a hill beyond that. Robert saw the long black structure then, low to the ground, its cantilevers moving in the slight breeze. While he looked, his weapon slipped from his hands to the floor of the sled. It clattered loudly and the other men looked down. He picked up the weapon and continued looking at the cloth building.

“There are four of them,” Dekker Barents said. “Let’s see what they’re like.”

He repowered the jets and the sled lifted and moved forward. They came to a near hill and lost
sight of the black building, and the sled coasted to the top of the hill and stopped suddenly, hitting the ground hard, and Robert Leader saw them. While the sled was stopped, they had crouched low and covered their heads with their black cloaks. But now they were running. One had run to the structure and done something which caused it to collapse and when the sled stopped atop the hill, Robert could see it still billowing down slowly, and the aliens were running. He saw the glint of sunlight off the metal helmets they wore. Dekker Barents was standing on the seat. Robert looked up and saw him frowning.

"Why are they running?" Dekker said, almost absently.

"Wouldn't you?" Robert said.

"They've probably got no right here."

"Neither have we," Harry Jackson said, from the back seat.

"Let's make it, then," Dekker said. "Give me your blaster, Leader."

"What for?"

"What the devil do you think for? Give it to me."

"No."

"Give me that damned gun." Dekker wrenched the weapon from Robert's hands, and just then he was hit from behind. He swung the blaster and Robert dropped down. The stock passed over his head, and Harry Jackson caught it, and Dekker swung around.

"Let it go, Harry."

"You're not going to do any shooting, Dek," Harry said.

"You're wrong, Harry."

Harry Jackson tried to pull the blaster from Dekker's hand, and Dekker's other hand was down and up and his sidearm was there. He shouted and Harry hit him, and the flame pistol fired and Robert heard Harry cry out. Then he heard the roar of his blaster, and he looked up and saw Dekker Barents sitting on the back of the seat, the blaster at his shoulder, and a flash as the suns caught the ejected shell flying out over his head, and Robert began to cry.

Dekker fired the entire magazine, then dropped the blaster across Robert's lap and turned to Harry. He bent toward him.

"Get away from me," Harry said.

Dekker jumped down in the seat and the sled lifted and moved forward once more. Robert looked around and saw Harry Jackson slumped heavily in the back seat, holding his left arm near the shoulder. He saw Harry's eyes in that moment, then he looked away.

The air sled stopped near the collapsed dwelling, and Robert Leader could not see the aliens. Dekker climbed down from the sled.

"Reload the blaster, Leader," he said.

Then Robert Leader became aware of the blaster across his
knees. He did nothing about re-loading, but sat motionless, looking at the fallen black hut. Dekker was walking back and forth along the mass of black cloth, kicking it once or twice. He then returned to the sled.

“You see anything you like, kid?” Dekker asked Robert.

“No.”

“Go ahead and take a look. They sometimes have very pretty things about. Typical nomadic tribesmen. Find them on a million planets. Strange how alike they all are. Go take a look.”

Dekker was at the back of the sled now, and Robert turned to him. He saw Harry. Harry was watching Dekker. Robert stepped out of the sled.

“You’re going to burn it, of course,” Harry said.

Robert looked at Harry.

“Of course,” Dekker said, and smiled. Then, to Robert, “You want a souvenir, you’d better make it fast.”

Robert turned to the fallen hut. "Stop him,” Harry said heavily.

Robert stopped, his back to Harry. Then, after a moment, he walked to the hut slowly and kicked back a fold of the black cloth, and he saw the axe. It had a short heavy, chopping blade and was fashioned of a black material with no gloss. He bent and picked it up. It was enormously heavy for its size. The blade was thick, had a weight as if it were stone. It was as sharp as any cutting instrument he had ever seen. The handle was white, carved with many intricately woven characters. They meant nothing to Robert. It was an axe such as Robert had never seen, in or out of museums, or anywhere else. He turned quickly, and walked back to the sled. Dekker passed him, going back to the hut. Robert did not look at Harry. He climbed back into the sled and watched Dekker.

“What sort of souvenir did you find, Robert?” he heard Harry say. He did not look around.

“A hand axe,” he said softly. “It isn’t much.”

“No, it isn’t much.”

Dekker walked the length of the hut, firing the flame pistol three or four times at the black cloth. He stopped and looked around slowly at the hills.

“You should have stopped him, Robert” Harry Jackson said.

Robert Leader said nothing, and watched Dekker fire at the cloth once more, and now the whole mass of cloth was in flames. The black smoke rose straight up, and Dekker came back to the sled. He put his hand on Harry’s arm. Harry pulled the arm away.

“It creased the skin,” Harry said. “A nice scorch.”

“I’m sorry, Harry,” Dekker said, and climbed into the driver’s seat.

“Does it hurt very much, Harry?” Robert Leader asked, not looking around.
"Yes. It hurts very much now."

The jets fired and the sled rose. Robert looked down at the axe which he had placed on the floor. He did not look up again until he knew they were far enough away not to see the burning hut, and then he looked up, but he did not look back. The fear gripped him solidly then, and it brought tears to his eyes. I hate them, he thought. It was a feeling of just a moment, nor was it clear to him who he meant. It passed almost instantly.

No one said anything during the trip back to the camp. Harry was sick once, and Dekker stopped the sled to help him. He refused the drink, Robert thinking it was because Harry wouldn’t accept anything from Dekker, but Harry knowing better than to drink in such heat during a long trip. Dekker acknowledged this and mumbled something, then they started again. They did not get back to camp until just before dark.

That was how it had been earlier that day, and how it had started. Now it would not stop. Nobody had spoken of it. He had hoped that when they were back in camp, the silence would be broken and something would be said. But it had not happened. The fire and the two others had been an eternity for Robert to endure, and when the silence had finally been broken, the words had only made it worse.

He opened his eyes. It was dark and he could not see the light of the fire through the hut wall. He had been asleep. He did not know how long. The fire was out so it must be well along toward morning. He lay awake for a while, looking at the darkness. Once, he felt beneath his bunk and touched the axe. It made him feel good to touch it, but it immediately brought everything back and the good feeling disappeared. After a while, he stopped thinking about anything and went back to sleep.

He was wakened by someone entering the hut. Hollis, one of the geologists who had drawn guard duty that night, was turning in from his shift. He lay down in his bunk.

"Hollis?" Robert whispered.
"Yes. Bloody cold out there. In here too, matter of fact."
"Hollis—"
"Yes, Leader?"
"Nothing."

"I spoke with your brethren in arms just before, old man. Heard you had an interesting afternoon. Oh, well, better a soldier than a geologist. Nothing to do coming. Nothing to do while you’re here. Nothing to do going. Active life, I must say. Good night, Leader."

"Did they tell you what happened?"

"When? Oh, this afternoon. Yes. Typical. Dekker is more than a little crazy, you know. I shouldn’t worry about it. Never appear
in the records, I shouldn’t think.”
“How can he talk to him?” Robert said.
“How can who talk to whom?”
“Harry, I mean. How can he even look at Dekker after what happened?”
“Oh, you mean the arm. It was an accident, or so they told me. They’re old friends, those two, you know. Quite nice chaps, too. A bit on the wild side, but quite nice.”
“I don’t understand,” Robert said. “If it was me, I’d hate him.”
“Really?”
“Yes. I think I might even want to kill him, or something, I swear it.”
“Then I imagine Dekker should be quite thankful it wasn’t you,” Hollis said broadly. Hollis smiled then, but Robert did not see the smile.

Robert was quiet for a moment. “Yes,” he said softly. “I hate him anyway. I hate them both.”
“I’d try getting a bit of sleep, Robert.” Hollis had lost interest in Robert’s conversation, and his hates.
“Dekker shot the aliens up, Hollis. Did they tell you that?”
“Something of the like was mentioned. They’ve had a bit to drink out there, you know. Not too coherent conversationalists right now. What about it?”
“You don’t think they’ll come after us?”
“The aliens? My word, no, Leader,” Hollis said.
“They’ll come.”
“I shouldn’t spend my time worrying over it, believe me.”
“They’ll come.”
Hollis turned away. “Very well, old man. If they come, they come. Have it your way, then. But don’t worry aloud, please. I’m quite a light sleeper.”
“They’ll come. I know they’ll come,” Robert said.
Hollis turned back then. “By the way, Leader, I hear you got yourself something of a smashing hatchet this afternoon. I should like to see it tomorrow, if you don’t mind. Weapons are something of a side interest, you know.”
“It isn’t a weapon,” Robert said. Hollis chuckled. “Perhaps. But one can always speak of it as having been a weapon. That is, to someone who’d never been to Lodan, of course.”
“Their trophies,” Hollis said lightly. “Why are the men who fear life most the ones who must have trophies?” He was quiet then, and he heard Robert’s breathing. “Robert,” he said, “life is a very fine thing. The only thing we don’t really get enough of is time, you know. There’s never enough time to do all the living we want. Isn’t it an awful waste to take even a small part of that time to be afraid of dying? We’re here, man. What the hell. That’s the way it is. You understand?”
“Yes,” Robert said.  
“Well, then, good night.”  
“But what if they do come?”  
“Oh, blast it all. Go to sleep.”  

Robert lay back. It would be two hours until his turn at the watch. He closed his eyes, but did not sleep.

Another hour passed before he heard the first shot.

It all happened before he knew what it was about. At first he heard the one shot, alone like a sharp crack, and his eyes opened and he saw nothing. Then he heard Hollis.

“That, I should imagine, will be your trouble,” Hollis said, and he was gone. Robert did not get up. Then the sounds made him get up off his cot and crouch on the ground, his hands covering his eyes tightly.

Outside, the men heard the shot, and they were out of the other hut. They heard the sound of two men running down the hill to the camp. They heard Dekker Barents’ voice, and they knew it was he and Harry.

“I think they’re gone,” Dekker shouted.

“No,” Harry said, and then there were many sounds, cracking-like shots and the roars of blasters and the sounds of flame pistols. The sounds came close upon each other in small flames of bluish light that stayed in flashes before their eyes. It was over in less than a minute. All that remained was a smell of burning, and the quiet.

“I’ve got one of them,” Dekker shouted. “Get some light.”

Someone ran to the hut and switched on a revolving beam. The beam was brought to rest on one spot and Dekker pushed the Lodan native ahead of him into the light. Dekker held a blaster against his back.

The Lodan was dressed in a long black cape, touching the ground. His height was less than that of an Earthman, and his build broader. Except for that, as on all the worlds men had visited, he was humanoid. He wore a very highly polished headgear with a metal chin strap that clasped to the neckline of the black cape. Beneath the cape he wore loose fitting garments, also black. A blouse and long trousers with cloth boots actually an extension of the trousers. His clothes were ragged, showed signs of age and great wear.

“What do you say, Barents?” Captain Stone said. “He looks decidedly military to me.”

“That’s no soldier,” Dekker said.  
“How would you know?”

“No spit and polish, Captain. I’ve seen military men on a thousand planets. No, sir, this one hasn’t soldiered a day in his entire life.”

“And the helmet?”

“I’ve seen stranger things. Maybe it reflects the heat away. I
wouldn't know. It shouldn't be too difficult to figure, though. I'll tell you one thing, it doesn't look to be of native manufacture. I'd say it came from elsewhere."

"Where?"

Dekker looked at the Captain. "The speculations, my dear Captain, are limitless. I should think it more profitable right now if we tried to communicate with this wretch."

"Yes," Stone said. "But that will require the flagship. They've the equipment. I'll have to report all this, of course. He looks friendly enough. Terrified out of his soul, I guess. Their courage, I should say, is a little inhuman."

"Perhaps pre-human," Dekker said.

"Well, at any rate, I'm glad this is over. Your Subaltern, Leader, has a pretty good nose, hasn't he? He called it, Barents, didn't he?"

"Yes, he called it."

Harry motioned to the Lodan to sit down. He understood and squatted on the ground, not using his hands, not arranging his clothing.

Harry rested his blaster in his bad arm and took a cigarette from a packet in his blouse. He lit it and inhaled deeply.

"Look at this," Barents said. He held a weapon in his hand. "It looks like an ancient musket. What a thing to fight with."

Barents also lit a cigarette. He looked down at the Lodan who was watching him. "I think they know the use of tobacco," he said. "Or something like it." He shook a cigarette loose in the packet and offered it to the Lodan. The Lodan looked at the packet, then up at Barents' face, but did not move.

"Go ahead," Barents said, motioning with the packet. The Lodan turned away.

Barents was quiet then, looking at the Lodan. Harry looked from the Lodan to Barents. He took a cigarette from Barents' packet and offered it silently to the seated figure. The Lodan looked from Harry to Barents, then back at Harry again. His face relaxed for a moment, and Dekker Barents laughed.

"How do you like that," Dekker said. "He's making you out the hero. I'll be damned, Harry. He's made you the bloody hero." He laughed aloud again.

The Lodan's hand came up for the cigarette, and Harry smiled, and the Lodan felt a sudden heat explode in his back and he was slammed forward on his face. The sound of the blaster at close range was followed by another shot, and the Lodan's body jerked on the ground. Then it lay still, face down.

The Lodan had known the use of tobacco, a form of which the men of his people used for smoking. They would roll an entire leaf and smoke it that way. He had been too concerned by the blasters
and what he had seen them do that day to want to smoke. But the man with the bandaged arm had offered it in true meaning. Also, he remembered the big, dark man who had burned the hut. He reached for the cigarette, and Harry smiled, and Dekker had laughed aloud again, and Robert Leader had crouched on his knees in the hut and heard all that went before, and looked down at the axe, and was suddenly overcome by the feeling which now became full-fledged hatred. Hatred of Dekker Barents, and of Harry and of everything they were, and he wasn't. And hatred of Lodan, of the being here which prevented the axe from having the meaning he wanted it to have, of making himself what he knew he could make himself believe he was once he got back on Earth.

And then he came out of the hut and brought his blaster out with him and shot the Lodan sitting in the beam of light with two quick direct blasts. He did not even remember releasing the shell of the first round for the second. The Lodan had been hit half way down the right side of his back. The second shot got him in the right buttock.

He lay still now, his face in the ground, and Robert Leader walked slowly toward the light. Captain Stone rushed past Leader, and when he saw what was in the light, looked back at Robert. Stone turned to Dekker. Then, he knelted by the body for a moment, and he stood and looked at Dekker silently.

Captain Stone walked away from the light, not looking at Robert Leader, or any of the men who were there now. Robert Leader came into the light and looked down at the body.

“That’s a beautiful thing you’ve done, Leader,” Dekker Barents said. “Really very pretty.”

Robert was going to speak, but instead sat on the ground, dropped the blaster, and covered his face with his hands.

“Don’t worry, Leader. Stone is telling the flagship he was killed in the fighting, so it’s actually as if you’d done it then. Good for your record.”

Robert Leader began to cry.

“Don’t worry about it,” Dekker Barents said.

“Shut up, won’t you?” Robert said.

“You’re really quite a marksman,” Dekker said. “Amazing. You had no concern about hitting any of us, and we so close to the savage too. Isn’t it a bit of marksman-ship, Harry?”

“That’s enough, Dekker,” Harry Jackson said.

“What have you got against me, Harry?”

“Nothing,” Harry said. “I’ve got nothing against you.”

Then Dekker did not say anything.