

FICTION

Jim Harmon

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A PUBLIC DOMAIN BOOK

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BREAK A LEG

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*The man worth while couldn't be allowed
to smile ... if he ever laughed at himself,
the entire ship and crew were as good as dead!*

If there is anything I am afraid of, and there probably is, it is having a rookie Accident Prone, half-starved from the unemployment lines, aboard my spaceship. They are always so anxious to please. They remember what it is like to live in a rathole behind an apartment house furnace eating day-old bread and wilted vegetables, which doesn't compare favorably to the Admiralty-style staterooms and steak and caviar they draw down in the Exploration Service.

You may wonder why anybody should make things so pleasant for a grownup who can't walk a city block without tripping over his own feet and who has a very low life expectancy on Earth due to the automobiles they are constantly stepping in front of and the live wires they are fond of picking up so the street won't be littered.

The Admiralty, however, is a very thorough group of men. Before they open a planet to colonization or even fraternization, they insist on knowing just what they are up against.

Accident Prones can find out what is wrong with a planet as easily as falling off a log, which they will if there is one lonely tree on the whole world. A single pit of quicksand on a veritable Eden of a planet and a Prone will be knee-deep in it within an hour of blastdown. If an alien race will smile patronizingly on your heroic attempts at genocide, but be offended into a murderous religious frenzy if you blow your nose, you can take the long end of the odds that the Prone will almost immediately catch a cold.

All of this is properly recorded for the next expedition in the Admiralty files, and if it's any consolation, high officials and screen stars often visit you in the hospital.

Charlie Baxter was like all of the other Prones, only worse. Moran III was sort of an unofficial test for him and he wanted to make good. We had blasted down in the black of night and were waiting for daylight to begin our re-survey of the planet. It was Charlie's first assignment, so we had an easy one--just seeing if anything new had developed in the last fifty years.

Baxter's guard was doubled as soon as we set down, of course, and that made him fidgety. He had heard all the stories about how high the casualty rate was with Prones aboard spaceships and now he was beginning to get nervous.

Actually Charlie was safer in space than he would be back on Earth with all those cars and people. We could have told him how the Service practically never lost a Prone--they were too valuable and rare to lose--but we did not want him to stop worrying. The precautions we took to safeguard him, the armed men who went with him everywhere, the Accident Prone First Aid Kit with spare parts for him, blood, eyes, bone, nerves, arms, legs, and so forth, only emphasized to him the danger, not the rigidly secured safety.

We like it that way.

No one knows what causes an accident prone. The big insurance companies on Earth discovered them when they found out in the last part of the nineteenth century that ninety per cent of the accidents were happening to a few per cent of the people. They soon found out that these people were not malingering or trying to defraud anybody; they simply had accidents.

I suppose everything from psychology to extra-sensory perception has been used to explain or explain away prones. I have my own ideas. I think an accident prone is simply a super-genius with a super-doubt of himself.

I believe accident prones have a better system of calculation than a cybernetic machine. They can take *everything* into consideration--the humidity, their blood sugar, the expression on the other guy's face--and somewhere in the corners and attic of their brain they *infallibly* make the *right* choice in any given situation. Then, because they are incapable of trusting themselves, they do exactly the opposite.

I felt a little sorry for Charlie Baxter, but I was Captain of the *Hilliard* and my job was to keep him worried and trying. The worst thing that can happen is for a Prone to give up and let himself sink into the fate of being a Prone. He will

wear the rut right down into a tomb.

Accident Prone have to stay worried and thinking, trying to break out of the jinx that traps them. Usually they come to discover this themselves, but by then, if they are real professionals with a career in the Service, they have framed the right attitude and they keep it.

Baxter was a novice and very much of an amateur at the game. He didn't like the scoring system, but he was attached to the equipment and didn't want to lose it.

His clumsiness back on Earth had cost him every decent job he ever had. He had come all the way down the line until he was rated eligible only for the position of Prone aboard a spaceship. He had been poor--hungry, cold, wet, poor--and now he had luxury of a kind almost no one had in our era. He was drunk with it, passionately in love with it. It would cease to be quite so important after a few years of regular food, clean clothes and a solid roof to keep out the rain. But right now I knew he would come precariously close to killing to keep it. Or to being killed.

He was ready to work.

I knocked politely on his hatch and straightened my tunic. I have always admired the men who can look starched in a uniform. Mine always seemed to wrinkle as soon as I put them around my raw-boned frame. Sometimes it is hard for me to keep a military appearance or manner. I got my commission during the Crisis ten years back, because of my work in the reserve unit that I created out of my employees in the glass works (glassware blown to order for laboratories).

Someone said something through the door and I went inside.

Bronoski looked at me over the top of his picture tape from where he lay on the sofa. No one else was in the compartment.

"Where is Baxter?" I asked the hulking guard. My eyes were on the sofa. My own bed pulled out of the wall and was considerably inferior to this, much less Baxter's bed in the next cabin. But then I am only a captain.

Bronoski swung his feet off the couch and stood more or less in what I might have taken for attention if I hadn't known him better. "Sidney and Elliot escorted him down to the men's room, Captain Jackson."

"You mean," I said very quietly, "that he isn't in his own bath?"

"No sir," Bronoski said wearily. "He told us it was out of order."

I stifled the gurgle of rage that came into my throat and motioned Bronoski to follow me. The engines on the *Hilliard* were more likely to be out of order than the plumbing in the Accident Prone's suite. No effort was spared to insure comfort for the key man in the whole crew.

One glance inside the compartment at the end of the corridor satisfied me. There wasn't a thing wrong with the plumbing, so Baxter must have had something in mind.

On a hunch of my own, I checked the supply lockers next to the airlock while Bronoski fired questions at my back. Three translator collars were missing. Baxter had left the spaceship and gone off into an alien night.

Elliot and Sidney, the guards, were absolutely prohibited from interfering in any way with a Prone's decisions. They merely had to follow him and give their lives to save his, if necessary.

I grabbed up a translator collar and tossed one to Bronoski. Then, just as we were getting into the airlock, I remembered something and ran back to the bridge.

The thick brown envelope I had left on my desk was gone. I had shown it to Baxter and informed him that he should study it when he felt so inclined. He had seemed bored with the idea then, but he had come back for the report before leaving the ship. The envelope contained the exploration survey on Moran III made some fifty years before.

I unlocked a desk drawer with my thumb print and drew out a duplicate of the report. I didn't have too much confidence in it and I hoped Charlie Baxter had less. Lots of things can change on a planet in fifty years, including its inhabitants.

Bronoski picked up Baxter's tracks and those of the two guards, Elliot and Sidney, with ultra-violet light. They were cold splotches of green fire against the rotting black peat of the jungle path. The whole dark, tangled mess smelled of sour mash, an intoxicating bourbon-type aroma.

I jogged along following the big man more by instinct than anything else, ruining my eyes in an effort to refresh my memory as to the contents of the survey report in the cheery little glow from my cigarette lighter.

The lighter was beginning to feel hot to my fingers and I started to worry about radiation leak, although they are supposed to be guaranteed perfectly shielded. I read that before the last exploration party had left, they had made the Moranite natives blood brothers. Then Bronoski knocked me down.

Actually he put his hands in the small of my back and shoved politely but firmly. Just the same, I went face down into the moist dirt fast enough.

I raised my head cautiously to see if Bronoski would shove it back down. He didn't.

I could see through the stringy, alcoholic grass fairly well and there were Baxter, Elliot and Sidney in the middle of a curious mob of aliens.



Charlie Baxter had got pretty thin on his starvation diet back on Earth. He had grown a slight pot belly on the good food he drew down as Prone, but he was a fairly nice-looking young fellow. He looked even better in the pale moonlight, mixed amber and chartreuse from the twin satellites, and in contrast to the rest of the group.

Elliot Charterson and Sidney Von Elderman were more or less type-cast as brawny, brainless bodyguards. Their friends described them as muscle-bound apes, but other people sometimes got insulting.

The natives were less formidable. They made the slight lump of fat Charlie had at his waist look positively indecent.

The natives were *skinny*. How skinny? Well, the only curves they had in their bodies were their bulging eyeballs. But just because they were thin didn't mean they were pushovers. Whips and garrotes aren't fat and these looked just as dangerous.

Whenever I see aliens who are so humanoid, I remember all that Sunday supplement stuff about the Galaxy being colonized sometime by one humanlike race and the Ten Lost Tribes and so forth.

They didn't give me much time to think about it just then. The natives looked unhappy--belligerently unhappy.

I began to shake and at the same time to assure myself that I didn't have anything to worry about, that the precious Accident Prone would come out of it alive. After all, Elliot and Sidney were there to protect him. They had machine

guns, flame-throwers, atomic grenades, and some really potent weapons. They could handle the situation. I didn't have a thing to worry about.

So why couldn't I stop shaking?

Maybe it was the way the natives were slowly but deliberately forming a circle about Charlie and his bodyguards.

The clothing of the Moranites hadn't changed much, I noticed. That was understandable. They had a non-mechanical civilization with scattered colonies that it would take a terrestrial season to tour by animal cart.

An isolated culture like that couldn't change many of its customs. Then Charlie shouldn't have any trouble if he stuck to the findings on behavior in the report. Naturally, that meant by now he had discovered the fatal error.

The three men were just standing still, waiting for the aliens to make the first move. The natives looked just as worried as Charlie and his guards, but then that might have been their natural expression.

I jumped a little when the natives all began to talk at once. The mixture of sound was fed to me through my translator collar while the cybernetic unit back on board the spaceship tried decoding the words. It was too much of an overload and, infuriatingly, the sound was cut out altogether. I started to rip my collar off when the natives stopped screeching and a spokesman stepped forward.

The native slumped a little more than the others, as if he were more relaxed, and his eyes didn't goggle so much. He said, "We do not understand," and the translation came through fine.

Baxter swallowed and started forward to meet the alien halfway. His boot slipped on the wet scrub grass and I saw him do the desperate little dance to regain his balance that I had seen him make so many times; he could never stay on his feet.

Before he could perform his usual pratfall, Sidney and Elliot were at his sides, supporting him by his thin biceps. He glared at them and shrugged them off, informing them wordlessly that he would have regained his balance if they had given him half a chance.

"We do not understand," the native repeated. "Do you hold us in so much contempt as to claim *all* of us as your brothers?"

"All beings are brothers," Charlie said. "We were made blood brothers by your people and my people several hundred of your years ago."

Charlie's words were being translated into the native language, of course, but Bronoski's collars and mine switched them back into Terrestrial. I've read stories where explorers wearing translators couldn't understand each other, but that isn't the way it works. If you listen closely, you make out the words in your own language underneath, and if you pay very close attention, you can find minor semantic differences in the original words and the echo translated back from a native language.

I was trying to catch both versions from Charlie. I knew he was making a mistake and later I wanted to be sure I knew just what it was. Frankly, I would have used the blood-brother gambit myself. I had also read about it in the survey report, as I made a point of telling you. This just proves that Accident Prone haven't secured the franchise on mistakes. The difference is that I would have gone about it a lot more cautiously.

"Enough of this," the native said sharply. "Do you claim to be *my* brother?"

"Sure," Charlie said.

Dispassionately but automatically, the alien launched himself at the Prone's throat.

Charterson and Von Elderman instantly went into action. Elliot Charterson jumped to Charlie's assistance while Sidney Von Elderman swung around to protect Charlie from the rest of the crowd.

But the defense didn't work.

The other aliens didn't try to get to Baxter, but when they saw Elliot start to interfere with the two writhing opponents, they clawed him down into the grass. Sidney had been set to defend the Prone, not his fellow guard. They might have been all right if he had pulled a few off Elliot and let him get to work, except his training told him that the life of a guard did not matter a twit, but that a Prone must be defended. He started toward Charlie Baxter and was immediately pulled

down by a spare dozen of the mob.

It all meant one thing to me. The reaction of the crowd had been spontaneous, not planned. That meant that the struggle between Charlie and the spokesman was a high order of single combat with which it was unholy, indecent and dastardly to interfere.

I could fairly hear Bronoski's steel muscles preparing for battle as he saw his two mammoth pals go down under the press of numbers. A bristle-covered bullet of skull rose out of the grass beside me and it was my turn to grind his face in the muck.

I had a nice little problem to contend with.

I knew the reason Baxter had slipped out at night to be the first to greet the aliens. He was determined to be useful and necessary without fouling things up. I suppose Charlie had never felt valuable to anyone before in his life, but at the same time it hurt him to think that he was valuable only because he was a misfit.

He had decided to take a positive approach. If he did things right, that would be as good proof of conditions as if he made the mistakes he was supposed to do. But he couldn't lick that doubt of himself that had been ground into him since birth and there he was, in trouble as always.

Now maybe Bronoski and I could get him out ourselves by a direct approach, but Charlie would probably lose all self-confidence and sink down into accepting himself as an Accident Prone, a purely passive state.

We couldn't have that. We had to have Charlie acting and thinking and therefore making mistakes whose bad examples we could profit by.

As I lay on my belly thinking, Charlie was putting up a pretty good fight with the stringy native. He got in a few good punches, which seemed to mystify the native, who apparently knew nothing of boxing. Naturally Charlie then began wrestling a trained and deadly wrestler instead of continuing to box him.

I grabbed Bronoski by his puffy ear and hissed some commands into it. He fumbled out a book of matches and lit one for me. By the tiny flicker of light, I began tearing apart my lighter.

I suppose you have played "tickling the dragon's tail" when you were a kid. I did. I guess all kids have. You know, worrying around two lumps of fissionable material and just keeping them from uniting and making a critical mass that will result in an explosion or lethal radiation. I caught my oldest boy doing it one day back on Earth and gave him a good tanning for it. Actually I thought it showed he had a lot of grit. Every real boy likes to tickle the dragon's tail.

Maybe I was a little old for it, but that's what I was doing there in the Moran III jungle.

I got the shield off my cigarette lighter and jerked out the dinky little damper rods for the pile and started easing the two little bricks toward each other with the point of my lead pencil.

I heard something that resembled a death rattle come from Charlie's throat as the fingers of the alien closed down on it and my hand twitched. A blooming light stabbed at my eyes and I flicked the lighter away from me.

The explosion was a dud.

It lit up the jungle for a radius of half a mile like a giant flashbulb, but it exploded only about ten times as loud as a pistol shot. The mass hadn't been slapped together hard enough or held long enough to do any real damage.

The natives weren't fools, though. They got out of there fast. I wished I could have gone with them. There was undoubtedly an unhealthy amount of radiation hanging around.

"Now!" I told Bronoski.

He ran into the clearing and found four bodies sprawled out: Charlie Baxter, his two guards and the native spokesman.

Charlie and the native were both technically unconscious, but they each had a stranglehold on each other, with Charlie getting the worst of it.

Bronoski pried the two of them apart.

While he roused Sidney and Elliot from their punch-drunk state, I examined Charlie. He had a nasty burn on his leg and two toes were gone. If there was an explosion anywhere around, he was bound to be in front of it.

He was abruptly choking and blinking watery eyes.

"You did it, Charlie," I lied. "You beat him fair and square."

Charlie was in bed for the next few days while his grafted toes grew on, but he didn't seem to mind.

We knew enough not to use the blood-brothers approach after fifty years and therefore it did not take us long to find out why we shouldn't.

The Moran III culture was isolated in small colonies, but we had forgotten that a generation of the intelligent life-forms was only three Earth months. It seems a waste at first thought, but all things are relative. The Crystopeds of New Lichtenstein, for instance, have a life span of twenty thousand Terrestrial years.

With so fast a turnover in Moran III individuals, there was bound to be a lot of variables introduced, resulting in change.

The idea that seemed to be in favor was the survival of the fittest. Since the natives were born in litters, with single births extremely rare, this concept was practiced from the first. Unless they were particularly cunning, the runts of the litter did not survive the first year and rarely more than one sibling ever saw adulthood.

Obviously, to claim to be a native's brother was to challenge him to a test of survival.

My men learned to call themselves Last Brother in the usual bragging preliminaries that preceded every encounter. We got pretty good results with that approach and learned a lot about the changes in customs in the half century. But finally one of the men--either Frank Peirmonte or Sidney Charterson, who both claim to be the one--thought of calling the crew a Family and right away we began hitting it off famously.

The Moranites figured we would kill each other off all except maybe one, whom they could handle themselves. They still had folk legends about the previous visit of Earthmen and they didn't trust us.

Charlie Baxter's original mistake had supplied us with the Rosetta Stone we needed.

Doctor Selby told me Charlie could get up finally, so I went to his suite and shook hands with him as he still lay in bed.

I waited for the big moment when Charlie would be on his feet again and we could get on with the re-survey of the planet.

"Here goes," Charlie said and threw back his sheet.

He swung his legs around and tottered to his feet. He was a little weak, but he took a few steps and seemed to make it okay.

Then the inevitable happened. He snagged the edge of one of the Persian carpets on the bedroom floor with his big toe and started to fall.

Selby and I both dived forward to catch him, but instead of doing the arm-waving dance for balance that we were both used to, he seemed to go limp and he plopped on the floor like a wet fish.

Immediately he jumped to his feet, grinning. "I finally learned to go limp when I take a fall, sir. It took a lot of practice. I imagine I'll save some broken bones that way."

"Yes," I said uneasily. "You have been thinking about this quite a lot while you lay there, haven't you, Baxter?"

"Yes, sir. I see I've been fighting this thing too hard. I am an Accident Prone and I might as well accept it. Why not? I seem to always muddle through some way, like out there in the jungle, so why should I worry or feel *embarrassed*? I know I can't change it."

I was beginning to do some worrying of my own. Things weren't working out the way they should. We were supposed to see that Prones kept developing a certain amount of doomed self-confidence, but they couldn't be allowed to believe they were infallible Prones. A Prone's value lies in his active and constructive effort to do the right thing. If he merely accepts being a Prone, his accidents gain us nothing. We can't profit from mistakes that come about from resignation or laughing off blunders or, as in this case, conviction that he never got himself into anything he couldn't get himself out of.

"Doctor Selby, would you excuse us?" I asked.

The medic left with a bow and a surly expression. I turned to Baxter, rather wishing Selby could have stayed. It was a labor dispute and I was used to having a mediator present at bargaining sessions at my glassworks. But this was a military, not a civilian, spaceship.

"I have some facts of life to give you, Baxter," I told him. "It is your duty to *actively* fulfill your position. You have to make decisions and plan courses of action. Do you figure on just walking around in that jungle until a tree falls on you?"

He sat down on the edge of the bed and examined the pattern in the carpet. "Not exactly, sir. But I get tired of people waiting for me to make a fool out of myself. I have a natural talent for--for *Creative Negativism*. That's it. And I should be able to exercise my talent with *dignity*."

"If you don't actively fulfill the obligations of a Prone, you aren't allowed the luxuries and privileges that go with the position. Do you think you would like to be without your armed guards to protect you every moment?"

"I can take care of myself, sir!"

I paused and came up with my best argument. "How would you like to live like an ordinary spaceman, without rare steaks and clean sheets? Because if you're not our Accident Prone, you're just another crew member, you know."

That one hurt him, but I saw I had put it to him as a challenge and he must have had some guilt feelings about accepting all that luxury for being nothing more than he was. "I could fulfill the duties of an ordinary spaceman, sir."

I snorted. "It takes skill and training, Baxter. Your papers entitle you to one position and one only anywhere--Accident Prone of a spaceship complement. If you refuse to do your duties in that post, you can only become a ward of the Galaxy."

His jaw line firmed. He had gone through a lot to keep from taking such abject charity. "Isn't there," he asked in a milder tone, "*any* other position I could serve in on this ship, sir?"

I studied his face a moment. "We had to blast off without an Assistant Pile Driver, j.g. It keeps getting harder and harder to recruit an APD, j.g. I suppose it's those reports about the eventual fatalities due to radiation leak back there where they are stationed."

Baxter looked back at me steadily. "There are a lot of rumors about the high mortality rate among Accident Prones in space, too."

He was right. We had started the rumors. We wanted the Prones alert, active and scheming to stay alive. More beneficial accidents that way. Actually, most Prones died of old age in space, which is more than could be said of them on Earth, where they didn't have the kind of protection the Service gives them.

"Look here, Baxter, do you like your quarters on this ship?" I demanded.

"You mean this master bedroom, the private heated swimming pool, the tennis court, bowling alley and all? Yes, sir, I like it."

"The Assistant Pile Driver has a cot near the fuel tanks."

He gazed off over my left shoulder. "I had a bed behind the furnace back on Earth before the building I was working in burned down."

"You wouldn't like this one any better than the one before."

"But there I would have some chance of *advancement*. I don't want to be stuck in the rank of Accident Prone for life."

I stared at him in frank amazement. "Baxter, the only rank getting higher pay or more privileges than Prone is Grand Admiral of the Services, a position it would take you at least fifty years to reach if you had the luck and brains to make it, which you haven't."

"I had something more modest in mind, sir. Like being a captain."

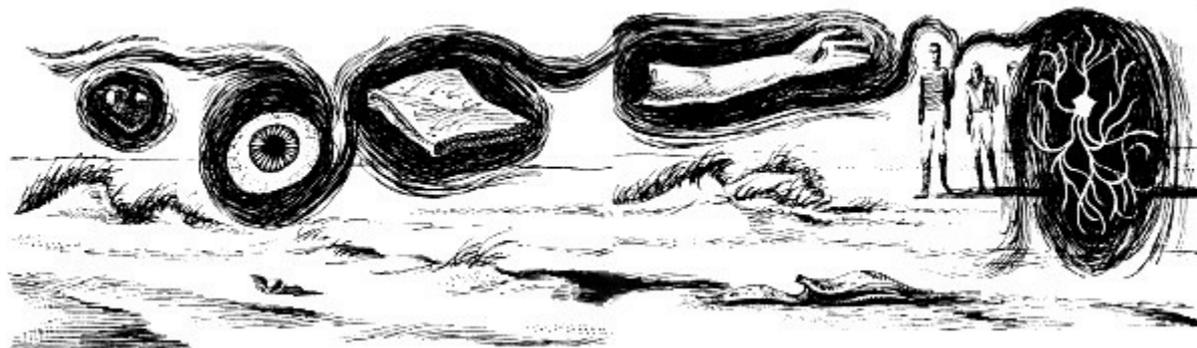
He surely must have known how I lived in comparison to him, so I didn't bother to remind him. I said, "Have you ever seen a case of radiation poisoning?"

Baxter's jaw thrust forward. "It must be pretty bad--but it isn't as violent as being eaten by floating fungi or being swallowed in an earthquake on some airless satellite."

"No," I agreed, "it is much slower than any of those. It is unfortunate that we don't carry the necessary supplies to take care of Pile Drivers. Most of our medical supplies are in the Accident Prone First Aid Kit, for the exclusive use of the Prone. Have you ever taken a good look at that?"

Baxter shivered. "Yes, I've seen it. Several drums of blood, Type AB, my type. A half-dozen fresh-frozen assorted arms and legs, several rows of eyes, a hundred square feet of graftable skin, and a well-stocked tank of inner organs and a

double-doored bank of nerve lengths. Impressive."



I smiled. "Sort of gives you a feeling of confidence and security, doesn't it? It would be unfortunate for anyone who had a great many accidents to be denied the supplies in that Kit, I should think. Of course, it is available only to those filling the position of Accident Prone and doing the work faithfully and according to orders."

"Yes, sir," Charlie mumbled.

"Selby is your personal physician, you realize," I drove on. "He takes care of the rest of us only if he has time left over from you. Why, when I was having my two weeks in the summer as an Ensign, I had to lie for half an hour with a crushed foot while the doctor sprayed our Prone's throat to guard against infection. Let me tell you, I was in quite a bit of pain."

Charlie's pale eyes narrowed as if he had just made a sudden discovery, perhaps about the relationship between us. "You don't make as much money as I do, do you, sir? You don't have a valet? And your bed folds into the bulkhead?"

I thought he was at last beginning to get it. "Yes," I said.

He stood sharply to attention. "Request transfer to position of Assistant Pile Driver, j.g., sir."

I barely halted a groan. He thought I resented him and was deliberately holding him down into the miserable overpaid, overfed job that was beneath him and the talents that so fitted him for the job.

"Request granted."

He would learn.

He had better.

I started to sweat in a gush. He had *really* better.

I took him into the rear of the ship and showed him where he would sleep. In the oily gloom, he regarded the pad from an old acceleration couch fitted to two scratched and nicked aluminum pipes jury-rigged between two squat tanks containing water for the atomic pile used close to planets where the gravitational field interfered with the star-drive.

"Over here's what you have to keep an eye on, Baxter," I told him.

We walked past the dimly lighted rows of towering fuel lines and cables. Charlie tripped over the hump of a deck-level cable housing. His knee banged against the deck plates and he stood with an effort.

"Careful," I said. "Now that you have limited medical attention, don't break a leg."

Baxter rubbed his leg thoughtfully. "Funny. My grandfather used to be in show business. He told me that telling somebody to break a leg was wishing them good luck."

I cleared my throat. "It would seem in dubious taste, addressed to an accident prone. However, you have my best wishes. You realize that your salary as Prone of 11,000 credits a month and your pay of 23 credits a month as an APD, j.g., are suspended until the Admiralty rules on your case."

"Yes, sir. I realize that, sir."

I stopped him in front of the soiled red box that was the tension gauge. "If the electrical control of the drive somehow becomes broken, the interrupted circuit will show on the gauge. It is then the duty of the APD, j.g., to go through the small airlock and maintain manual control of the pile while at least one of the control circuits is repaired. The job rarely has to be done, but when it is, it is very often fatal."

Baxter only nodded. "I understand."

I doubted that he did.

After leaving Baxter on his first watch, I went to the messhall and waited for him to show up. The men knew what to do when he came.

It was rather pleasant to sit there savoring the odors. At times, they still seem more like those of a chemical laboratory than a kitchen, but I have become so used to associating burning starch products, centrifuged tannic acid, and melting dextrose with food that I am almost immune to the aroma of Prone food like juicy, sizzling steak. Almost.

Charlie Baxter finally came through the hatch. He paused and seemed to shake off what he must have thought was some olfactory hallucination and started to sit down at the table with the rest of the men. He looked rather pleased. He had probably decided being Accident Prone had deprived him of much of the company he had every right to enjoy with his shipmates.

"Get out of here!" Frank Peirmonte yelled, jumping up from the other end of the oblong table.

"Why?" Baxter asked in astonishment.

"Baxter," I put in, "I'm afraid the men think they may catch radiation fever from a pile driver like you."

"Catch radiation fever?" he repeated. "Men have been exposed to atomics for hundreds of years. Surely you men must know any poisoning in one individual can't be transmitted to another like germs. I couldn't absorb enough radiation to be dangerous to you in simple proximity and still be alive. Don't you see that?"

At once, all of my crew at the table covered their faces with their arms.

"Don't look at us!" Bronoski screamed, his voice knifing toward the higher octaves.

Baxter gaped in a daze from one of us to the other. "What do you mean? Why shouldn't I look at you?"

"You've got The Eye! *All* pile drivers get it."

"But I have to eat," he objected. "I'm hungry. Really I am."

I swung around and exchanged a few words with Tan Eck, the cook, at the rear hatch. I took a steaming tray and went across the compartment, averting my face.

"You will have to forgive these superstitious spacemen," I apologized to Baxter. "You go right ahead and eat just outside the door. I won't mind a bit."

"Thanks," Baxter said, accepting the plate. He looked down at the white paste, black gum and cup of yellowish liquid fitted in the proper holes and slots, then up at me. "What is this stuff?"

"You don't have to look right at me!" I snapped. "It is standard spaceman's fare--re-reconstituted carbohydrates, protein and hot ground roasted soya. This is stuff we had left over on our plates from lunch, all set to go into the converter, but Tan Eck reprocessed it for you. It's what regulations specify for an APD, j.g."

Baxter opened his mouth and closed it hard. "Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

He turned smartly to leave and I halted him with a palm up. "Baxter."

He turned. "Yes, sir?"

"We are moving to the other side of the continent to continue with the re-survey. I want to make it clear to you that you are absolutely forbidden to leave the ship. We can't spare the guards for your liabilities, now that you have thrown away your value."

"Yes, sir."

Even at the time, I was gratified by the sudden thoughtful narrowing of his eyes.

I wasn't surprised the next day when Bronoski reported that Charlie Baxter had taken a bacpac--food, soap, blankets and so forth--and left the *Hilliard*. He was determined to prove that he wasn't merely Accident Prone and could get things done on his own.

"Charterson and Von Elderman are following him?" I asked.

Bronoski nodded his bullet-shaped head. "Like a hawk."

"The Bird can follow him like a hawk. I want them to follow him like men."

"They are as good at the job as I am," Bronoski reassured me.

"I think," I said quickly, "that I had better go down to Communications and follow Baxter myself."

The Bird was an electronic device. It looked like a local life-form that was actually a flying mammal. Inside the thing was a sensitive video camera and a self-propulsion unit.

The Bird homed in on Baxter's electroencephalograph waves.

The view on the screen in front of the lounging chairs was clear but monotonous.

Charlie made his way across the landscape, woods on this side of the continent, not jungle, without incident. He did fall down like a wet laundry bag every so often, but that, as you'd figure, amounted to traveling across country without incident. He'd have done the same on a smooth pavement.

I had a cigarette in my mouth, futilely pounding my pockets for the lighter I didn't have, when Charlie met the alien.

There was only one native this time, the same thin form, but more lightly clothed here. I shifted uneasily and hoped the two guards were close. There was only one this time, but it was useless to suppose Charlie could handle him himself.

"Greetings," Charlie said. "I am Big Brother of a new Family."

There was no sound equipment in the Bird, but the translator circuits in the control board read Baxter's lips and produced their sound patterns for us. They would also translate the native's language, but just then he wasn't saying anything.

He walked around the Prone leisurely, as if considering buying him.

Charlie shifted the straps of his pack. He hadn't been convinced of his own abilities enough to take along a gun or any other kind of weapon. He would be almost sure to kill himself with it.

Or would he?

I suddenly wondered if Charlie doubted himself enough to commit outright suicide. He had had plenty of close calls, yet he had always survived. If his goal was self-destruction, he surely would have reached it after this many opportunities.

I watched the screen intently.

Charlie thought he was alone there with a possibly hostile native. All he had to do was make one small slip and he would be dead. Yet, so far, he had followed the pattern we had used at the other colony exactly.

Instantly I realized that it *must* be a mistake to follow the other pattern with this second group of aliens, if Charlie Baxter did it.

At first I couldn't understand why the pattern should be wrong for this group if it was right for the first. They were close enough so that there must have been intercourse between them, and if customs were violently different, there would probably be a state of warfare between them and none was apparent.

I finally realized why warfare would be almost impossible and why the customs of the separated colonies might be extremely at odds.

The colonies were three months apart by fastest transportation, which was longer than a generation of the natives. No one could live long enough to reach a second colony, so each culture developed in isolation along entirely random lines.

I felt like yelling at Charlie. There was literally no way of telling how he might be offending and antagonizing this Moranite by treating him as we had learned to treat the others.

The alien finally spoke. "You are part of a--Family?"

Charlie nodded his head.

So did the native--he bobbed Charlie's head with a rock.

"Close in on 'em fast but gentle," I radioed the guards.

The native dragged Baxter's limp body through a nearby thicket and into a small clearing. Abruptly I saw they were up against the base of the nearest mountain. A bubbling, dancing stream twisted through brown and green rock and disappeared into a ridge of gray slate. It reappeared below the hill, steaming, obviously passing through an underground hot springs.

The alien had Charlie where he wanted him before we could move. He lashed him securely with stringy vine and, with him thrown over his shoulder, ran up the slate, which rumbled down ominously behind them. He tossed Charlie over a wide hole at the top of the ridge. Slate rained down into the hole. If the Prone hadn't snapped awake and made his body rigid, he would have tumbled into the hole at that moment.

"So you wake, Familyman," the native said. "How could you admit to being anything so immoral when you were alone? You surely did not think you could eat me without help from the others of your evil brothers!"

Charlie licked his lips and moved his eyes; that was about all he dared move. "You--don't approve of families?"

The native drew himself up to his full elongated height in the screen. "Like all good People, I was properly abandoned at birth and I proudly say I have never associated with others except for Mating and Trading."

I noticed abstractly that he finished moving his lips long before the translation was finished. He was using a very primitive language. I screwed the button nervously in my ear for Charterson and Von Elderman to report.



The alien looked at the rigid form of Baxter over the pit. "I suppose I should have some pity for you. You began your filthy practice too young to know better. But imagine! Combining with others of your kind to survive--at the expense of decent individuals like myself. Robbing us, eating us. The Finger of Fire will come soon and will destroy you. I have heard Familymen often try to aid one another. Perhaps others of your kind will die with you!"

He was gone long before the translation was finished, leaving Charlie Baxter arched across a pit that widened as the alien's descent disturbed more of the soft shale.

The native was out of sight. I realized his tribe would soon be extinct. The racial mind for the whole species seemed obsessed with survival by natural selection, but his tribe had gone off on the tangent of individualism, which was fine to some extent, but the Service had learned that a race couldn't survive without *some* degree of cooperation and this one's level of mating and trading did not seem sufficient.

"Captain Jackson!" Von Elderman's voice said in my ear. "We can't reach him! If we start up that hill, the soft shale is bound to shift and drop him right into that hole."

"I'll send Bronoski with a personal flyer immediately to make an air pickup," I said numbly.

It wasn't the guards' fault. Charlie hadn't seemed to be in any immediate danger and we don't kill intelligent life-forms without damned good reason--the kind of reason that stands up in court. But he was now stretched over what I was fairly certain was an active geyser--"The Finger of Fire," the native had called it, and had assured Charlie that it would kill him.

I dispatched Bronoski, but that was all I could do. I did not know when the geyser would spout. Maybe Bronoski would make it. Maybe he wouldn't.

I magnified the view from the useless little Bird and studied Charlie's face in the screen. If he lay there doing nothing, waiting for a miracle to happen, he was--I shuddered--cooked. He had to make an active decision.

If he didn't, he was almost sure to die.

But maybe that was what he wanted. Maybe accident prone really want to destroy themselves.

It was his bid.

Slate dropped off the rim of the hole into the pit and Charlie stiffened. More passive acceptance. But maybe I wasn't being fair. There wasn't much Charlie could do. There wasn't much else for him to do except give up.

But I noticed his eyes moving. They went up to the bubbling ribbon of water and down to the steaming stream below the ridge where it emerged. Charlie smiled. He had made a decision.

He folded his knees and dropped into the hole.

He had naturally made the wrong decision. Bronoski in the flying platform swung into position above the pit.

Charlie must have figured that he would be washed on through the hot springs and out into the shallow water below. He would be, but he would be boiled alive.

Only there are mistakes and mistakes, and sometimes mistakes aren't mistakes at all.

The geyser exploded, higher, faster and harder than it ever had before. And Charlie, half-drowned and half-or-more scalded, popped up and landed in the brush twenty feet away.



Bronoski fought for control of his flyer and finally made a fast pickup.

Doc Selby did a pretty good job with the First Aid Kit. Charlie's neck and collarbone were broken and over fifty per cent of his skin had to be replaced. Still, it was lucky Charlie had that concentrated soap in his pack. Ever been to Earth National Park and seen Old Faithful? You know what happened--they use soap to get the geyser spouting when it's off schedule.

We haven't told Charlie that it was anything but an accident that Bronoski was so handy. And we let him tell us about the changed customs of the natives. He resumed his regular position of Accident Prone when he saw realistically that he would inevitably be doing the same work and that he might as well get paid for it.

I often wonder if it was a genuine mistake the way he dropped into the geyser. Certainly he would have died if it hadn't been for the soap concentrates. If he took that into consideration, though, it wasn't a mistake at all, but a wise choice.

A few days ago, when he was leaving my office--that is, the bridge--I saw Charlie slip and start to fall. He didn't give up and go limp. He gave his old dance of struggling to regain his balance. *Only this time he made it!*

I began sweating again.

After all the time, effort and money the Service puts into acquiring and training a Prone, I wonder if it is possible for one to beat his problem and cease to be an Accident Prone or even an accident prone.

This afternoon, I passed Charlie Baxter's swimming pool and saw him poised on his diving board. I waved and rather jauntily extended his grandfather's wish for good luck: "Break a leg."

Charlie grinned back at me. "Yes, sir."

But he didn't.

It would be very reassuring if he would.