

FRANK HERBERT

Missing Operation
Link Haystack

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Two Classic Stories Starring
Lewis Orne

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**Missing Link
&
OPERATION HAYSTACK**

Two Classic Stories by
FRANK HERBERT

PHOENIX PICK

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**Missing
Link**

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The Romantics used to say that the eyes were the windows of the Soul. A good Alien Xenologist might not put it quite so poetically...but he can, if he's sharp, read a lot in the look of an eye!

“WE OUGHT TO SCRAPE this planet clean of every living thing on it,” muttered Umbo Stetson, section chief of Investigation & Adjustment.

Stetson paced the landing control bridge of his scout cruiser. His footsteps grated on a floor that was the rear wall of the bridge during flight. But now the ship rested on its tail fins—all four hundred glistening red and black meters of it. The open ports of the bridge looked out on the jungle roof of Gienah III some one hundred fifty meters below. A butter yellow sun hung above the horizon, perhaps an hour from setting.

“Clean as an egg!” he barked. He paused in his round of the bridge, glared out the starboard port,

spat into the fire-blackened circle that the cruiser's jets had burned from the jungle.

The I-A section chief was dark-haired, gangling, with large head and big features. He stood in his customary slouch, a stance not improved by sack-like patched blue fatigues. Although on this present operation he rated the flag of a division admiral, his fatigues carried no insignia. There was a general unkempt, straggling look about him.

Lewis Orne, junior I-A field man with a maiden diploma, stood at the opposite port, studying the jungle horizon. Now and then he glanced at the bridge control console, the chronometer above it, the big translite map of their position tilted from the opposite bulkhead. A heavy planet native, he felt vaguely uneasy on this Gienah III with its gravity of only seven-eighths Terran Standard. The surgical scars on his neck where the micro-communications equipment had been inserted itched maddeningly. He scratched.

"Hah!" said Stetson. "Politicians!"

A thin black insect with shell-like wings flew in Orne's port, settled in his close-cropped red hair. Orne pulled the insect gently from his hair, released it. Again it tried to land in his hair. He ducked. It flew across the bridge, out the port beside Stetson.

There was a thick-muscled, no-fat look to Orne, but something about his blocky, off-center features suggested a clown.

"I'm getting tired of waiting," he said.

"*You're* tired! Hah!"

A breeze rippled the tops of the green ocean below them. Here and there, red and purple flowers jutted from the verdure, bending and nodding like an attentive audience.

“Just look at that blasted jungle!” barked Stetson. “Them and their stupid orders!”

A call bell tinkled on the bridge control console. The red light above the speaker grid began blinking. Stetson shot an angry glance at it. “Yeah, Hal?”

“O.K., Stet. Orders just came through. We use Plan C. ComGO says to brief the field man, and jet out of here.”

“Did you ask them about using another field man?”

Orne looked up attentively.

The speaker said: “Yes. They said we have to use Orne because of the records on the *Delphinus*.”

“Well then, will they give us more time to brief him?”

“Negative. It’s crash priority. ComGO expects to blast the planet anyway.”

Stetson glared at the grid. “Those fat-headed, lard-bottomed, pig-brained...POLITICIANS!” He took two deep breaths, subsided. “O.K. Tell them we’ll comply.”

“One more thing, Stet.”

“What now?”

“I’ve got a confirmed contact.”

Instantly, Stetson was poised on the balls of his feet, alert. "Where?"

"About ten kilometers out. Section AAB-6."

"How many?"

"A mob. You want I should count them?"

"No. What're they doing?"

"Making a beeline for us. You better get a move on."

"O.K. Keep us posted."

"Right."



Stetson looked across at his junior field man. "Orne, if you decide you want out of this assignment, you just say the word. I'll back you to the hilt."

"Why should I want out of my first field assignment?"

"Listen, and find out." Stetson crossed to a tilt-locker behind the big translite map, hauled out a white coverall uniform with gold insignia, tossed it to Orne. "Get into these while I brief you on the map."

"But this is an R&R uni—" began Orne.

"Get that uniform on your ugly frame!"

"Yes, sir, Admiral Stetson, sir. Right away, sir. But I thought I was through with old Rediscovery & Re-education when you drafted me off of Hamal into the I-A...sir." He began changing from the I-A blue

to the R&R white. Almost as an afterthought, he said: "...Sir."

A wolfish grin cracked Stetson's big features. "I'm soooooo happy you have the proper attitude of subservience toward authority."

Orne zipped up the coverall uniform. "Oh, yes, sir... sir."

"O.K., Orne, pay attention." Stetson gestured at the map with its green superimposed grid squares. "Here we are. Here's that city we flew over on our way down. You'll head for it as soon as we drop you. The place is big enough that if you hold a course roughly northeast you can't miss it. We're—"

Again the call bell rang.

"What is it this time, Hal?" barked Stetson.

"They've changed to Plan H, Stet. New orders cut."

"Five days?"

"That's all they can give us. ComGO says he can't keep the information out of High Commissioner Bullone's hands any longer than that."

"It's five days for sure then."

"Is this the usual R&R foul-up?" asked Orne.

Stetson nodded. "Thanks to Bullone and company! We're just one jump ahead of catastrophe, but they still pump the bushwah into the Rah & Rah boys back at dear old Uni-Galacta!"

"You're making light of my revered alma mater," said Orne. He struck a pose. "We must reunite

the lost planets with our centers of culture and industry, and take up the glorious onward march of mankind that was so brutally—”

“Can it!” snapped Stetson. “We both know we’re going to rediscover one planet too many some day. Rim War all over again. But this is a different breed of fish. It’s not, repeat, *not a re-discovery.*”

Orne sobered. “Alien?”

“Yes. A-L-I-E-N! A never-before-contacted culture. That language you were force fed on the way over, that’s an alien language. It’s not complete...all we have off the *minis*. And we excluded data on the natives because we’ve been hoping to dump this project and nobody the wiser.”

“Holy mazoo!”

“Twenty-six days ago an I-A search ship came through here, had a routine mini-sneaker look at the place. When he combed in his net of sneakers to check the tapes and films, lo and behold, he had a little stranger.”

“One of *theirs*?”

“No. It was a *mini* off the *Delphinus Rediscovery*. The *Delphinus* has been unreported for eighteen standard months!”

“Did it crack up here?”

“We don’t know. If it did, we haven’t been able to spot it. She was supposed to be way off in the Balandine System by now. But we’ve something else on our minds. It’s the one item that makes me want

to blot out this place, and run home with my tail between my legs. We've a—"

Again the call bell chimed.

"NOW WHAT?" roared Stetson into the speaker.

"I've got a *mini* over that mob, Stet. They're talking about us. It's a definite raiding party."

"What armament?"

"Too gloomy in that jungle to be sure. The infra beam's out on this *mini*. Looks like hard pellet rifles of some kind. Might even be off the *Delphinus*."

"Can't you get closer?"

"Wouldn't do any good. No light down there, and they're moving up fast."

"Keep an eye on them, but don't ignore the other sectors," said Stetson.

"You think I was born yesterday?" barked the voice from the grid. The contact broke off with an angry sound.



"One thing I like about the I-A," said Stetson. "It collects such even-tempered types." He looked at the white uniform on Orne, wiped a hand across his mouth as though he'd tasted something dirty.

"Why *am* I wearing this thing?" asked Orne.

"Disguise."

"But there's no mustache!"

Stetson smiled without humor. “That’s one of I-A’s answers to those fat-keistered politicians. We’re setting up our own search system to find the planets before *they* do. We’ve managed to put spies in key places at R&R. Any touchy planets our spies report, we divert the files.”

“Then what?”

“Then we look into them with bright boys like you—disguised as R&R field men.”

“Goody, goody. And what happens if R&R stumbles onto me while I’m down there playing patty cake?”

“We disown you.”

“But you said an I-A ship found this joint.”

“It did. And then one of our spies in R&R intercepted a *routine* request for an agent-instructor to be assigned here with full equipment. Request signed by a First-Contact officer name of Diston...of the *Delphinus!*”

“But the Del—”

“Yeah. Missing. The request was a forgery. Now you see why I’m mostly for rubbing out this place. Who’d dare forge such a thing unless he knew for sure that the original FC officer was missing...or dead?”

“What the jumped up mazoo are we doing here, Stet?” asked Orne. “Alien calls for a full contact team with all of the—”

“It calls for one planet-buster bomb...buster—in five days. Unless you give them a white bill in the meantime. High Commissioner Bullone will have

word of this planet by then. If Gienah III still exists in five days, can't you imagine the fun the politicians'll have with it? Mama mia! We want this planet cleared for contact or dead before then."

"I don't like this, Stet."

"YOU don't like it!"

"Look," said Orne. "There must be another way. Why...when we teamed up with the Alerinoids we gained five hundred years in the physical sciences alone, not to mention the—"

"The Alerinoids didn't knock over one of our survey ships first."

"What if the *Delphinus* just crashed here...and the locals picked up the pieces?"

"That's what you're going in to find out, Orne. But answer me this: If they *do* have the *Delphinus*, how long before a tool-using race could be a threat to the galaxy?"

"I saw that city they built, Stet. They could be dug in within six months, and there'd be no—"

"Yeah."

Orne shook his head. "But think of it: Two civilizations that matured along different lines! Think of all the different ways we'd approach the same problems...the lever that'd give us for—"

"You sound like a Uni-Galacta lecture! Are you through marching arm in arm into the misty future?"

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Orne took a deep breath. “Why’s a freshman like me being tossed into this dish?”

“You’d still be on the *Delphinus* master lists as an R&R field man. That’s important if you’re masquerading.”

“Am I the only one? I know I’m a recent *convert*, but—”

“You want out?”

“I didn’t say that. I just want to know why I’m—”

“Because the bigdomes fed a set of requirements into one of their iron monsters. Your card popped out. They were looking for somebody capable, dependable...and...*expendable!*”

“Hey!”

“That’s why I’m down here briefing you instead of sitting back on a flagship. *I* got you into the I-A. Now, you listen carefully: If you push the panic button on this one without cause, I will personally flay you alive. We both know the advantages of an alien contact. But if you get into a hot spot, and call for help, I’ll dive this cruiser into that city to get you out!”

Orne swallowed. “Thanks, Stet. I’m—”



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