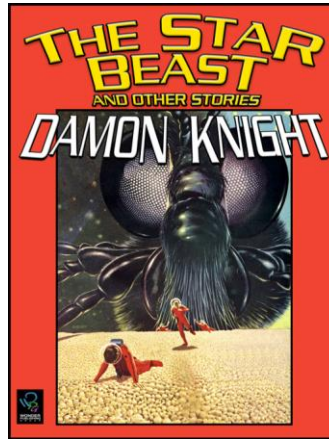


THE BEACHCOMBER by DAMON KNIGHT

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Maxwell and the girl started their weekend on Thursday, in Venice. Friday they went to Paris, Saturday to Nice, and on Sunday they were bored. Alice pouted at him across the breakfast table. "Vernon, let's go someplace else," she said.

"Sure," said Maxwell, not too graciously. "Don't you want your bug eggs?"

Alice pushed them away. If I ever did, I don't now. Why do you have to be so unpleasant in the morning?"

The eggs were insect eggs, all right, but they were on the menu as *oeufs Procyon Thibault*, and three of the half-inch brown spheres cost about one thousand times their value in calories. Maxwell was well paid as a script-writer for the North American Unit Ministry of Information—he

bossed a gang of six gagmen on the Cosmic Cocktail show—but he was beginning to hate to think about what these five days were costing him.

"Where do you want to go?" asked Maxwell. Their coffee came out of the conveyer, steaming and fragrant, and he sipped his moodily. "Want to run over to Algiers? Or up to Stockholm?"

"No," said Alice. She leaned forward across the table and put up one long white hand to keep her honey-colored hair out of her eyes. "You don't know what I mean. I mean, let's go to some other planet."

Maxwell choked slightly and spilled coffee on the tabletop. "Europe is all right," Alice was saying with disdain, "but it's all getting to be just like Chicago. Let's go someplace different for once."

"And be back by tomorrow noon?" Maxwell demanded. "It's ten hours even to Proxima; we'd have just time to turn around and get back on the liner."

Alice dropped her long lashes, contriving to look inviting and sullen at the same tune. Not bad at that, Maxwell thought, for ten o'clock in the morning. "You couldn't get Monday off, I suppose," she said, giving him her A-number-One smile. "We could have so much fun—together ... "

* * * *

They took the liner to Gamma Tauri IV, the clearing point for the system, then transferred to the interplanet shuttle for Three. Three was an almost undeveloped planet; there were perhaps a hundred cities near the equator, and some mines and plantations in the temperate zones—the rest was nothing but scenery. Maxwell had heard about it from people at the Ministry; he'd been warned to go within a year or so if he went at all—after that it would be as full of tourists as Proxima II.

The scenery was worth the trip. Sitting comfortably on their rented airscooters, stripped to shorts and singlets, with the polarized sunscreens moderating the blazing heat of Gamma Tauri, Maxwell and the girl could look in any horizontal direction and see a thousand square miles of exuberant blue-green foliage.

Two hundred feet below, the tops of gigantic tree-ferns waved spasmodically in the breeze. They were following a chain of low mountains that bisected this continent; the tree-tops sloped away abruptly on either side, showing an occasional glimpse of reddish-brown undergrowth, and merged into a sea of blue-green that became bluer and mistier toward the horizon. A flying thing moved lazily across the clear, cumulus-dotted sky, perhaps half a mile away. Maxwell trained his binoculars on it: it was an absurd lozenge with six pairs of wings—an insect, perhaps; he couldn't tell. He heard a raucous cry down below, not far away, and glanced down hoping to see one of the carnivores; but the rippling sea of foliage was unbroken.

He watched Alice breathing deeply. Maxwell grinned. Her face was shiny with perspiration and pleasure. "Where to now?" he asked.

The girl peered to the right, where a glint of silver shone on the horizon. "Is that the sea, over there?" she asked. "If it is, let's go look for a nice beach and have our lunch."

There were no nice beaches; they were all covered with inch-thick pebbles instead of sand; but Alice kept wanting to try the next place.

After each abortive approach, they went up to two thousand feet to survey the shore-line. Alice pointed and said, "There's a nice looking one. Oh! There's somebody on it."

Maxwell looked, and saw a tiny figure moving along the shore. "Might be somebody I know," he said, and focused his binoculars. He saw a broad, naked back, dark against the silvery sea. The man was stooping, looking at something on the beach.

The figure straightened, and Maxwell saw a blazing crest of blond hair, then a strongly modeled nose and chin as the man turned. "Oh-oh," he said, lowering the binoculars

Alice was staring intently through her binoculars. "Isn't he handsome," she breathed. "Do you know him?"

"Yeah," said Maxwell. "That's the Beachcomber. I interviewed him a couple of times. We'd better leave him be."

Alice kept staring. "Honestly," she said. "I never saw such a— Look, Vernie, he's waving at us."

Maxwell looked again. The Beachcomber's face was turned up directly toward them. As Maxwell watched, the man's lips moved unmistakably in the syllables of his name.

Maxwell shortened the range, and saw that the Beachcomber was indeed waving. He also saw something he had missed before: the man was stark naked.

"He's recognized me," he said, with mingled emotions. "Now we will have to go down."

Alice took her eyes away from the binoculars for the first time since they had sighted the man. "That's silly," she said. "How could he—Vernon, you don't mean he can see us clearly from that far away?"

Maxwell waved back at the tiny figure and mouthed silently, "Coming right down. Put some pants on, dammit." He said to Alice, "That's not all he can do. Weren't you listening when I said he's the Beachcomber?"

They started down on a long slant as the little figure below moved toward the jungle's edge. "The who?" said Alice, looking through the binoculars again.

"Watch where you're going," said Maxwell, more sharply than he had intended.

"I'm sorry. Who is he, dear?"

"The Beachcomber. The Man From the Future. Haven't you seen a newscast for the last five years?"

"I only tune in for the sports and fashions," Alice said abstractedly. Then her mouth formed an O. "My goodness! Is *he* the one who—"

"The same," said Maxwell. "The one who gave us the inertialess drive, the anti-friction field, the math to solve the three-body problem, and about a thousand other things. The guy from three million years in the future. And the loneliest man in all creation, probably. This is the planet he showed up on, five years ago, now that I come to think of it. I guess he spends most of his time here."

"But why?" asked Alice. She looked toward the tiny beach, which was now vacant. Her expression, Maxwell thought, said that there were better uses to which he could put himself.

Maxwell snorted. "Did you ever read—" He corrected himself; Alice obviously never read. "Did you ever see one of the old films about the South Seas? Ever hear of civilized men 'going native' or becoming beachcombers?"

Alice said, "Yes," a trifle uncertainly.

"All right, imagine a man stranded in a universe full of savages—pleasant harmless savages, maybe, but people who are three million years away from his culture. What's he going to do?"

"Go native," said Alice, "or comb beaches."

"That's right," Maxwell told her. "His only two alternatives. And either one is about as bad as the other, from his point of view. Conform to native customs, settle down, marry, lose everything that makes him a civilized man—or just simply go to hell by himself."

"That's what he's doing?"

"Right."

"Well, but what is the combing those beaches *for*?"

Maxwell frowned. "Don't be a cretin. These particular beaches have nothing to do with it; he just happens to be on one at the moment. He's a beachcomber because he lives like a bum—doesn't do any work, doesn't see people, just loaf and waits to be old enough to die."

"That's awful," said Alice. "It's—such a waste."

"In more ways than one," Maxwell added drily. "But what do you want? There's only one place he could be happy—three million years from now—and he can't go back. He says there isn't any place to go back to. I don't know what he means; he refuses to clarify that point."

* * * *

The Beachcomber was standing motionless by the edge of the forest as their scooters floated down to rest on the pebbly beach. He was wearing a pair of stained, weathered duroplast shorts, but nothing else; no hat to protect his great domed head, no sandals on his

feet, no equipment, not even a knife at his belt. Yet Maxwell knew that there were flesh-eaters in the jungle that would gobble a man outside the force-field of his scooter in about half a second. Knowing the Beachcomber, none of this surprised him. Whether it occurred to Alice to be surprised at any of it, he couldn't tell. She was eating the Beachcomber with her eyes as he walked toward them.

Maxwell, swearing silently to himself, turned off his scooter's field and stepped down. Alice did the same. *I only hope she can keep from trying to flirt with him*, Maxwell thought. Aloud, he said, "How's it, Dai?"

"All right," said the Beachcomber. Up close he ceased to be merely impressive and became a little frightening. He stood over seven feet tall, and there was an incredible strength in every line of him.

His clear skin looked resilient but *hard*; Maxwell privately doubted that you could cut it with a knife. But it was the eyes that were really impressive: they had the same disquieting, alien quality as an eagle's. Dai never pulled his rank on anybody; he "went native" perfectly when he had to, for social purposes; but he couldn't help making a normal human adult feel like a backward child.

"Dai, I'd like you to meet Alice Zwerling."

The Beachcomber acknowledged the introduction with effortless courtesy; Alice nearly beat herself to death with her eyelashes.

She managed to stumble very plausibly as they walked down to the water's edge, and put a hand on the giant's arm for support. He righted her casually with the flat of his hand on her back—at the same time giving a slight push that put her a step or two in advance—and went on talking to Maxwell.

They sat down by the water's edge, and Dai pumped Maxwell for the latest news on Earth. He seemed genuinely interested; Maxwell didn't know whether it was an act or not, but he talked willingly and well. The Beachcomber threw an occasional question Alice's way, just enough to keep her in the conversation. Maxwell saw her gathering her forces, and grinned to himself.

There was a pause and Alice cleared her throat. Both men looked at her politely. Alice said, "Dai, are there really man-eating animals in this jungle? Vernon says so, but we haven't seen a one, all the time we've been here. And—" Her gaze ran down the Beachcomber's smooth, naked torso, and she blushed very prettily. "I mean—" she added, and stopped again.

The Beachcomber said, "Sure, there are lots of them. They don't bother me, though."

She said earnestly, "You mean—you walk around, like that, in the jungle, and nothing can hurt you?"

"That's it."

Alice drove the point home. "Could you protect another person who was with you, too?"

"I guess I could."

Alice smiled radiantly. "Why, that's too good to be true! I was just telling Vernon, before we saw you down here, that I wished I could go into the jungle without the scooter, to see all the wild animals and things. Will you take me in for a little walk, Dai? Vernon can mind the scooters—you wouldn't mind, would you, Vernie?"

* * * *

Maxwell started to reply, but the Beachcomber forestalled him. "I assure you, Miss Zwerling," he said slowly, "that it would be a waste, of your time and mine."

Alice blushed again, this time not so prettily. "Just what do you mean?" she demanded.

Dai looked at her gravely. "I'm not quite such a wild man as I seem," he said. "I always wear trousers in mixed company." He repeated, with emphasis, "*Always.*"

Alice's lips grew hard and thin, and the skin whitened around them. Her eyes glittered. She started to say something to the Beachcomber, but the words stuck in her throat. She turned to Maxwell. "I think we'd better go."

"We just got here," Maxwell said mildly. "Stick around."

She stood up. "Are you coming?" "Nope," said Maxwell.

Without another word she turned, walked stiffly to her scooter, got in and soared away. They watched the tiny shining speck dwindle and disappear over the horizon.

Maxwell grinned and looked at the Beachcomber. "She had that coming," he said. "Not that she's out anything—she's got her return ticket." He put a hand behind him to hoist himself to his feet. "I'll be going now, Dai. Nice to have—"

"No, stay a while, Vern," said the giant. "I don't often see people." He looked moodily off across the water. "I didn't spoil anything special for you, I hope?"

"Nothing special," Maxwell said. "Only my current light o' love." The giant turned and stared at him, half-frowning.

"What the hell!" said Maxwell disgustedly. "There are plenty of other pebbles on the beach."

"Don't say that!" The Beachcomber's face contorted in a blaze of fury. He made a chopping motion with his forearm. Violent as it was, the motion came nowhere near Maxwell. Something else, something that felt like the pure essence of wrath, struck him and bowled him over, knocking the breath from him.

He sat up, a yard away from the giant, eyes popping foolishly. "Whuhh—" he said.

There was pain and contrition in the Beachcomber's eyes. "I'm sorry," he said. He helped Maxwell up. "I don't often forget myself that way. Will you forgive me?"

Maxwell's chest was still numb; it was hard to breathe. "Don't know," he said with difficulty. "What did you do it for?"

Sunlight gleamed dazzlingly on the Beachcomber's bare head. His eyes were in deep shadow, and shadows sketched the bold outline of his nose, marked the firm, bitter lines of his mouth. He said, "I've offended you." He paused. "I'll explain, Vernon, but there's one condition you must never tell anybody else, ever."

He put his big hand on Maxwell's wrist, and Maxwell felt the power that flowed from him. Almost hypnotically he knew he never would be able to. He was aware his mind was being schooled in what to remember.

"All right," said Maxwell. A curious complexity of emotions boiled inside him—anger and petulance, curiosity and something else, deeper down: a vague, objectless fear. "Go ahead."

The Beachcomber talked. After a few minutes he seemed almost to forget Maxwell; he stared out across the silver sea, and Maxwell, half hypnotized by the deep, resonant voice, watched his hawklike profile in silence.

Dimly, he saw the universe the Beachcomber spoke of: a universe of Men set free. Over that inconceivable gap of time that stretched between Maxwell's time and theirs, they had purged themselves of all their frailties. Maxwell saw them striding among the stars, as much at home in the pitiless void as on the verdant planets they loved. He saw them tall and faultless and strong, handsome men and beautiful women, all with the power that glowed in the Beachcomber, but without a hint of his sadness.

* * * *

He tried to imagine what the daily life of those people must be like, and couldn't; it was three million years beyond his comprehension. But when he looked at the Beachcomber's face, he knew that the last men were human beings like himself, capable of love, hate, and despair.

"We had mating customs that would seem peculiar to you," said the Beachcomber after a while. "Like elephants—because we were so long-lived, you know. We—married—late, and it was for life. My marriage was about to take place when we found the enemy."

"The enemy?" said Maxwell. "But—didn't you say you were the only dominant life-form in the whole universe?"

"That's right." The Beachcomber outlined an egg-shaped figure with a motion of his cupped hands, caressingly. "The universe; all of it. Everything that existed in this space. It was all ours. But the enemy didn't come from this universe."

"Another dimension?" Maxwell asked.

The Beachcomber looked puzzled. "Another—" he said, and stopped. "I thought I could say it better than that in English, but I can't. Dimension isn't right—call it another time-line; that's a little closer."

"Another universe like ours, co-existent with this one, anyhow," said Maxwell.

"No—not the same as ours, at all. Different laws, different—" he stopped again.

"Well, can you describe the enemy?"

"Ugly," said the Beachcomber promptly. "We'd been searching other—dimensions, if you want to use that word—for thousands of years, and this was the first intelligent race we found. We hated them on sight." He paused. "If I drew you a picture, it would look like a little spiny cylinder. But a picture wouldn't convey it. I can't explain." His mouth contracted with distaste.

"Go on," said Maxwell. "What happened? They invaded you?"

"No. We tried to destroy them. We broke up the crystal spiderwebs they built between their worlds;

we smashed their suns. But more than a quarter of them survived our first attack, and then we knew we were beaten. They were as powerful as we were, more so in some ways—"

"Wait, I don't get it," said Max: well unbelievably. "You—attacked them—without provocation? Wiped out three-quarters of them, simply because—"

"There was no possible peace between us and them," said the Beachcomber. "And it was only a matter of time before they discovered us; it was simply chance that we made the contact first."

What would an unspoiled South Sea Islander have made of the first atomic war? Maxwell wondered. Morals of one society didn't apply to another, he knew. Still—was it possible that the Beachcomber's people, Maxwell's own descendants, still had a taint of the old Adam? And was it accident that they were the only dominant life-form in the entire universe, or had they eliminated all other contenders?

* * * *

Not for him to judge, he decided; but he didn't like it. He said, "Then what—they counterattacked?"

"Yes. We had time to prepare, and we knew what they were going to do. The trouble was, there simply was no defense against it." He noticed Maxwell's wry smile. "Not like the planet-busters; there is a defense against those, you just haven't found it yet. But there actually was no defense whatever against their weapon. They were going to destroy our universe, down to the last quantum—wipe it right out of the series, make a blank where it had been."

"And—?" said Maxwell. He was beginning to understand why the Beachcomber had never told this story to anyone else; why the public at large must never know it. There was a feeling of doom in it that would color everything men did. It was possible, he supposed, to live with the knowledge that the end of it all was death, but fatalism was the mark of a dying culture.

"And these was just one thing we could do," said the Beachcomber. "Not a defense, but a trick. At the instant before their weapon was due to take effect, we planned to bring our universe back three million years along its own time-line. It would vanish, just as if it had been destroyed. Then, if it worked, we'd be able to return, but on a different time-line — because, obviously, on our own line nothing like this doubling back had already happened. Changing the past changes the future; you know the theory."

"Yeah. So—you were too late, is that it? You got away, but all the rest were destroyed."

"The timing was perfect," said the Beachcomber. "All the calculations were perfect. There's a natural limit to the distance in time any mass can travel, and we managed to meet it exactly. Three million years. I wish we hadn't. If we hadn't, I could go back again—" He stopped, and his jaw hardened.

"There isn't much more to tell," he said. "I happened to be chosen to execute the plan. It was a great honor, but not an easy one to accept. Remember, I was-about to be married. If anything went wrong it meant that we'd be separated forever ... We couldn't even die together. But I accepted. I had one day with her—one day; and then I set up the fields and waited for the attack. Just one micro-second before it would have reached us, I released the energy that was channeled through me—and the next instant, I was falling into the ocean out there."

He turned a tormented face to Maxwell. "It was the worst possible luck!" he said. "You can see for yourself, there was less chance of my landing anywhere near a planet than of—finding one given pebble on all the beaches of this planet."

Maxwell felt as if he had missed the point of a joke. "I still don't understand," he said. "You say *you* landed—but what about the universe? Where did it—?"

The Beachcomber made an impatient gesture. "You don't think we could bring it back into a space it already occupied, do you? It was in stasis, all but a fraction out of this time-line. Just a miniature left, so that it could be controlled. A model of the universe, so big." He spread his thumb and forefinger an inch apart—"Just a pebble."

Maxwell's jaw dropped open. He stared at the giant. "You don't mean—you—"

"Oh, yes," said the Beachcomber, "I landed about twenty miles out from shore—five years ago." He stared out across the sea, while his fingers groped nervously among the pebbles at his feet.

"And when I hit the water," he said, "I dropped it."

THE END

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