**THE FASTEST GUN**

by Michael Halm

Not until our ship had traveled more than seventy-three krognae did we gather the collective courage to raise antennae and listen for our pursuers. We could detect neither Pfek nor Bhlurr thought patterns -- but then we dared not listen even a gleeb. We could not doubt that we had been followed. We neither need nor wanted confirmation.

We knew not whether our queenship had survived the Bhlurr's sudden attack through our unguarded flank, but knew we must be followed in either case. If Bhlurr's superior weapons had destroyed the rest of the fleet or allowed them to take our queen captive, we would be sought as enemy. If somehow she lived, we would be sought as deserter. We had to flee, not knowing from whom we fled.

After sixty-one more krognae, we located a marginally habitable planet about an ordinary, yellow dwarf star. The atmosphere checked out just breathable. Most of its surface was covered with an awful poisonous liquid. That not so covered seemed even more well protected with highly chaotic thoughtwaves. It seemed an ideal refuge, if only a temporary one. We knew it could be only a few krognae before we were caught and painfully dismembered.

We chose a landing site at random, far from that deadly liquid and listened. Monitoring the native though patterns, we distinguished hundreds of thoughts even in this relatively quiet spot, each exceptionally powerful and ghastly -- so unPfek. We could not help but listen.

Our curiosity became aroused when we discovered a whole hive's thoughts -- feeding thoughts, fighting thoughts, commands, individual, communal, other unidentifiable -- from a single huge drone. Its thoughtwaves swamped our own, though it had no antennae. Its coloring was a chaotic as it thoughts, not monochomatic. It's bloated subnormal number of legs looked impossibly unstable, yet it walked. We had obviously jumped from the greklpeer into the Phulk. We were doomed, but at least had postponed that doom for a few gleebs.

We could find no clues to the location of the drone's hive. The mental linkage between them must be heavily shielded, quite understandable what with its so illogical and self-contradictory thoughts.

We caught several disconnected images and emotions which appeared and fade quickly. Again and again scenes flashed from it of an ugly, non-hexagonal cell with several other creatures as horrible as itself. The creatures pointed absurdly primitive projectile weapons at each other and left with cloth containers filled with metal.

Although sharing a common theme, each new image varied slightly. Sometimes the drone would fire its own weapon at the other creatures. Sometimes the would fire at it. Sometimes the fired at what, from the emotions associated with the image, must be a queenling, the drones potential mate, wounding or killing her. Although these creatures seemed to die easily, they also seemed to revive even more easily.

This dominant scenario was often interrupted by another series of images. The wonderfully dry area would become drenched with the poisonous liquid, falling from of all places from the sky. Horribly joyful thought were associated with this image. We quickly decided to leave the planet quickly lest this thought become reality.

As we listened the drone thoughts focused. Rather than replaying the same scene over and over, a new scene began to dominate. As he pursued the other creatures to a local concentration of the poisonous liquid, he thought of himself defeating them. This thought encouraged us as nothing about this planet had. We too could fight, rather than hide.

We studied this drone's weapon and discover that it had advantages that we had not at first appreciate. Rather than a raygun to paralyze or disintegrate our foe, we could merely wound them. It was invulnerable to telepathic interference since it was mechanically, not mentally, controlled. We could not help but think of ways to modify his "primitive" weapon.

We added a miniaturized temporal condenser, like the much larger one used on the ship, as we modified our own ship's weapons. We finished the modification to both weapons almost instantaneously thanks to the temporal condensers.

Sheriff McGraw had tracked the Carlton gang to the waterhole. Once they left there the next stop would be the Mexican border. They had to know that he would follow them; they would soon know that he alone had followed them. They would not need his daughter as hostage any more, once he attacked. They were waiting there for him to come to the waterhole and be ambushed and then kill her.

For years his job had been nothing more than putting up a few drunken cowpokes on a Saturday night or keeping boys from swiping apples from the Mercantile. The mayor had been talking of his retirement. Now the cattle-rustling Carltons had broken out and come back for revenge. They dared to rob the bank in broad daylight and kidnap Sally as well. He tried not to think of that, but of what he must do to save Sally.

McGraw felt somewhat relieved to find Ned and his brothers still at the waterhole. He had half-expected them to have just watered their horses and sped on to freedom. He prayed that they wanted him and not to "enjoy themselves" with her. He prayed that there was still a bit of the old sheriff in him yet. In any case, he knew, though the posse had abandoned him, and his horse too had given out, he had to catch them or die trying. If h didn't, there was not point in return to town.

Watch over a dune unobserved, he discovered the brother, true to form, had been too concerned over the dividing the loot. They had never had so much before at one time. They did not see him until he came over the dune -- and tripped.

He felt himself fall, tried to catch himself and failed. He heard the shots. Then McGraw waited for the expected pain and blood and death.

Only when he did not feel any pain or see any blood did he realize he had not been killed. His gun was pointed out in front of him, though he could not remember drawing it. Before him stood three of the Carltons holding their wounded gun hands and the fourth a busted rifle. Sally saw only Ned, her father and hero, and did not notice his dumbfounded expression. She smiled beautifully as she untangled the bullet-severed ropes about her hands and ran to him.

The townsfolk did not pay too much attention to the wild stories that year of airships. They would have cared nothing of the Bhlurr's defeat by the Pfuk, even if they had known. In 1897 they told stories o their old Sheriff McGraw and for many years thereafter.