

THE CUTTING

It had grown sixteen feet overnight! Just yesterday it had been a sprig of ivy that Sally had sent him for luck.

Now look at it.

Stanley wiped sweat from his forehead and rested a moment, leaning on his double-headed ax. This was the day to take suckers off the apple trees and harvest the corn.

He should have known, of course. Didn't everything grow well here? Wasn't that why the Federation had planted him here? Along with a few others.

It must have needed more water than he had given it in the small dish he had felt he could spare. Water did not run in streams or rivers here, there were no ponds or lakes or oceans. It did rain, once a week, for precisely four hours. He was always careful about water.

He gazed over at the forest, inching its way closer again. Tomorrow he would need to drop a few trees and cut back the brush.

No matter how hard he worked, he had to struggle to stay even, to keep the clearing that the landing rockets had burned clear free of the forest that wanted to claim it back.

Stanley reached up to pat a fat apple. It was just eighteen inches across, almost ripe. Tomorrow he'd have apple pie and sauce and juice and

baked apple. He was allowed one per crop. The tree would produce another one in another two weeks and he had five trees.

He sighed and got back to work, heaving the heavy axe skyward and chopping down on the vigorous shoots. Harvest would be tomorrow and would be hectic in the middle of trimming the forest but he had to launch the balloon on time to catch the harvest floater. Four apples and a dozen ears of corn would be a heavy load. Corn grew so large that one ear could feed a dozen people.

Homeworld was starving, polluted and crowded. His farm would feed his family. And Sally. It was hoped it would someday feed homeworld.

If he and the others were successful.

He kept chopping. It would take all day to finish the apple trees and the corn was showing suckers too.

Later that night, he glanced out the prefab cabin window as he kneaded the bread that would feed him through the next day. Wheat and oats had been his first crops and were a staple shipment. The corn was new. The apple trees eight weeks old.

The corn stalks were bent to the ground, heavy and nearly bursting their husks. Wheat stalks in the next grid were bending over with the weight of their grain. Wheat was on the list for the day after tomorrow.

He stopped kneading the bread. The ivy had reached the nearest tree. It was obligingly headed away from the cabin and his garden and headed straight for the encroaching forest.

Stanley smiled, maybe it would smother a tree or two and he'd have a day of rest.

Rest! Eighteen months of constant labor, twenty-hour days 'till his muscles past hard and were steel, and his hands had calluses five layers deep. He never dreamed when sleeping.

His only consolation was the food. Everything grew well so far and he ate well. That had been the terms of the contract that had sent him halfway around the galaxy.

And Sally, waiting for his three year term to end. His delicate bride to be. She would never have survived the work to live here. He didn't mind. She would be waiting. And they would not starve, not as long as he had strength.

He put the bread to rise in the oven and sat at the built-in table to check over the seed packets that had come with the ivy. The next crops to test in this wonderfully weird soil.

Beets and carrots. Root crops. He had not tried them yet. Beans would also be nice. Dried beans, grain and fruit had been his diet after the canned meat had run out. Soft things. He thought a crisp carrot would be delicious.

He still thought about food. Even working to grow it, surrounded by it, the thought of having it was the most important thought. Years of hunger had made it more precious than the metals and stones of an earlier age.

He absently rubbed at a callus and read over the rules for carrot seeds. Maybe he'd try 2 or 3 seeds, until he saw how big they grew.

The timer buzzed and he put the risen bread in to cook and reset the timer.

He showered in the recycle unit, noting that it was near time for fresh rainwater to be added. Refreshed, he came back to eat a loaf of fresh bread

and synth-margerine, washed down with the last of the cider from the first apple crop.

Full for the moment, Stanley looked back out at his garden. The apples were now over two feet across and the trees were bending down. New shoots were springing up where he had spent the day trimming.

The raspberry bush bore five or six, he couldn't see all the berries. Two more days to raspberry jam. Fresh jam on fresh bread. The berry harvest followed the apples and corn in an endless routine. He couldn't complain. He was out of jam.

The corn was even bigger and the husks splitting. Things did not grow much at night but he would have to hustle in the morning. Corn cake. He loved corn cake even with synth-syrup.

Maple trees! Maybe he should send for one. Real syrup on corn cakes. It was still a novelty not to be starving.

A cracking sound caught his attention and he went back to the window. The ivy had topped the trees and was strangling the first one. He swore that he saw the vines move. Stanley shuddered as he watched the tree bend and break under the weight. Three feet across and it broke like a matchstick.

The ivy seemed to be reading his wishes. All of its shoots were headed into the trees.

Darkness was closing down his range of vision as the primary sun was setting now. He closed the port and settled down to sleep. All plants slept in the dark. Maybe tomorrow he could take a rare nap.

His internal clock beat the morning alarm and he dressed quickly. Wolfing down another loaf with water, juice would be later, he stopped to pick up the carrot seeds. He had decided to order a maple tree and scribbled a note to attach to the harvest balloon.

The cabin seemed to shudder as the first rays of the secondary sun cleared the horizon. It shuddered again, violent.

Stanley froze as memories of the war came flashing back. Rain was not due yet. Storms were gentle washes, no thunder or lightening. He started to get up from the solitary fixed chair.

Another tremor hit and the cabin lurched and rolled over. Stanley grabbed the arm of the chair as he swung over and dangled over the ceiling.

One by one the cabin windows darkened and the cabin filled with a greenish glow. The cabin interior grew darker and the cabin seemed to sway and twist, creaking under the stress.

The parasitic ivy climbed toward the light of the new day.

The cabin seemed to sway and twist, creaking under the stress in the crushing arms of the ivy.