

Laurence M. Janifer

Lost in Translation

DOUBLEDAY SCIENCE FICTION

**A BOOK OF
SHORT STORIES**

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LOST IN TRANSLATION




By

LARRY M. HARRIS

In language translation, you may get a literally accurate word-for-word translation ... but miss the meaning entirely. And in space-type translation ... the effect may be the same!

Illustrated by Schoenherr



he cell had been put together more efficiently than any Korvin had ever been in. But that was only natural, he told himself sadly; the Tr'en were an efficient people. All the preliminary reports had agreed on that; their efficiency, as a matter of fact, was what had made Korvin's arrival a necessity. They were well into the atomic era, and were on the verge of developing space travel. Before long they'd be settling the other planets of their system, and then the nearer stars. Faster-than-light travel couldn't be far away, for the magnificently efficient physical scientists of the Tr'en—and that would

mean, in the ordinary course of events, an invitation to join the Comity of Planets.

An invitation, the Comity was sure, which the Tr'en would not accept.

Korvin stretched out on the cell's single bunk, a rigid affair which was hardly meant for comfort, and sighed. He'd had three days of isolation, with nothing to do but explore the resources of his own mind. He'd tried some of the ancient Rhine experiments, but that was no good; he still didn't show any particular psi talents. He couldn't unlock the cell door with his unaided mind; he couldn't even alter the probability of a single dust-mote's Brownian path through the somewhat smelly air. Nor could he disappear from his cell and appear, as if by magic, several miles away near the slightly-damaged hulk of his ship, to the wonder and amazement of his Tr'en captors.

He could do, as a matter of fact, precisely nothing. He wished quietly that the Tr'en had seen fit to give him a pack of cards, or a book, or even a folder of tourist pictures. The Wonders of Tr'en, according to all the advance reports, were likely to be pretty boring, but they'd have been better than nothing.

In any decently-run jail, he told himself with indignation, there would at least have been other prisoners to talk to. But on Tr'en Korvin was all alone.

True, every night the guards came in and gave him a concentrated lesson in the local language, but Korvin failed to get much pleasure out of that, being unconscious at the time. But now he was equipped to discuss almost anything from philosophy to plumbing, but there was nobody to discuss it with. He changed position on the bunk and stared at the walls. The Tr'en were efficient; there weren't even any imperfections in the smooth surface to distract him.

He wasn't tired and he wasn't hungry; his captors had left him with a full stock of food concentrates.

But he was almightily bored, and about ready to tell anything to anyone, just for the chance at a little conversation.

As he reached this dismal conclusion, the cell door opened. Korvin got up off the bunk in a hurry and spun around to face his visitor.

The Tr'en was tall, and slightly green.

He looked, as all the Tr'en did, vaguely humanoid—that is, if you don't bother to examine him closely. Life in the universe appeared to be rigidly limited to humanoid types on oxygen planets; Korvin didn't know why, and neither did anybody else. There were a lot of theories, but none that accounted for all the facts satisfactorily. Korvin really didn't care about it; it was none of his business.

The Tr'en regarded him narrowly through catlike pupils. "You are Korvin," he said.

It was a ritual, Korvin had learned. "You are of the Tr'en," he replied. The green being nodded.

"I am Didyak of the Tr'en," he said. Amenities over with, he relaxed slightly—but no more than slightly—and came into the cell, closing the door behind him. Korvin thought of jumping the Tr'en, but decided quickly against it. He was a captive, and it was unwise to assume that his captors had no more resources than the ones he saw: a small translucent pistollike affair in a holster at the Tr'en's side, and a small knife in a sheath at the belt. Those Korvin could deal with; but there might be almost anything else hidden and ready to fire on him.

"What do you want with me?" Korvin said. The Tr'en speech—apparently there was only one language on the planet—was stiff and slightly awkward, but easily enough learned under drug hypnosis; it was the most rigorously logical construction of its kind Korvin had ever come across. It reminded him of some of the mathematical metalanguages he'd dealt with back on Earth, in training; but it was more closely and carefully constructed than even those marvels.

"I want nothing with you," Didyak said, leaning against the door-frame. "You have other questions?"

Korvin sighed. "What are you doing here, then?" he asked. As conversation, it wasn't very choice; but it was, he admitted, better than solitude.

"I am leaning against the door," Didyak said. The Tr'en literalist approach to the smallest problems of everyday living was a little hard to get the hang of, Korvin told himself bitterly. He thought for a second.

"Why did you come to me?" he said at last.

Didyak beamed at him. The sight was remarkably unpleasant, involving as it did the disclosure of the Tr'en fifty-eight teeth, mostly pointed. Korvin stared back impassively. "I have been ordered to come to you," Didyak said, "by the Ruler. The Ruler wishes to talk with you."

It wasn't quite "talk"; that was a general word in the Tr'en language, and Didyak had used a specific meaning, roughly: "gain information from, by peaceful and vocal means." Korvin filed it away for future reference. "Why did the Ruler not come to me?" Korvin asked.

"The Ruler is the Ruler," Didyak said, slightly discomfited. "You are to go to him. Such is his command."

Korvin shrugged, sighed and smoothed back his hair. "I obey the command of the Ruler," he said—another ritual. Everybody obeyed the command of the Ruler. If you didn't, you never had a second chance to try.

But Korvin meant exactly what he'd said. He was going to obey the commands of the Ruler of the Tr'en—and remove the Tr'en threat from the rest of the galaxy forever.

That, after all, was his job.

The Room of the Ruler was large, square and excessively brown. The walls were dark-brown, the furnishings—a single great chair, several kneeling-benches and a small table near the chair—were light-brown, of some metallic substance, and even the drapes were tan. It was, Korvin decided, much too much of a bad idea, even when the color contrast of the Tr'en themselves were figured in.

The Ruler himself, a Tr'en over seven feet tall and correspondingly broad, sat in the great chair, his four fingers tapping gently on the table near him, staring at Korvin and his guards. The guards stood on either side of their captive, looking as impassive as jade statues, six and a half feet high.

Korvin wasn't attempting to escape. He wasn't pleading with the Ruler. He wasn't defying the Ruler, either. He was just answering questions.

The Tr'en liked to have everything clear. They were a logical race. The Ruler had started with Korvin's race, his name, his sex—if any—and whether or not his appearance were normal for humanity.

Korvin was answering the last question. "Some men are larger than I am," he said, "and some are smaller."

"Within what limits?"

Korvin shrugged. "Some are over eight feet tall," he said, "and others under four feet." He used the Tr'en measurement scale, of course; it didn't seem necessary, though, to mention that both extremes of height were at the circus-freak level. "Then there is a group of humans," he went on, "who are never more than a foot and a half in height, and usually less than that—approximately nine or ten inches. We call these *children*," he volunteered helpfully.

"Approximately?" the Ruler growled. "We ask for precision here," he

said. "We are scientific men. We are exact."

Korvin nodded hurriedly. "Our race is more ... more approximate," he said apologetically.

"Slipshod," the Ruler muttered.

"Undoubtedly," Korvin agreed politely. "I'll try to do the best I can for you."

"You will answer my questions," the Ruler said, "with exactitude." He paused, frowning slightly. "You landed your ship on this planet," he went on. "Why?"

"My job required it," Korvin said.

"A clumsy lie," the Ruler said. "The ship crashed; our examinations prove that beyond any doubt."

"True," Korvin said.

"And it is your job to crash your ship?" the Ruler said. "Wasteful."

Korvin shrugged again. "What I say is true," he announced. "Do you have tests for such matters?"

"We do," the Ruler told him. "We are an exact and a scientific race. A machine for the testing of truth has been adjusted to your physiology. It will be attached to you."

Korvin looked around and saw it coming through the door, pushed by two technicians. It was large and squat and metallic, and it had wheels, dials, blinking lights, tubes and wires, and a seat with armrests and straps. It was obviously a form of lie-detector—and Korvin felt himself marveling again at this race. Earth science had nothing to match their enormous command of the physical universe; adapting a hypnopædic language-course to an alien being so quickly had been wonder enough, but adapting the perilously delicate mechanisms that necessarily made up any lie-detector machinery

was almost a miracle. The Tr'en, under other circumstances, would have been a valuable addition to the Comity of Nations.

Being what they were, though, they could only be a menace. And Korvin's appreciation of the size of that menace was growing hourly.

He hoped the lie-detector had been adjusted correctly. If it showed him telling an untruth, he wasn't likely to live long, and his job—not to mention the strongest personal inclinations—demanded most strongly that he stay alive.

He swallowed hard. But when the technicians forced him down into the seat, buckled straps around him, attached wires and electrodes and elastic bands to him at appropriate places and tightened some final screws, he made no resistance.

"We shall test the machine," the Ruler said. "In what room are you?"

"In the Room of the Ruler," Korvin said equably.

"Are you standing or sitting?"

"I am sitting," Korvin said.

"Are you a *chulad*?" the Ruler asked. A *chulad* was a small native pet, Korvin knew, something like a greatly magnified deathwatch beetle.

"I am not," he said.

The Ruler looked to his technicians for a signal, and nodded on receiving it. "You will tell an untruth now," he said. "Are you standing or sitting?"

"I am standing," Korvin said.

The technicians gave another signal. The Ruler looked, in his frowning manner, reasonably satisfied. "The machine," he announced, "has been adjusted satisfactorily to your physiology. The questioning will now continue."

Korvin swallowed again. The test hadn't really seemed extensive enough to him. But, after all, the Tr'en knew their business, better than anyone else could know it. They had the technique and the logic and the training.

He hoped they were right.

The Ruler was frowning at him. Korvin did his best to look receptive. "Why did you land your ship on this planet?" the Ruler said.

"My job required it," Korvin said.

The Ruler nodded. "Your job is to crash your ship," he said. "It is wasteful but the machines tell me it is true. Very well, then; we shall find out more about your job. Was the crash intentional?"

Korvin looked sober. "Yes," he said.

The Ruler blinked. "Very well," he said. "Was your job ended when the ship crashed?" The Tr'en word, of course, wasn't *ended*, nor did it mean exactly that. As nearly as Korvin could make out, it meant "disposed of for all time."

"No," he said.

"What else does your job entail?" the Ruler said.

Korvin decided to throw his first spoke into the wheel. "Staying alive."

The Ruler roared. "Do not waste time with the obvious!" he shouted. "Do not try to trick us; we are a logical and scientific race! Answer correctly."

"I have told the truth," Korvin said.

"But it is not—not the truth we want," the Ruler said.

Korvin shrugged. "I replied to your question," he said. "I did not know that there was more than one kind of truth. Surely the truth is the truth, just as the Ruler is the Ruler?"

"I—" The Ruler stopped himself in mid-roar. "You try to confuse the Ruler," he said at last, in an approximation of his usual one. "But the Ruler will not be confused. We have experts in matters of logic"—the Tr'en word seemed to mean *right-saying*—"who will advise the Ruler. They will be called."

Korvin's guards were standing around doing nothing of importance now that their captor was strapped down in the lie-detector. The Ruler gestured and they went out the door in a hurry.

The Ruler looked down at Korvin. "You will find that you cannot trick us," he said. "You will find that such fiddling"—*chulad-like* Korvin translated—"attempts will get you nowhere."

Korvin devoutly hoped so.

The experts in logic arrived shortly, and in no uncertain terms Korvin was given to understand that logical paradox was not going to confuse anybody on the planet. The barber who did, or didn't, shave himself, the secretary of the club whose members were secretaries, Achilles and the tortoise, and all the other lovely paradox-models scattered around were so much primer material for the Tr'en. "They can be treated mathematically," one of the experts, a small emerald-green being, told Korvin thinly. "Of course, you would not understand the mathematics. But that is not important. You need only understand that we cannot be confused by such means."

"Good," Korvin said.

The experts blinked. "Good?" he said.

"Naturally," Korvin said in a friendly tone.

The expert frowned horribly, showing all of his teeth. Korvin did his best not to react. "Your plan is a failure," the expert said, "and you call this a good thing. You can mean only that your plan is different from the one we are occupied with."

"True," Korvin said.

There was a short silence. The expert beamed. He examined the indicators of the lie-detector with great care. "What is your plan?" he said at last, in a conspiratorial whisper.

"To answer your questions, truthfully and logically," Korvin said.

The silence this time was even longer.

"The machine says that you tell the truth," the experts said at last, in a awed tone. "Thus, you must be a traitor to your native planet. You must want us to conquer your planet, and have come here secretly to aid us."

Korvin was very glad that wasn't a question. It was, after all, the only logical deduction.

But it happened to be wrong.

"The name of your planet is Earth?" the Ruler asked. A few minutes had passed; the experts were clustered around the single chair. Korvin was still strapped to the machine; a logical race makes use of a traitor, but a logical race does not trust him.

"Sometimes," Korvin said.

"It has other names?" the Ruler said.

"It has no name," Korvin said truthfully. The Tr'en idiom was like the Earthly one; and certainly a planet had no name. People attached names to it, that was all. It had none of its own.

"Yet you call it Earth?" the Ruler said.

"I do," Korvin said, "for convenience."

"Do you know its location?" the Ruler said.

"Not with exactitude," Korvin said.

There was a stir. "But you can find it again," the Ruler said.

"I can," Korvin said.

"And you will tell us about it?" the Ruler went on.

"I will," Korvin said, "so far as I am able."

"We will wish to know about weapons," the Ruler said, "and about plans and fortifications. But we must first know of the manner of decision on this planet. Is your planet joined with others in a government or does it exist alone?"

Korvin nearly smiled. "Both," he said.

A short silence was broken by one of the attendant experts. "We have theorized that an underling may be permitted to make some of his own decisions, leaving only the more extensive ones for the master. This seems to us inefficient and liable to error, yet it is a possible system. Is it the system you mean?"

Very sharp, Korvin told himself grimly. "It is," he said.

"Then the government which reigns over several planets is supreme," the Ruler said.

"It is," Korvin said.

"Who is it that governs?" the Ruler said.

The key question had, at last, been asked. Korvin felt grateful that the logical Tr'en had determined to begin from the beginning, instead of going off after details of armament first; it saved a lot of time.

"The answer to that question," Korvin said, "cannot be given to you."

"Any question of fact has an answer," the Ruler snapped. "A paradox is not involved here; a government exists, and some being is the governor. Perhaps several beings share this task; perhaps machines do the work. But where there is a government, there is a governor. Is this agreed?"

"Certainly," Korvin said. "It is completely obvious and true."

"The planet from which you come is part of a system of planets which are governed, you have said," the Ruler went on.

"True," Korvin said.

"Then there is a governor for this system," the Ruler said.

"True," Korvin said again.

The ruler sighed gently. "Explain this governor to us," he said.

Korvin shrugged. "The explanation cannot be given to you."

The Ruler turned to a group of his experts and a short muttered conversation took place. At its end the Ruler turned his gaze back to Korvin. "Is the deficiency in you?" he said. "Are you in some way unable to describe this government?"

"It can be described," Korvin said.

"Then you will suffer unpleasant consequences if you describe it to us?" the Ruler went on.

"I will not," Korvin said.

It was the signal for another conference. With some satisfaction, Korvin noticed that the Tr'en were becoming slightly puzzled; they were no longer moving and speaking with calm assurance.

The plan was taking hold.

The Ruler had finished his conference. "You are attempting again to confuse us," he said.

Korvin shook his head earnestly. "I am attempting," he said, "not to confuse you."

"Then I ask for an answer," the Ruler said.

"I request that I be allowed to ask a question," Korvin said.

The Ruler hesitated, then nodded. "Ask it," he said. "We shall answer it if we see fit to do so."

Korvin tried to look grateful. "Well, then," he said, "what is your government?"

The Ruler beckoned to a heavy-set green being, who stepped forward from a knot of Tr'en, inclined his head in Korvin's direction, and began. "Our government is the only logical form of government," he said in a high, sweet tenor. "The Ruler orders all, and his subjects obey. In this way uniformity is gained, and this uniformity aids in the speed of possible action and in the weight of action. All Tr'en act instantly in the same manner. The Ruler is adopted by the previous Ruler; in this way we are assured of a common wisdom and a steady judgment."

"You have heard our government defined," the Ruler said. "Now, you will define yours for us."

Korvin shook his head. "If you insist," he said, "I'll try it. But you won't

understand it."

The Ruler frowned. "We shall understand," he said. "Begin. Who governs you?"

"None," Korvin said.

"But you are governed?"

Korvin nodded. "Yes."

"Then there is a governor," the Ruler insisted.

"True," Korvin said. "But everyone is the governor."

"Then there is no government," the Ruler said. "There is no single decision."

"No," Korvin said equably, "there are many decisions binding on all."

"Who makes them binding?" the Ruler asked. "Who forces you to accept these decisions? Some of them must be unfavorable to some beings?"

"Many of them are unfavorable," Korvin said. "But we are not forced to accept them."

"Do you act against your own interests?"

Korvin shrugged. "Not knowingly," he said. The Ruler flashed a look at the technicians handling the lie-detector. Korvin turned to see their expression. They needed no words; the lie-detector was telling them, perfectly obviously, that he was speaking the truth. But the truth wasn't making any sense. "I told you you wouldn't understand it," he said.

"It is a defect in your explanation," the Ruler almost snarled.

"My explanation is as exact as it can be," he said.

The Ruler breathed gustily. "Let us try something else," he said.

Everyone is the governor. Do you share a single mind? A racial mind has been theorized, though we have met with no examples—"

"Neither have we," Korvin said. "We are all individuals, like yourselves."

"But with no single ruler to form policy, to make decisions—"

"We have no need of one," Korvin said calmly.

"Ah," the Ruler said suddenly, as if he saw daylight ahead. "And why not?"

"We call our form of government *democracy*," Korvin said. "It means the rule of the people. There is no need for another ruler."

One of the experts piped up suddenly. "The beings themselves rule each other?" he said. "This is clearly impossible; for, no one being can have the force to compel acceptance of his commands. Without his force, there can be no effective rule."

"That is our form of government," Korvin said.

"You are lying," the expert said.

One of the technicians chimed in: "The machine tells us—"

"Then the machine is faulty," the expert said. "It will be corrected."

Korvin wondered, as the technicians argued, how long they'd take studying the machine, before they realized it didn't have any defects to correct. He hoped it wasn't going to be too long; he could foresee another stretch of boredom coming. And, besides, he was getting homesick.

It took three days—but boredom never really had a chance to set in. Korvin found himself the object of more attention than he had hoped for; one by one, the experts came to his cell, each with a different method of resolving the obvious contradictions in his statements.

Some of them went away fuming. Others simply went away, puzzled.

On the third day Korvin escaped.

It wasn't very difficult; he hadn't thought it would be. Even the most logical of thinking beings has a subconscious as well as a conscious mind, and one of the ways of dealing with an insoluble problem is to make the problem disappear. There were only two ways of doing that, and killing the problem's main focus was a little more complicated. That couldn't be done by the subconscious mind; the conscious had to intervene somewhere. And it couldn't.

Because that would mean recognizing, fully and consciously, that the problem ~~was~~ insoluble. And the Tr'en weren't capable of that sort of thinking.

Korvin thanked his lucky stars that their genius had been restricted to the physical and mathematical. Any insight at all into the mental sciences would have given them the key to his existence, and his entire plan, within seconds.

But, then, it was lack of that insight that had called for this particular plan. That, and the political structure of the Tr'en.

The same lack of insight let the Tr'en subconscious work on his escape without any annoying distractions in the way of deep reflection. Someone left a door unlocked and a weapon nearby—all quite intent, Korvin was sure. Getting to the ship was a little more complicated, but presented no new problems; he was airborne, and then space-borne, inside of a few hours after leaving the cell.

He set his course, relaxed, and cleared his mind. He had no psionic talents, but the men at Earth Central did; he couldn't receive messages, but he could send them. He sent one now.

Mission accomplished; the Tr'en aren't about to come marauding out into space too soon. They've been given

food for thought—nice indigestible food that's going to stick in their craws until they finally manage to digest it. But they can't digest it and stay what they are; you've got to be democratic, to some extent, to understand the idea. What keeps us obeying laws we ourselves make? What keeps us obeying laws that make things inconvenient for us? Sheer self-interest, of course—but try to make a Tr'en see it!

With one government and one language, they just weren't equipped for translation. They were too efficient physically to try for the mental sciences at all. No mental sciences, no insight into my mind or their own—and that means no translation.

But—damn it—I wish I were home already.

I'm bored absolutely stiff!

THE END

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