Too Soon to Die
by TOM GODWIN

The Queer Ones
by LEIGH BRACKETT

WALTER M. MILLER, JR.
GORDON R. DICKSON
On the other hand, possibly not. So science fiction has often said. And now as this issue goes to press, a scientist comes along with a speculation that rivals the best that s f has offered. Robert Leon Carroll, a Navy scientist, believes that from cold atoms energy can be derived which will make possible speeds faster than light—and the Air Force thinks enough of his theory to grant him the money to try to prove it! If he does, he will have made a monumental contribution to science; he will also have brought dismay to those who believe Man is already going to hell quite speedily enough. As for us, we must admit that we wait for word with wonder, hope—and a measure of concern.

On the other hand . . . if Mr. Carroll is successful, within a relatively short time we will doubtless be hearing that a Russian stableboy stumbled on the discovery years ago. That such a report will be true seems about as unlikely as the chance of this country turning fascist in the foreseeable future. Of course neither is an impossibility—and both, therefore, are fit subjects for the s f writer. For example, see “Vengeance for Nikolai,” by Walter M. Miller, Jr. Mr. Miller flatly does not believe we will be taken over by the Blue Shirts; further, as a Catholic and a thinking, free man, he finds Communism and fascism equally abhorrent. As a writer, however, in this grim, remotely possible future he finds material for a penetrating study of people. Marya, with her grief for her dead baby, her hate, and her love of Russia’s earth—“. . . it has the blood of my baby in it; don’t speak to me of sides, or leaders, or politics . . .”—Marya is surely a facet of Man. She is also the central figure in a powerful story.

On the other hand . . . there are, we think, several powerful stories in this issue. Take, for example, “Too Soon to Die,” by Tom Godwin, which we consider an adventure story on a truly grand scale. One thing bothers us, though—the rigors of life on Ragnarok are presented with such unsettling realism that we worry about the possible over-enthusiasm of Mr. Godwin’s research. From the rough back country of the Southwest he has written to promise us more stories, which delights us. But please, Mr. Godwin, beware of the Prowlers. . . .

On the other foot . . . is where James Thurber seems to be trying to shove the shoe. In a just published fable, he offers a most disturbing moral. “The noblest study of mankind is Man,” says Man,” Mr. Thurber observes. We have no idea who or what else Mr. Thurber thinks might be judging our studies, but we do hope that most of you out there are of the species Man, and therefore willing to believe that the following stories of people have a noble subject.

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TOO SOON TO DIE

by TOM GODWIN

The monstrous Gern had left them to die—
left them on a half-world of gigantic wolf-like predators,
of stony death that dragged at living bodies, and smote
that withered life as free. It was unimaginable that
they could strike back at the Gern 200 light-years away—

it was impossible that they could even survive . . . impossible

The Constellation, bound for Athena with eight thousand soldiers aboard, had not expected at
all. Each from the Gern. There had been no indication when it left Earth that the cold war with the
Gern Empire would suddenly flare into violence, and the world of Athena was a Terren discovery,
four hundred light-years from the outer boundary of the Gern Em-

pire.
The two Gern cruisers appeared without warning and attacked with silent, vicious efficiency, de-
structing the Constellation’s stern and rendering her动力less and
prone. Her angle oblique Master fired once in futile defense and was instantly destroyed, to-
gether with the forecastle control room.

Within seconds the Constella-
tion was helpless and leaderless, her air regenerators lifeless. Gern

boarded her and a Gern officer delivered the simplest in quick,
terroristic words:

“A state of war now exists be-
tween the Gern Empire and Earth. This section of space, together
with the planet Athena, is claimed as part of the Gern Empire.

This ship has invaded Gern

territory and fired upon a Gern
cruiser, but we are willing to re-
tend a truce not required by the circumstances. Terren techni-
cians and skilled workers in cer-
tain specific fields can be of use to us in the factories we shall build
on Athena. The others will not
be needed and there is no room
on the cruisers to take them.

You will be divided into two
groups, the Acceptables and the
Rejects. The Rejects will be taken
by the cruisers to an Earth-type
planet near here and left, together
with ample supplies. The cruisers

3
will then take the Acceptable ones to Athens.

This division will split families but there will be no resistance to it. As the first instance of rebellion the offer will be withdrawn and the counties will go on their way again.

There was no choice for the counties. The air was already growing dark and within twenty hours they would have smothering in death. The division was made.

Six hours later the Rejeckts, four thousand of them, stood in a black, rocky valley, a 3-5 gravity dragging at them like a heavy burden, and watched the counties run away into the gray sky. A moaning wind sent the sullen dust swirling in cold, bitter clouds and things like gigantic black wolves could already be seen gathering in the distance.

They waited, then, what had happened. They were on Ragnarok, the hell-world, and their abandonment was intended to be a death sentence for all of them.

The bright blue star shone down and dawn touched the sky, bringing with it a coldness that filled the soul of the sky. John Pemberton's hands and formed heaps of ice on his gray mantles. There was a stirring in the area behind him as the weary Rejeckts in his group prepared to face the new day. A child whispered from the cold. There had not been time the evening before to gather enough wood—

"Prowlers!"

The warning cry came from an outer gate as the counties fell like black shadows materialized out of the dark dawn, dark white fangs gleaming in their white faces as they ripped through the outer gate later. Pemberton's rifle locked out thin tongues of flame as he added his fire to that of the inner guards. The prowlers came on, breaking through, but four of them went down and the others scurried by the fire so that they struck only the outer edge of the area where the Rejeckts were grouped.

At that distance they blended into the dark ground so that he could not find them in the sights of his rifle. He could only watch helplessly in the dawn's dim light and see a starched-collared woman caught in their path, trying to run with a child in her arms and already knowing it was too late. For a moment her white face was turned in hopeless appeal to the others. Then she fell, deliberately, going to the ground with her child beneath her so that her body would protect it from the prowlers. A man was running toward her, slow in the high gravity, an axe in his hands and his cursing a roaring, impartant sound.

The prowlers passed over her, pausing for an instant as they...
Took Too Soon to Die

"Someone had us." She shrugged her shoulders. "I guess I was soft enough to entice myself for the job. Why—was his mother a friend of yours?"

"She was my daughter," he said.

"I didn’t know she was on Bag- mark till just now."

"Oh." The bold, brassy look was gone from her face for a moment, like a mask that had slipped. "I’m sorry. And I’ll take care of Billy."

The first observation to his assumption of leadership occurred an hour later. The prowlers had withdrawn with the coming of full daylight and wood had been carried from the trees to warm the fire. Mary, one of the volunteer cooks, was sitting two men to curry water when he approached. The smaller man picked up one of the clumsy containers, hastily improvised from barriers, and started for the creek, but the thick-chested man did not move.

"People are hungry and cold and sick," Mary said. "Aren’t you going to help?"

The man continued to squat by the fire, his hands extended to its warmth. "Name somebody else," he said.

"But—"

Mary looked at Prentiss in uncertainty and went to the thick-chested man, knowing there would be violence and witnessing it as something to help drive away the vision of Etnor’s pole, cold face under the red sky.
He found a leader in the second group, as he had known he would. It was a characteristic of human nature that leaders should appear in times of emergency.

His name was Lake, a man with old blue eyes under pale brows and a stoic as blank as moonlight on an arctic glacier, and he agreed that they should move into the woods at once. "We'll have to couple," he said. "The provosts raised hell here last night and I don't want that to happen again."

"When the last discussion of plans was finished and Prunius was ready to go, Lake said, "It might be of help if we knew more about Bagorsk, besides its name." He quoted deeply, "'the last day of god and men.'"

"I was with the Dunsber Expedition that discovered Bagorsk," Prunius said. "We didn't stay to study it very long—there wasn't any reason to. Six men died and we marked it on the chart as unapproachable. The Goons know it—when they left us here they were giving us death."

"Yes," Lake looked out across the camp, at the dead and the dying and the snow whipping from the frozen hills. "But it's too soon to die," he said.

The dead were buried in shallow graves, and men set to work building crude shelters among the trees. Inventory was taken of the promised "ample supplies" which
were no more than the few personal possessions that each Rezay had been permitted to take along. There was very little food and inven-
tory of the firearms and ammunition showed the total three to be disconcertingly small.

There were a few specks of hair over the Rezay, drowsy lashes in particular, but they would have to learn how to make and use bows and arrows as soon as possible.

An overcast darkened the sky and at noon black storms clouds came driving in from the west. Eff

er were intensified to complete the move before the storm broke. Lake's group established itself be

side his and by late afternoon they were ready.

The rain came at dusk, a roaring downpour. The wind rose to a velocity that made the trees lean, and hampered and ripped at the hastily built shelters. Many of them were destroyed. The rain continued, growing colder and driven in almost horizontal sheets by the wind. One by one, the fires went out.

The rain turned to snow at midnight. Pennis walked through it wearily, forcing himself on. He

was no longer young—he was fifty—and he had had little rest.

He had known, of course, that successful leadership would involve more effort and sacrifice on his part than on the part of those he led. He had thought that what

little be knew of Ragoonak might help the others to survive. So he had taken charge, hesitating to dis

perse his claim as leader. It was, he supposed, some old instinct that forbid him to stand idly aside and let the group die.

The snow stopped an hour later and the wind died to a frigid moaning. The clouds thinned, broke apart, and the giant star looked down upon the land with its cold, blue light. The provers came then, in sudden, ferocious attack.

Twenty got through past the slaughtered south guards, and charged into the innermost of the camp. As they did so, the call went up the guard lines:

"Emergency guards—shut in!"

Above the trampolike, demoniacal yammering of the provers came the screams of women, the thud of men's feet, the shouting and cursing of men as they tried to fight the provers with knives and clubs. Then the emergency guards—every third man from the east and west guard lines—came plunging through the snow, firing as they came.

The provers launched them-

selves way from their victims and toward the guards, leaving a wamo
to stagger lamely, blood spurting from a severed artery and splashing dark in the starlight in the white snow.

The air was filled with the cracking of gunfire and the deep,
savage snarling of the provokers. Ten of them got through, leaving four dead guards behind them. The other ten lay where they had fallen and the remaining guards turned to hurry back to their sisters, exhaling as they went.

The wounded woman was lying in the snow and a fist-sized stone knelt over her. He straightened, shaking his head, and joined the others as they searched for the injured among the provoker's victims.

They found no injured, only the dead. The provokers killed with grim efficiency.

"John—"

Chint, in charge of the shelter in that section of the camp, hurried toward him, his dark eyes搜索ed under whiskered brows.

"The wood is running," he said. "It's going to take some time to get the fires going again. There are babies and small children who have their mothers when the provokers attacked. They're already cold and wet—they'll freeze to death before we can get the fires going."

Petinias looked at the ten provokers lying in the snow and searched toward them. "They're wards. Take out their guns."

"What?" Then Chint's eyes lighted with comprehension and he hurried away without further question.

He went on, to make the rounds of the guard stations. When he returned he said that his order had been obeyed.

The provokers lay in the snow as before, their faces bared and their devil's faces turned to their dying mates. But snug and warm inside them, children slept.

There were three hundred dead when the wagon was lifted to thin out the four hundred into the white, frozen land; two hundred from Hulh Fever and one hundred from provoker attacks.

Lake reported, approximately the same number of dead and said, "Our guards were too fat apart."

"We'll have to move everyone in closer together," Petinias agreed. "And we've going to have to have a stockade well around the camp."

All were moved to the center of the camp area that day and work was started on building a big wall around the camp. When the provokers came that night they found a ring of guards and fires which kept most of them out.

Men moved heavily at their jobs as the days went by. Of all the forces on Ragunor, the gravity was the worst. Even at night there was no real rest and from which they woke tired and ach-

Each morning there would be none who did not awaken at all, though their hearts had been wound enough for living on Earth or Athena.

But overworked muscles
The Sack to Die

She stopped to talk to Perennis one evening. She had changed in the past weeks. She still wore the red skirt, faded and patched, but her face was tired and thoughtful and no longer bold.

"Is it true, Julia?" she asked, "that only a few of us might be able to have children here and that most of us who try to have children in this gravity will die for it?"

"It's true," he said, "but you know that when you married."

"Yes. . . . I know it."

"There was a little silence, then, "All my life I've had fun and done as I pleased. The human race didn't need me and we both knew it. But now—some of us can be apart from the others or be afraid of anything. If we're selfish and afraid there will come a time when the last of us will die and there will be nothing on Ragnarok to show we were ever here."

"I don't want it to end like that for us. I want there to be children, to live on after we're gone, so I'm going to try to have children. I'm not afraid and I won't be."

When he did not reply she said, "almost self-consciously. "Coming from me that all sounds silly, doesn't it?"

"It sounds wise and splendid, Julia," he said, "and it's what I thought you were going to say."
Venome Science Fiction

That was how short the time to grow and reproduce before the brown death of summer came. The poisons were suddenly gone one day, in follow the spring north, and for a week men could work outside without protection.

Then the warm spell appeared, the one they had not expected—

The stockade wall was a blue-black rectangle behind them and the blue star burned with the brilliance of a dream moon, lighting the wood in blue shadow and azure light. Premias and the hunter walked a little in front of the two r malaysia, wandering to keep it in the silent glade.

"It was on the other side of the next group of trees," the hunter said in a low voice. "Turtle was dragging out the second wood-goose while I came in with the first one. He shouldn't have been over fifteen minutes behind—not said it's been over an hour."

They rounded the grove of trees. At first it seemed there was nothing before them but the empty, grassy glade. Then they saw it lying on the ground no more than twenty feet in front of them. It was—it had been—a man. He was leashed and stripped to his loincloth.

For a moment there was dead silence, then the hunter whispered, "What did that?"

The answer came in the pounding
ting of down hooves. A ferale antelope beside the turn mantled itself into a monstrous charging bullock: a thing like a gray bear, eight feet tall at the shoulder, with the starlight glinting along the curving, vicious length of its single horns.

"Unicorns," Premias said, and jars up his rifle.

The rifle cracked in a small, hollow valley. The unicorn quaked at fury and struck the hunter, catching him on its horn and hurling him thirty feet. One of the riflemen went down under the unicorn's hooves, his cry ending almost as soon as it began.

The unicorn reared the and in deep fumes as it whirled back to Premias and the remaining riflemen, not turning in the manner of four-footed beasts of Earth but soaring and spinning on its hind feet. It reared above them as it whirled, the tip of its horn fifteen feet above the ground and its front hooves swinging around like great chokes.

Premias shot again, his sights on what he hoped would be a vital spot, and the riflemen shot in instant later. The shot went true. The momentum of the unicorn's swing brought it on around, then it collapsed, falling to the ground with jerking muscles.

"We get it!" the riflemen said, "We—"

It half scrambled to its feet and
made a noise; a call that went out through the night like the blast of a mighty trumpet. Then it dropped back to the ground, to die while its call was still echoing from the nearer hills.

From the nest came an answering trumpet blast, a trumpet-miss that was sounded again from the north and from the south. Then there came a low and suffused drumming, like the pounding of thousands of hooves.

The rifer's face was blue-white in the starlight. "The others are coming—we'll have to run for it!"

He turned and began to run toward the distant bulk of the stockade.

"No!" Penzias commanded, quick and harsh. "Not the stockade!"

The riflemen kept running, snorting not to hear him in his panic. He commanded again, "Not the stockade—you'll lead the unicorns into it!"

Again the riflemen seemed not to hear him.

The unicorns were coming into sight; converging in from the east and north and south, the sound of their hooves swelling to a thunder that filled the night. The riflemen would reach the stockade only a little ahead of them and they would go through the wall as though it had been made of paper. For a little while the arm inside the stockade would be filled with the stamping of swarming, charging unicorns and the screams of the dying. It would be over very quickly and there would be no one left alive on Ingwaneck.

There was only one thing for him to do.

He dropped to one knee so his aim would be steady and the sight catch the running man's back. He pressed the trigger and the rifle cracked viciously as it bucked against his shoulder.

The man spun and fell hard against the ground. He raised himself a little and looked back, his face white and accusing and unhelping.

"You shot me!"

Then he fell forward again and lay without moving.

Penzias turned back to face the unicorns and to look at the trees in the northern grove. He saw what he already knew: they were young terrors and too small to offer any escape for him. There was no place to run, no place to hide.

There was nothing he could do but wait; nothing he could do but stand in the blue starlight and watch the devil's herd冲send toward him and think, in the last moment of his life, how swiftly and unexpectedly death could come to a man.

The unicorns held the Rejekr prisoners in their stockade the rest of the night and all the next day. Lake had seen the shooting of the
erhman and had watched the unicorn herd bill John Penrith and then engage the dead off man. He ordered a series of fires built around the inside of the stockade walls, quickly, for the unicorns were already moving on toward them.

This fire was started and green wood was thrown on to make them smellier and smoke for as long as possible. Then the unicorns were just outside and every person in the stockade went into the excavation of the shelters.

Lake had already given his last order: There would be absolute quiet until 3 if the unicorns left; a quiet that would be enforced with flat or club whenever necessary. The unicorns were still outside when morning came. The fires could not be extinguished; the sight of a man moving within the stockade would bring the entire herd crashing through the walls. The lakes dragged by, the smoke from the dying fires distorting to thin streamers. The unicorns grew increasingly bold and snarled, crowding closer to the walls and peering through the openings between the logs. The sun was setting when one of the unicorns trumpeted; a sound different in that of the call to battle. The unicorns threw up their heads to listen, then they turned and drifted away. Within minutes the entire herd was gone out of sight through the woods, toward the north.

"That was close," Barber said, coming over to where Lake stood by the south wall. "It's herd to make two thousand people stay quiet hour after hour. Especially the children—they didn't understand."

"We'll have to leave," Lake said. "Lawn?" Barber asked. "We can make the stockade strong enough to hold out unicorns."

"Look to the south," Lake told him.

Barber did so and saw what Lake had already seen; a broad, low cloud of dust moving slowly toward them.

"Another herd of unicorns," Lake said. "John didn't know they migrated—the Danish Expedition wasn't here long enough to learn that. There will be herd after herd coming through and no time for us to strengthen the walls. We'll have to leave tonight."

Preparations were made for the departure; preparations that consisted mainly of providing each person with as much in the way of food and supplies as he or she could carry. In the 1.5 gravity of Skaunok, that was not much.

They left when the blue star rose. They filed out through the northern gate and the rear guard closed it behind them. There was almost no conversation and some of them turned to take a last look at what had been the only home..."
they had ever known or imagined. Then they faced forward again, to the northwest, where the foot-hills of the plateau might offer them sanctuary.

Lake stepped to look back to the south where they had climbed the first low ridge. The cloud of dust was much nearer and it was coming straight toward the scree.

They found their sanctuary on the second day; a limestone ridge honeycombed with caves. Men were sent back at once to carry the food and supplies to the new home.

When they returned with the first load they reported that the second herd of unicorns had broken down the walls and raised the interior of the stone into wreckage. He sent them back to retrieve more to bring everything down to the last piece of bent metal or torn cloth. They would find uses for all of it in the future.

The blue star became a small sun and the yellow sun blazed hotter. The last of the unicorns disappeared to the north and there were suddenly very few woodpeckers to be found. The final all-out hunt was made.

Preparing the meat was no problem—it was cut in strips and dried in the sun. But the hunters returned on the third day with an amount of meat far insufficient to last until fall brought the woodpeckers back from the north.

Lake concluded that a much stricter than before and finally contemplated the spectacle of famine that hovered over his charges.

Early summer came to wither and cool the leaves of men, and there were twelve hundred of them. The weeks dragged by and summer without rain. The heart reached its lowest height then and there was no escape from it, not even in the caves. There was no night; the blue sun rose in the east as the yellow sun set in the west. There was no life of any kind to be seen; nothing moved across the barren land but the swarming sandstorms.

The death rate increased rapidly, especially among the children. The small supply of canned and dehydrated milk, fruit and vegetables was consumed exclusively by them but it was far too small.

Each day thin and haggard mothers would come to him to plead with him to save their children. "... it would take so little to save him—please—before it's too late..."

But the time was yet so long until fall would bring relief from the famine that he could only answer with a grim and final, "No."

And watch the last flickering hope fade from their eyes and watch them turn away, to go and sit beside their dying children.

There were six hundred and forty-three of them when the food...
The thief was discovered. The thief was a man named Bremson, one of the men who had been entrapped with storing the food supplies. His cache was found buried beside his pallet: dried meat, case of salt, little plastic bags of dehydrated fruits and vegetables.

Lake summoned the four sub-leaders—Craig, Barber, Schradur, Anders—and sent two of them to get Bremson. Confounded by the evidence and by the grim Quints, Bremson blanched briefly then broke and admitted his guilt.

"I won't ever do it again," he promised, wiping at his sweating face. "I swear I won't."

"I know you won't," Lake said. He spoke to Craig. "You and Barber take him to the lookout point."

What—? Bremson's protest was cut off as Craig and Barber took him by the arm and walked him swiftly away. Lake turned to Anders. "Get a rope," he ordered.

Anders paled a little. "A rope?"

"A rope. Do you object?"

"No," Anders said, a little weakly. "No—I don't object."

The lookout point was an outcropping poyr of the ridge, six hundred feet from the caves and in full view of them. A lone tree stood there, its dead limbs throning like white arms through the broad foliage of the dense forest that still lived. Craig and Barber waited under the tree; Bremson between them. The lowering sun shone hot and bright on his face as he squinted back toward the caves at the approach of Lake and the other two.

He reviled to look at Barber. "What is it—what are you going to do?" There was the terror of fear in his voice. "What are you going to do to me?"

Barber did not answer and Bremson turned back to Lake. He saw the rope in Anders' hand for the first time and his face went white with comprehension.

"No!

He threw himself back with a violence that almost tore him loose from the grip of Craig and Barber. "No—no!"

Schradur stepped forward to help hold him and Lake took the rope from Anders. He fashioned a noose in it while Bremson struggled and made pattering, animal sounds, his eyes fixed in horrified fascination on the rope.

When the noose was finished he threw the free end of the rope over the white limb above Bremson. He released the noose and Barber caught it, so that it swung around Bremson's neck.

Bremson struggled, writhing there, gasping weakly. For a moment it appeared that he would faint. Then he worked his mouth soundlessly until words came.

"You won't—you can't—really hang me?"

Lake spoke to him:
"We're going to hang you. We trusted you and what you stole would have saved the lives of ten children. You've heard the children cry because they were so hungry. You've watched them become too weak to cry or care any more and you've watched them die.

Your crime is the murder of ten children and the betrayal of our trust in you. If you have anything to say, say it now while you can.

"You can't—I have a right to live!" The words came quick and ragged with hysteria and he reached to appeal to the ones who held him. "I have a right to live—you won't let him murder me."

Only Craig answered him, with a snarl that was like the thin snarl of a wolf.

"Two of the children who died were mine."

Lahn nodded to Craig and Schroeder, not waiting any longer. They stopped back to pull the free end of the rope and Remmon screamed as what was coming, tearing loose from the grip of Barber.

Then his scream was abruptly cut off as he was jerked into the air. There was a cracking sound and he kicked spasmodically, his head swaying grotesquely to one side.

Craig and Schroeder and Barber watched him with hard, expressionless faces but Ansley
turned quickly away, to be sudden and violently sick.

"He was the first to lower us," Lake said. "Smell the rope and let him smell them. If there are any others like him, they'll know what to expect."

The blue sea rose as they went back to the cover. Behind them Benrossen swung and twisted aimlessly on the end of the rope. Two long, pale shadows moving and twisted with him; a yellow one to the west and a blue one to the east.

They numbered four hundred when the first sun came; the rain that meant the end of summer. The yellow sun moved southward and the blue sun shrank steadily. Grass grew again and the woodlands receded. For a while there was meat in plenty and green shoots to procure the diet deficiencies. Then the animals came, to make hunting dangerous, and beside them the predators to make hunting with bows and arrows almost impossible. But the supply of carriages was at the vanishing point and the bowmen learned, through necessity, how to use their bows with increasing skill and deadliness.

They were prepared as best they could be when winter came. Wood had been gathered in great quantities and the caves had been lined with crude doors and a ventilation system.

Men were put in charge of the food supplies. Lake took inventory at the beginning and held check-ups in irregular and unannounced intervals. He found no shortages. He had expected none—Benrossen had long since been hunted but the rope still hung from the dead limb, the rope swinging and turning in the wind.

A Baptism calendar was made and the corresponding Earth dots marked on it. By a coincidence, Christmas fell near the middle of the winter. There was still the same rustling of food on Christmas day but little brown trees were cut for the children and decorated with such ornaments as could be made from the materials at hand.

There were toys under the trees—those that had been patiently whitened from wood or made from scraps of cloth and provider skins while the children slept. They were crude and humble toys but the pale, thin faces of the children were bright with delight when they beheld them. The magic of an Earth Christmas was recaptured for a few fleeting hours that day.

That night a child was born to the girl named Julia, on a pellet of dried grass and provider skins. She asked for her baby before she died and they let her have it.

I wasn't afraid, was I?" she asked. "But I wish it wasn't so cold—I wish I could see my baby before I go . . . ."
They took the baby from her arms when she was gone and re-
moved from it the enveloping blanket that had concealed from her 
that it was still-born and pu-
terally deformed.

There were those hundred and fifty of them when the first violent 
storms of spring came. By then eighteen children had been born. 
Twelve were still-born, four were 
deformed and lived only a little while, but two were like any nor-
mal babies on Earth. There was 
one difference: the 1.5 gravity of 
Ragnak did not seem to affect 
the Ragnak-born children as it 
had the one born on Earth.

There were deaths from Hell 
Fever again but two little boys 
and a girl survived and sur-
vived; the first proof that Hell Fe-
vor was not always and invariably 
fatal.

That summer there was not the 
feasting of the first summer. There 
was sufficient meat and dried 
herbs but not enough for those who had be-
come accustomed to it.

Loki had taken a wife that 
spring and his son was born that 
fallowing winter. It stressed his 
philosophy and he began thinking of the future, not in terms of years 
but in terms of genera-
tions to come.

There was a man named West who had held degrees in philos-
ophy on Earth and he said to Loki 
our night, as they sat together by 
the fire: 

"Here you noticed the way the 
children listen to the stories of 
what used to be on Earth, what 
might have been on Athena, and 
what would be if only we could 
find a way to escape from Reg-
naek?"

"I've noticed," he said.

"These stories already contain 
the goal for the future genera-
tions," West went on. "Sometime, 
someday, there will go to Athena, 
to kill the Gorgons there and free 
the Titan slaves and reclaim 
Athena as their own."

He had listened to them talk 
of the interstellar flight to Athena 
as they sat by their fires and 
worked at making bows and ar-
rows. Without the dream of some-
day leaving Ragnak there would 
be nothing before them but the 
vision of generation after genera-
tion living and dying on a world 
that could never give them more 
than existence.

The dream was needed. But it, 
alone, was not enough. How long 
on Earth, had it been from the 
Neolithic age to advanced civil-
ization—how long from the time 
men were ready to leave their 
caves until they were ready to go 
in the stars? 

Twelve thousand years.

There were men and women 
among the Iccepts who had been 
specialists in various fields. There 
were a few books that had sur-
淆 the turmoil of the unicorns and the unicorn hides preserved on inner skins that would make a parchment for writing upon with ink made from the black laurel tree bark.

The knowledge contained in the books and the learning of the Rejected still being should be preserved for the future generations. With the absence of the learning perhaps they really could, somehow, escape from their prison and reclaim Athens.

"We'll have to have a school," he said, and told West of what he had been thinking.

West nodded in agreement. "We should get started with the school and the writings as soon as possible. Especially the writings. Some of the treatises will require more time to write than Ragnarok will give the authors." A school for the children was started the next day and the writing of the treatises began. Two of the treatises would be small but of such importance that it was decided to make four copies of each: Craig's INTERIOR FEATURES OF A GERM CRUSHER and Schroeder's OPERATION OF GERMAN BLASTERS.

Spring came and the school and writings were interrupted until the summer arrived, then they were resumed. There was another cessation of school and writing during the fall and they were resumed when winter came.

Your followed your, each much like the one that had preceded it but for the rapid aging of the Old Ones, as Lake and the others called themselves, and the growing up of the Young Ones. Five years passed and no woman among the Old Ones could any longer have children but three had been eight named, healthy children born. Twelve years passed and there were ten of the Old Ones left, ninety Young Ones, ten Ragnarok-born children of the Old Ones, and two Ragnarok-born children of the Young Ones.

West died in the winter of the fifteenth year and Lake was the last of the Old Ones. White-haired and aged far beyond his years, he was still leader of the group that had shrank to ninety. He knew, before spring arrived, that he would not be able to compare the younger ones on the hunts. He could do little but sit by his fire and feel the gravity dragging at his heart, warning him the end was near.

It was time he chose his successor. He had hoped to live to see his son take his place but Jim was only thirteen. There was a scar-faced, tall boy of twenty among the Young Ones, not the oldest among them but the one who seemed to be the most thoughtful and stubbornly determined: John Pennington's grandson, Bill Hambolt.

A violent storm was raging
outside the cave the night he told the others he wanted Bill Humbold to be his successor. There were no objections and, with few words and without ceremony, he terminated his fifteen years of leadership.

He left the others, his son among them, and went back to the place where he slept. His fire was low, down to dying embers, but he was too tired to build it up again. He lay down on his pallet and saw, with neither surprise nor fear, that his time was much shorter than he had thought — it was already at hand.

He let the last day noise him, not fighting it. He had done the best he could for the others and now the weary journey was ended.

The thought dissolved into the memory of the day fifteen years before. The meeting of the storm became the thunder of the Gemm cruisers as they disappeared into the gray sky. Four thousand Rejicts stood in the cold wind and watched them go, the children not yet understanding that they had been condemned to die. Somehow, his own son was among them.

He tried feebly to rise. There was work to do— a lot of work...

Bill Humbold thought of the plan only that spring and considered it during the coming winter.

For him the dream of secondary leaving Reg롵, and taking Athana from the Gens, was a journey toward which they must fight with unswerving determination. He could remember a little of Earth and he could remember the excitement and high hope as the Constellate remarked for Athena. Quite clearly he remembered the day the Gem left them on Regrollo, the wind sweeping down the barren valley, his father gone and his mother working to cry. Almost all other memories was the one of the cold, dark dawn when his mother had held him and shielded him while the powdery dust rose from the earth. She could have escaped then, alone.

He would remember what the Gens had done and hate them till the day he died. But to future generations the slow, unanswered progress of contracts might bring a false sense of security, might turn the eyes of what the Gens had done to the Rejicts and the warnings of the Old Ones into legends and then into half-believed myths.

The Gemm would have to be loved to Regrollo before that could happen.

He set the plan in action as soon as the spring hunting ended. Among the Young Ones was a man who had been fascinated by the study of electronics and had read all the material available on
the subject and he went to him to ask him the question:

"George, could you build a transmitter—one that would send a signal to Athene?"

George laid down the arrow he had been straightening. "A transmitter?"

"I know it would have to be a normal-space transmitter—you couldn't possibly rig up a hyperspace transmitter," he said, "but that would be enough—just a dot-dot transmitter."

"It would take two hundred years for the signal to get to Athene," George said. "And forty days for a Gemini cruiser to come to Ragunan through hyperspace."

"I know."

"So you want our showdown with the Gerns to come no later than two hundred years from now?" George asked.

"You're as old as I am," he said. "You still remember the Gerns and what they did, don't you?"

"I'm older than you," George said. "I was nine when they left us here. They kept my father and mother and my sister was only three. I used to keep her warm by holding her but I couldn't. The Hell Fever got her that first night. Yes... I remember the Gerns and what they did."

"The generations to come won't have the memories that we have. Someday the Gerns will come to Ragunan, even if only by chance and a thousand years from now, and our people might by then have forgotten what the Gerns did to us and would do to them. But if they know the Gerns will be here two hundred years from now they won't have time to forget."

"You're not supposed to sit in a cave and build an interstellar transmitter," George said. "But it doesn't take much power with the right circuit. There's wire and various electronic gadgets here. There's metal that can be heated and shaped into a wave-driven generator. It might be done..."

George completed the transmitter and generator five years later. It was set in operation and George observed its output as registered by the various meters, one of which he had made himself.

"Work, but it will reach the Gern monitor station on Athene," he said. "It's ready to send—what do you want to say?"

"Make it something short," Hundoh told him. "Make it 'Raganard calling. That will be enough to bring a Gern cruiser.'"

George patted his finger over the transmitting lens. "This will set something in motion that will end two hundred years from now with either the Gerns or us going under. These signals can never be recalled."

"I think the Gerns will be the..."
“I think the same thing,” George said. “I hope we’re right. It’s something we’ll never know.”

He began deciphering the key.

A boy was given the job of sending the signals and the cell went out twice daily toward distant Armin and winter froze the creek and stopped the waterswheel that powered the generator.

Hinchet sent out prospecting expeditions that year and in following years to search for metallic ores. The Damson Expedition had reported Ragnark to be virtually devoid of minerals but he held to the hope that they might find enough metals to make weapons with which to meet the Gorm. Perhaps—fantastic—hope though it was—enough to plan the building of a small rocket ship with a hyperspace drive.

But no ores were found, other than iron ore of such low grade as to be useless. Neither did Ragnar ever plant any fiber-bearing plants from which thread and cloth could be made.

At the end of ten years he was forced to accept the fact that Ragnark did not and would never offer men more than the bare necessities of life. There would be no weapons or spaceship built in the future; there were no metals with which to build them. Ragnark was a prison, devoid of all means of escape but one: the possibility of killing the jailer to the cell door and overpowering him.

The sound had been made ten years before, and was being made every year; that would bring the jailer to investigate, with his weapons and with his keys.

He was forty-five and the last of the Young Chon when he invoke one night to find himself burning with the Hall Fever. He waited quietly. There was no reason to call to the others. They could do nothing for him and he had already done all he could for them. Now they must carry on, forty-nine men, women and children, and know that their last living link with the past was gone; that they were truly on their own.

They represented the lowest ebb in numbers of human life on Ragnark and they were all Ragnark-born and their number would increase. For a while, perhaps, the immediate problems of survival would overshadow everything else. But the books would be lost and there would always be some who would study them. They would grow in number as the generations went by and the lapse would be shorter; the time for the coming of the Gorm, when measured in tens of generations, was already near.

Forces were in motion that would bring the seventh genera-
than the trial of combat and the opportunity for freedom. But they, themselves, would have to achieve their own destiny.

He refused to let doubt touch his mind as to what that destiny would be. The men of Bagvard were only furtive hunters who concealed in caves, but the time would come when they would walk as conquerors before beaten and humbled Gvens.

It was fifty years from the sending of the first signal and there were eighty-four of them... The West stepped under a tree, his bow and quiver arrow in his hands, and regained a sight of warriors as he scanned the clearing before him. He was fifteen and it was his third day of the intensive training that began for each boy when he reached that age; the hunter-and-hunted game in which his father, at the moment, was a prowler he was stalking and which was in turn stalking him. It was a very important game but the sun was hot and it seemed to him his father was unduly demanding—

He heard, too, the whisper of moving feet behind him. He whirled, bringing up the bow with the arrow nocked in the string, and fell sprawling backward over a root he had not seen.

His father’s body struck him and he was knocked blinded and helpless under a rain of hard, open-handed blows. His efforts to resist were in vain and it seemed to him the lesson would never end.

When his father was finished he sat up dizzily and wiped the blood from his nose. His father squatted before him, his muscles rippling as he rocked on the balls of his feet and regarded him with thoughtful speculation.

“Didn’t I tell you that prowlers will circle a hunter and attack him from the rear?” he asked.

Yes, but I’ll still have got you with the arrow if it hadn’t been for that root,” he defended himself.

His father reached out with a blur that caught him alongside the head and knocked him rolling in a blaze of white light.

“What did I tell you about watching your steps?” he asked.

He sat up gingerly hold his hand to his ear. “To pay attention so I won’t ever trip over anything... Next time I will.”

He got to his feet to retrieve the arrow he had dropped, moving more quickly than before and with his desire to stop and rest forgotten.

His nose was still bleeding and all the other places still hurt but it never occurred to him to feel the slightest resentment toward his father. His father was doing what all fathers did with their sons: teaching him how to survive. Soon he would have to hunt...
real prowlers and unicorns and learn next," he said. "You've learned how to kill prowlers and unicorns. Now you'll learn how to kill bigger game—Grens. They'll be here in a hundred years for certain—a great many of your grandchildren will be alive yet when they come."

"But if you don't learn how to kill Grens now you may never have any grandchildren. All of you know why—the Grens might come tomorrow."

It was one hundred and twenty-five years from the sending of the first signal and there were five hundred and ninety-five of them. . . .

"You can kill prowlers and unicorns," Leader John Lake said, "but killing Grens is harder to do."

The group of boys he addressed had recently and successfully gone through their first hunting season. They had proven they could face anything that walked on Ragnakid. Danze Craig answered with the confidence of youth:

"An arrow will go through a Gren."

"If you get the chance to shoot it. But what do you think the Gren would do? Suppose the Gren came today—what would you do?"

Danze Craig's answer came without hesitation: "Fight."

"An arrow won't go through a steel cruiser. One of their turret blasters could kill every human being on Ragnakid in one sweep."

"Then what should we do?"

"Danze asked.

"That's what you're going to learn next," he said. "You've learned how to kill prowlers and unicorns. Now you'll learn how to kill bigger game—Grens. They'll be here in a hundred years for certain—a great many of your grandchildren will be alive yet when they come."

But if you don't learn how to kill Grens now you may never have any grandchildren. All of you know why—the Grens might come tomorrow."

It was one hundred and twenty-five years from the sending of the first signal and there were five hundred and ninety-five of them. . . .

Bunker led the way into the starlit night just outside the mouth of the cave, his twelve p脽alk following him. They acted themselves behind him, ranging in age from a fourteen-year-old boy down to a girl of six, and waited for him to speak.

He pointed to the sky, where the group of stars called the Achene constellation.
VENTURE SCIENCE FICTION

leaks we are here. Why is it, then, that you and all the other groups of children have to study reading and writing and have no time to learn about all sorts of things you can't eat or wear, like history and physics and the way to fire a Germ Master?"

The hand of every child went up. He selected eight-year-old Fred Humblet. "Tell us, Freddy."

"Because we don't know when the Gens will come," Freddy said. "In hyperspace their cruises can travel a lightyear every five days. One of their cruisers might pass by only forty or fifty lightyears away and drop into normal space for some reason and pick up our signal. Thus they would be here in only eight or nine days. So we have to know about them and how to fight them because there aren't very many of us."

The little girl said, "The Gens will come to kill part of us and make slaves out of the rest, like they did with the others a long time ago. They're awful mean and awful smart and we have to be smarter than they are."

The oldest boy, Steve Lasa, was still watching the constellation of Athenos. "I hope they come," he said. "I hope they come just as soon as I'm old enough to kill them." "How would a Germ cruiser look if it came at night?" Freddy asked. "Would it come from to-ward Athenos?"

"It probably would," Bumler answered. "You would look toward Athenos and you would see its naked shot as it came down, like a bright trail of fire--"

A bright trail of fire burst sud- denly into being, coming from the constellation of Athenos and lighting up the woods and the startled faces as it arced down toward them.

"It's them!" a tingle voice ex- claimed, and there was a quick flurry of movement among the children. Then the light vanished, leaving a faint glow where it had been.

"Only a matter," Bumler said as he turned to the children. He saw with deep satisfac tion that none of them had run and that the older boys had shoved the smaller children behind them and were standing in a relaxed little line, ready to their bunch with which to ward off the Gens.

It was one hundred and fifty years from the sending of the first signal and there were twelve hun- dred and eighty of them. . . .

Frank Schoder opened the book to a fresh parchment page and dipped the pen in the clay bottle of lance-tip ink. What he would write would be only the observations of an old man who had recently transferred leadership to someone younger but they were things he knew to be true.
and he wanted those who lived in the years to come to read them and remember them.

He began to write:

We have adapted, as the Old Ones in the beginning believed we would do. We move as swiftly in the 1.5 gravity of Bagarok as our ancestors did in the gravity of Earth. The Bell Penser has become unnecessary to us and the predators and sumpens are beginning to fear us.

We have survived; the generations that the Gerns presumed would never be born. We must never forget the characteristics that insured that survival: courage to fight, and die if necessary, and an unswerving loyalty of every individual to the group.

Fifty years from now the Gerns will come. There will be no one to help. Those on Earth are alone and it is probable that Earth has been destroyed by war.

We will stand or fall, alone. But if we of today could know that those who meet the Gerns will still have the courage and the loyalty to one another that made our survival possible, then we would know that the Gerns are already defeated.

It was two hundred and seventy-five years from the sending of the first signal and there were two thousand and six hundred of them.

Jill Humbolt sat high on the hillside above the town, the book open in her lap and her short cap set close to her right hand. Far below her the massive stackade wall, built to keep out uniform, was a square surrounding the thick-walled houses. Wide caskets of logs and brush spread over the roof to keep out the summer heat as much as possible. They were nice houses, she thought, much easier to live in than the cave where she had been.

Her son baby would be born in one of them in only seven months. And if it was a boy, he might be leader when the Gerns come.

She already knew what they would name him: John, after John Pennsies, the first of the great and wise Old Ones.

A rug was tied to her left. She reached instinctively for her spear as she jumped her head toward the sound.

It was a scream, just within the trees thirty feet away.

It abandoned its stealth at her movement and broke out of the trees in a squalling, pandering lunge. She came to her feet in one quick movement, the hook falling unnoticed to the ground, and applauded the situation to determine what she must do to stay alive.

In her swirl, calm appraisal she found but one thing to do: stand her ground and make use of the fact that a human could jump to
one side more quickly than a fourfooted beast in headlong charge. It was coming with its head low- 
cord to impale her, and for a frac- 
tion of a second, if she could 
jump quickly enough and at 
eactly the right moment, the vul-
nerable spot behind her jaw would 
be within reach of her spear.

She felt the red fins under her 
neck as she flashed her 
weight a little, her eyes on the 
lowered head of the unicorn and 
the spear held steady. The ground 
trembled under the pounding of 
its hooves and the black horn was 
suddenly an arm's length from her 
shoulder.

She jumped aside then, swing- 
ing as she jumped, and thrust 
the spear with all her strength into 
the unicorn's neck.

The horn burst and the 
and the spear went deep into 
the flesh. She released it and 
flung herself back to dodge the 
slashing hooves. The force of the 
unicorn's charge took it past her, then its leg 
collapsed under it, and its massive 
body crashed to the ground. It 
leaped once and then lay still.

She went to it and removed 
the spear, feeling a stirring of 
pride as she walked past her sullen 
victim. Eighteen-year-old boys had 
been known to kill unicorns with 
sparks but never, before, had an 
eighteen-year-old girl tried to do 
it. The sea she carried would be 
pride of her when he—

She saw the book and gasped 
in horror, all else forgotten. The 
uniform had struck it with one of 
s its hooves and it lay knocked to 
outside, battered and torn.

She ran to it and picked it up, 
to smooth the torn leaves as best 
she could. It had been a very 
important book; one of the 
old books, printed on real paper, 
that told them things they would need 
to know when the Gypsy came.

Now, her confidence had eroded 
in such damage to it that page 
after page was unreadable.

She would be punished for it, 
of course. She would have to go 
to the town hall and stand up 
where everybody could see her 
while the chief of the council told 
her how she should have been 
told to take good care of the book and 
how she had betrayed them most 
in her. It would all be true and 
she would not be able to look any 
one in the eye as she stood there. 
She was a traitor, she was a—

a witch?

She started slowly back down 
the hill toward town, not seeing 
the unicorn as she walked past it; 
the bloody spear trailing disas-
bruptly behind her and her head 
hanging in shame.

It was two hundred years from 
the sending of the first signal and 
there were five thousand of them. 
John Hunselt stood on the 
wide steplike wall and looked to 
the southeast to the distant val-
lay where the Grom cruisers had set down so long ago.

It was a blizzard and harvest storm to him, despite all the years he had known it. Winter was coming again; the gray afternoon sky was spattering flakes of snow and an icy wind was sweeping down from the north. Always, on Bag-narok, either winter was coming or the burned death of summer. They had adapted to the environment but Bagnarok was a prison that had no key, a hard and barren prison in which all the distant years of the future held only the never changing monotony of mere existence.

But the imprisonment should end soon. Restlessness and impatience stirred in him at the thought. He was of the generation that the Old Ones had planned would meet and overpower the Groms. He was twenty-five years old and he had studied since he was six for that meeting. He could draw diagrams of the interior of a Grom cruiser, placing the compartments and circuits exactly where the old drawings showed them to be. He and many of the others would speak Grom, though they might with an accent since they had had only the written lessons. And all of them had spent many hours practicing with wooden models of the Grom hand blaster. They were as prepared as they could ever be and during the past year the anticipation of the coming of the Groms had become a fever of desire among them all. It was hard to compel themselves to go patiently about their routine duties when any day or night the cruiser might come that would carry them to the stars tall and black and incredible deadly, and thru' if they could take it.

The Groms would come, to look upon the men of Bagnarok with contempt. They would not fear the men of Bagnarok, thinking they were superior to them, and their belief in their superiority would bring their defeat.

A sound came above the moan of the wind, a warning that missed its pitch and swelled in volume as it came nearer. He listened, watching the gray sky and his heart thumped with exhilaration. As he watched it broke through the clouds, riding its rockets of flame.

The cruiser had come! It settled to the ground, so near the stackade that it loomed high and menacing above the town with its blaster turrets looking down into it. It was beautiful in its menace—it was like some great and savage predator that might be tamed and used to kill the other predators.

He turned and dropped the ten feet to the ground inside the stackade, landing lightly. The warning signal was being sounded from the center of the town, a uniform born
that gave not the call they had used in the practice alarm. But this time it was real, this time there might never be an All Clear sounded. Already the women and children would be hurrying along the tunnels that led to the safety of the woods beyond the town. The Germ might use their newest blasters to destroy the town and all to it before the day was over. There was no way of knowing what might happen before it ended but whatever it was, it would be the action they had all been waiting for. 

He ran to where the others would be gathering, hearing the horn ring wild and savage and triumphant as it announced the end of two centuries of waiting.

"So we came two hundred light-years to find this?" Commander Gambo indicated the viewscreen with a poder white hand—burly in the gravity of Hapsburg—where the bearded sages could be seen among their pales and rude boards.

Occasionally one of them would glance toward the cruiser with something like mild curiosity and Sokol's commander North frowned with a combination of perplexity and amusement. These descendants of the Rejek had obviously degenerated into utter primitives and primitives always amazed to the presence of a cruiser with a high degree of awe and fear. These merely ignored it.

"They behave like mindless animals," he said to the commander. "They couldn't have sent these signals."

"The transmitter was built two hundred years ago, before they degenerated," the commander said. "It must have been fitted with some means for automatic operation that required no further attention. Obviously, these sages down there represent retrogression to the point where they have no knowledge whatever of the past."

"I suppose the medical students will want some of them for study since it had been assumed survival was impossible here," North remarked absently, his eyes on the viewscreen. "But the reason for sending the signals—I wonder what that could have been?"

The commander shrugged. "To ask us for assistance, no doubt." He glanced at the chronometer and his manner became briefer. "It's almost meal-time. Send out a detachment to bring some of them in for observation. They seem to be strong enough—if their intelligence isn't too abnormally low we can use them on Athena for simple manual labor."

"I'll go myself," North said. "I know a little Rejek and it should be mildly entertaining to take a close look at them."

"Take your detachment straight..."
toward the stockade wall, not down it to the gate," the com-
mmander ordered. "I'll have one of the turret blasters destroy that sec-
tion of the wall just before you get to it. The best way to get eager cooperation from primitives is to
impress them with the futility of resistance."

The blaster beam lashed down
from one of the cuirass's muzzles
and disintegrated those hundred
feet of stockade wall into a bellow
of dust. Narth and his twelve men
rushed through the breach, their
weapons in their hands. The
thought occurred to him that they
must appear to the natives as
strange and terrible gods, strides
drifting through the dust created by their
own genius for destruction.
But when he and his men
emerged from the cloud of dust
the natives were watching them
with the same cold curiosity as
before. He felt the gall of sharp
irritation. He was a Genn and
bearded savages did not ignore
Gens. As if to add to his irritation,
several of the watching men
turned away and went back into
the houses, not as men who sought
conciliation but as men who saw
nothing of sufficient interest to
keep them outside in the cold
wind any longer.
He settled in frustration.
He ordered his men to a halt
when they were some distance
from the first house and they stood
in a line, their weapons held on
the four natives who stood under
the canopy of the house before
them. He beckoned to the natives,
a gesture too imperative for them
to fail to understand, and entered
commandingly in Teneran:
"Come here!"
One of the natives turned and
went back in the house. The other
three continued to watch with the
same forbidding lack of interest.
What's the matter?" The voice
of the commander spoke from the
communicator which hung from
his neck.
"There are three natives by the
house in front of us," Narth said.
"You can't see them from the ship
because of the canopy. I ordered
them to come here but apparently
they no longer understand Tene-
ran.
"Then give them some action
they can understand—drag them
out by the heels. I can't wait all
day for you to bring back a few
specimens."
"Very well," Narth said. "It
won't take long."
He and his men approached
the natives again. Narth marveling at
the ease with which they moved
in the dragging gravity. They were
splendidly muscled, not bulky
but in the way a Genn threw cat
was muscled. If only their intelli-
gence was not too low, Bagarnish
would become the source of an
endless supply of the strongest,
most docile slaves the Genn Eva-
John Humbolt surveyed the line of Termi, holding the Gem of

They would not live long enough to regret it, of course. He opened his mouth, to speak the quirk words into the commits-

e-ness that would bring the blun-

tsearies closing down and transform the hour and the native into dis-

associated atoms—

"Drow!"

The warning came from the Termian again. "Your next action was obvious before you thought of it," he said. "An arrow will go through you at the first word. We have nothing whatever to lose by killing you."

Narth looked again at the arrow aimed at his throat. The first bead of it looked broad enough and sharp enough to decapitate him and the Termian seemed to be holding the action hanging in a dangerously careless manner.

His anger swelled a little. It was true the natives had nothing to lose by killing him, but, on the other hand, he had a lot to lose—his life. And their victory would be short-lived. It was inconceiv-

able that such an absurd situation could last for long—

"A little faster," the native or-

ered. "Under the canopy here—more!"

They suddenly quickened their pace and the Termians on the roof dropped their arrows to follow their progress.

Narth looked, and saw that thirteen bowmen had suddenly ap-

peared along the edge of the roof, invisible to the ship because of the canopy. Thirteen broad-headed ar-

rows were aimed at their hearts and thirteen coldly intent pairs of eyes were watching them for the first move to lift a weapon.

They had walked into the sim-

plest kind of trap, set for them by half-barbaric savages. In his surge of emotion and anger he did not wonder how they had learned to speak Gem. The important thing was that they had tricked him and his men into a position that was not at all in keeping with his dignity as a Gem officer.
Humboldt turned to Charley Craig. "Have we hit him long enough for you to mimic his voice?" he asked.

"Long enough," Charley said.

"Melt it?" Humboldt mused. "No sooner imprinted on the Gem's face, to be replaced by the rags. I warn you for the last time: your death will be painful enough at best. Return that communication at once!"

He reached for the communicator as he spoke. Humboldt flicked out his hand and there was the sharp snapping of finger bones. The Gem gasped, his face whitening, and the fury drained out of him as he held his broken hand.

Humboldt turned to Charley again and handed him the communicator. Charley slipped it around his neck and let his flaring beard conceal the microphone.

"Let's hope your accent won't be too conspicuous," he said as he pressed the call button.

The response came almost immediately from the ship:

"Narid—what are you doing? Where are the natives you were sent after?"

Charley's hand parted. In a smile at the words and Humboldt felt a sense of relief. What might have been a serious obstacle did not exist. Apparently Cern communicators were designed for verisimilitude rather than faithful mental reproduction: the voice that came from the communicator was very melodic.
"Our captives are very docile," Charley said, "and we can get them into the ship more easily if we load them. Only one of them can speak Terran at all and he is very stupid."

The Terran-speaking officer relied on the reference to himself but made no other move to slow his compartment.

The airlock did open when they reached the bottom of the boarding ramp and the armed Gorns stepped out, shackles in their hands.

"Orders of the commander, sir," the officer in charge of them said to the Gorn officer beside Humbel, looking down at him. "The natives will be chained together before taking them to the examination chamber. They will—"

He saw, belatedly, the strained expressions on the faces of the Gorns below him. He snapped a command as he jerked at the blaster he carried.

"The natives—kill them!"

Humbel shot him with the blaster of the officer beside him before he could fire. The other five went down a moment later, but not before one of them had killed Charley.

The commander would have seen it all in the viewscreen. They had nearly left in which to carry out their plans.

"Into the ship!" he said. "Leave the Gorns."

They ran, the airlocks begin—"
The 'Sven' to Die

ring to shake, and they did so. They crawled through the huge
locks that had completely, leaving thirteen Gerns suddenly locked
to the ship.

Alarm bells were ringing shrilly inside the ship and from the mul-
tiple-compartment shafts came the sounds of elevators dropping with
refinements. They ran past the elevator shafts without pausing, to
split forces as they had long ago planned: five men going with
Clarkey to try to light their way to the drive room and five going
with Humbolt in the attempt to take the control room.

Humbolt found the narrow ladder and they began to climb.
There was one factor much in their favor: the Gerns would waste
some time looking for them near the bottom of the elevator shafts.

They came to the control room level and ran down the short cor-
rider. They turned left into the one that had the control room at
its end and into the fire of six waiting Gerns.

For three seconds the control was an inferno of blaster beams
that crackled and buzzed as they met and crossed, throwing little
chips of metal from the walls. When it was over one man re-
nained standing beside Humbolt: the blonde and maverick Lake.

Thomson and Barkey and Land-
doo were dead and Jimmy West
was leaning against the wall, a blaster hole in his chest
and his legs giving way under him.
He tried to smile and tried to say something. "We showed—what—" He
fell to the floor, his sen-
tence unfinished.

They ran on, leaping the bodies of the Gerns. The control room
door swung open a crack as they
passed it then was knocked wide
open as Humbolt shot the Gern
who had intended to take a ca-
tin out.

They went through the door, to
engage in the last brief battle.
There were two officers in addition
to the one who wore a command-
er's uniform and the three of them
were upon Lake in the way
that seemed so carefully slow
to the men of Fripsnik. They
killed the two officers before either could
fire and the commander's blaster
was knocked across the room as
Lake's husked blaster smashed
him across the furniture.

Humbolt closed the door be-
hind him and Lake recovered his
blaster. The commander stared at
them, astonishment and appre-
sension on his pale, fat face.

"What—how did you get past
the guards?" he asked in hoarse
accented Terran, rubbing his
bruised knuckles. Then he seemed
to regain some of his courage and
his voice became smug with
threat. "More guards will be here
within a minute. Lay down your
weapons and—"

"Don't talk until you've asked a
question," Lake said.
“Now.” Humbolt said, “you will order your men to return to their sleeping quarters. All of them. They will leave their blasters in the corridors outside and they will not resist the men who will come to take charge of the ship.”

The commander made a last effort toward defiance:

“And if I refuse?”

Lake answered, smiling at him with the smile of his that was so much more than a quick show of white teeth and with the woody expressiveness in his pair eyes.

“Then I shall start with your fingers and break every bone to your shoulders. If that isn’t enough I shall start with your toes and go to your hips.”

The commander hesitated, sweat filming his face as he looked at them. Then he reached out to switch on the all-ship communicator and say into it:

“Attention, all personnel! You will return to your quarters at once, leaving your weapons in the corridors outside. You are ordered to make no resistance when the men come.”

There was a shudder when the commander had finished and Humbolt and Lake looked at each other, bearded and clad in provider suits but standing as last in the control room of the ship that was theirs; in the ship that could take them to Athena, to Earth, to the end of the galaxy.

The commander, watching
them, could not conceal his last
vindicative anticipation.
"You have the cruiser," he said,
"but what can you do with it?"
"I'll tell you what we can do
with it," Humboldt said kindly.
"We've planned it for two hundred
years. We have the cruiser and
sixty days from now we'll have
Athens. That will be the only
beginning and you Gerns are going
to help us do it."

It was not, North thought,
the kind of humbugging he and
the others had expected. Ragnarok lay
a hundred and eighty-five light-
years behind them and Athens was
only three ships' days ahead of
them. It had been only forty-nine
days since he had gone out to
bring back some of the natives for
observation in the examination
chamber and for experimental of their
worth as slaves. In those forty-
ine days the sons of Ragnarok had
forced the Gerns to teach them how
to operate the cruiser, learning with amazing speed.

"You have to know that on Rag-
urak," the one called Charley
had remarked. "Those who are
slow in learning don't live long
enough to produce any slow-learn-
ing children."

In retrospect it seemed to
North that the first two days had been
an insane nightmare of bearded
monsters who asked endless ques-
tions about the ship and calshy,
deliberately broke the bones of
anyone who refused to answer or
gave an answer that was not true.

By the end of the second day they
had learned that passive resistance
was painful and futile and two of
them had learned that active re-
istance was futile.

So they had tossed existing in
any manner, but it was only a
temporary submission for strategic
reasons. The savages had gained
the upper hand by means of de-
cent and meekness; they had
been lucky in their trickery and
had become masters of the cruiser
but they were still savages from a
wild and leg village. They had
dared to defy Gerns and when
their luck ran out they would pay the
penalty.

He clenched his hands at
the thought. It was something to
look forward to, the day when
those savages would be taken back to
Ragnarok and an example made
of them in the centre of the vil-
lage while their wives and their
children and all the savages left
behind watched and learned what
it meant to defy the Gerns . . .

The red-bearded Charley was
smiling at him from the captain's
chair.

"It's not much use to resist
what happened," he said. "You
Gerns made too big mistakes and
this is the result."

North quickly forced his face
into an expression of civil interest.
"We made two big mistakes?" he asked.
It was very seldom that he held a conversation with any of the Ragnark men. Humbold would occasionally exchange a few words not relevant to the average plane but only Charley ever exhibited any desire to engage in idle conversation with the Gerns. It seemed to amuse him to observe their reactions. Galling as it was, it was more comfortable than the cold patience that was so characteristic of the others. Especially the one called Lake. Lake had never shown him in any way but there was an underlying sense of danger about him that made him unnecessary. It had been Lake who had avenged the death of the Ragnark boy, that two Gerns stabbed to death with long knives stolen from the galley. Lake had sound them and then, without touching his weapons, he had proceeded to dismember them with their own knives. He had stood and smiled down at them as they writhed and moaned and finally died.

"First, you Gerns underestimated us," Charley said. "You thought we were as primitive as we looked. Actually, we let our hounds go for the past year to help you think that. You were stupid enough to take it for granted we were stupid.

"Then you were afraid to do anything while there was still time. You yourselves were afraid to watch the ship. The commander was afraid to resist and hoped the men at the different stations would do something. The men at the different stations hoped that someone else would do something.

"Hope is a good thing but... Charley smiled at him again... you have to fight together and not be afraid of getting hurt."

Humbold stood in the control room.

"Well, we're going to talk now," he said to Charley.

He went to the board and said himself, then punched the silver stations button. "You... he looked at North—"strap yourself in for high-acceleration maneuvers."

North did so and asked, "High acceleration?"

"We want to make sure there's nothing wrong with this cruiser so we'll know what we can do with the two we'll get at Athens. And there are two more cruisers at Athens—you didn't hear about it, did you?"

He asked the question in the tone that had so often probed painful violence. For Gerns who had lied and North hastily assuaged him.

"No—there are two cruisers there, so we told you. But what—when you get there—"

He stopped, wondering if he could tactfully ask Humbold what he thought he could do with them.

"We'll take the three cruisers back to Ragnark," Humbold said.

"We'll pick up the rest of the
The man who was neither too old nor too young and went on to Earth: I'll show you a minute, why we expect no trouble breaking through your lines around Earth. These Tagmansk men will be given training in the handling of both Gern and Terzan ships and thus we will destroy all the Gern ships around Earth that return to our sphere."

Narth returned a smile, some of his depression leaving him. It was a plan so fantastic it was amusing; it would be the last assault attempt the savages would ever make.

"As you know," Humbolt said, "the largest ship's blasters are good for only a relatively short range due to the dispersion. A space battle consists of firing your long-range projectiles and trying to dodge the projectiles of the enemy. The acceleration limitator makes certain that the projectile轨迹 mechanism doesn't cause such a sudden change of direction or such a degree of acceleration that the cover will be ignored or killed.

"We face Tagmansk are accustomed to a one point five gravity. We can withstand much higher degrees of acceleration than Gern or anti from Earth. Now, we're going to make some preliminary tests. We've had the acceleration limitator discontinued."

"Dissatisfied?" Narth heard the faintest note in his own cry. "Don't—you'll kill us all!"

"No," Humbolt said. "You won't go any farther right now than to make you unconscious."

"But it..." Humbolt touched the acceleration control and North was shoved deep into the seat. His breath cut off as his diaphragm sagged. The chair swung in a curve and North was stunned sideways, the projector cutting into his flesh and his vision blurring. He thought Humbolt was watching him; he could not see to tell."

"Now," he heard Humbolt say, his voice dim and distant, "We'll see how many Gs you can take."

An instant later something smashed at him like a physical force and consciousness vanished.

"You didn't give us a chance to come anywhere near our own acceleration limit," Humbolt said to him after he had regained consciousness. "But you can see now that the Gern ships around Earth can never hope to maneuver us nor hope to hit us."

North saw, and what he saw was unpleasant to behold. The Tagmansk savages possessed a physical abnormality that would enable them to do as they planned. Earth and Athens would be lost and a corner of the Gern Empire thrust back. But the Gerns were a race of conquerors who ruled action in thousand lightyears of space. The existence of the Empire was proved..."
of their superiority. While the savages straited on Earth and Athena, boasting of their prowess, the Empire would be lying plans and preparing for their annihilation.

When the time was right the Gern would strike and when it was over the fate of Earth and Athena would be a grim example to all other subject worlds of the utter futility of defying Gern domination.

He looked at Humbolk, feeling the hatred and anticipation twist his face.

"We'll go on to enslave the Gern home fleet without any waste of time," Humbolk said. "Then we'll destroy your Empire, world by world.

It seemed to North that the full and terrible implications were slow in coming to him.

"Destroy the Empire—now!"

"Were you foolish enough to think we would stop with the freeing of Earth and Athena? When a race has been condemned to die and miserable, somehow, to survive, it learns a lesson well; it must never again let the other races be in a position to destroy it. So we're not going to give you time to do that. You yourselves sowed this seed on Bagmakia two hundred and twenty years ago when you condemned us to die. Now, the time has come to reap the harvest.

"You understand, don't you?" Humbolk smiled at him in the mirthless way that Bagmakian men smiled at Gern and his voice was almost gentle. "You are a menace which we must remove."

North did not answer. There was no answer he could make. He sat without moving, the triumphant anticipation draining away from him. He had not thought they would dare challenge the Gern Empire—not so soon, before it was prepared to defeat them ... .

You yourselves sowed the seeds.

They would remember an incident that had happened two centuries before and they would shatter the Empire into dust, coldly, suddenly, without mercy.

The time has come to reap the harvest.

Only an incident in the Empire's偏远, unimportant, almost unrecorded, and the harvest would be destruction by the descendants of the summoned, terror and death at the hands of the children of the condemned.

You are a menace which we must remove.

He wet his lips, feeling the weakness of a cold and bitter sickness inside him.

"But it's too soon to die..."
THE LADY WAS A TRAMP

by ROSE SHARON

Tarry had a hungry heart and star-filled eyes,
and a yearning for space was in his blood.

What he got was a lousy tramp,
and he wasn't even sure she wanted him . . .

She had been lovely once, sleek-blond and proud, with stain-
ing flanks, and men had come to her with hungry hearts and star-
filled eyes, and the high pulse of adventure in their blood.

Now she was old. Her hide was scarred with use, her home-
dulled; though there was beauty in her still it was hidden deep. A
man had to know where to look—and he had to care.

The young man left the condi-
tioned comfort of the Adminis-
trator Building and passed out-
side the door to orient. Then he
strode leisurely forward, ignoring
the heat that wilted his uniform col-
far and damply curled the edg-
es of the faded stamping papers
in his breast pocket. He passed the inner tier of decks, refusing
to look to left or right at the twin
proud heights of glimmering Navy
vessels.

Beyond them, alone in the out-
most ring, the Lady Jane sat on
her base in the concrete hole, wait-
ing. In the white-light glare of the
shadowless Dome, each smallest
pit and crackmark of twenty years' usage stood out in cruel relief
against the smooth-rolled darkness
of her hull. Fathomed, dumpy, un-
beautiful, she squatted without
grace beside the steel framework of supports, while her masts
were flushed and her tubs rinsed
down. When the deck gang was
done, and the mages of the last voyage reported interior as
could be, she would sit forth once more on her mantle of the
ports in space. Meanwhile, she
rested.

The young man paused. It was
his first good look at the Lady
Jane. He half-turned back, but it
was too late now. Furry, or train-
ing, or dispose, or some of all of
them, moved him on.

"That’s how all right," Austin
smiled, and turned a knob on the
Lady Jane’s viewport screen; the
figure leaped toward them with
He ducked through the bush-room door as she started to rise. "Don't shout," he called back.

"It ain't so funny, honey." She stood watching the scene. "What's bothering me is, who's going to keep him happy?"

Terence Hugh Carmichael, Lieutenant, U.S.N. Reserve, was twenty-four years old and newly commissioned. He was smitten in the gills with eight full years of Academy training, precision, and knowledge. The shiny new stripes on his sleeve and the dampening papers inside his breast pocket were the prizes he'd worked for and dreamed of as long as it mattered. The fruits were over now, and the dream was cooled. A man might approach the Lady inspired by lust to a manner of good; but the sight of her was enough to wipe out the last vestige of glory.

The Lieutenant moved on, more slowly. He stepped as a three-speeded red-and-white-striped baggage trolley swung out in a slow crazy curve from behind the Navy skip to the left and convened to a stop at the Lady's side.

A tall thin man in rumpled full-canvas white jacket unhooked out of the bucket, swinging a canvas suitcase in his hand. He climbed aboard the ship's waiting elevator and it started up.

Terry walked on and waited beside the truck for the cage to
come down. When he did, he produced his ID card, got inside, and rode up to the bridge.

In the open lock, the man in the dirty white was waiting for him. He held out his hand, and for the first time Terri saw the pilot's badge on his jacket; and the bands on his shoulders spelled Compatibility.

"You the new 65-Man?" the yeo-let asked. "Where's your gear?"

"I sent it on this morning."

They shook, and the pilot's slim fingers were unexpectedly cool and dry.

"Welcome to our happy home," he said. "Glad to have you aboard."

And all that sort of thing. Manuel Hueso Deaverde, at your service. They call me Deo."

"I'm Terri Carmahan."

"Come on in. I guess they're all waiting." Deo led the way through the open inner valve.

On the starboard, the pilot turned back. "Just take it easy, kid," he said. "It ain't like the Navy in here."

It wasn't.

The Lieutenant had been on merchant ships before. It was part of his training to know the layout and standard equipment of every jumpship ever made. He had been on inspection tours, and a Lady class ship was still in Academy use for cadet instruction trips. But that one was Navy-manufactured and Navy-staffed.

This Lady had left the service thirteen years back. The crew quarters had been very nice, to make an extra hold, and the rule book had gone by the wayside along with the hamsacks.

"Up here," Deo said, and Ter-ry followed him up the ladder to Officer's Country. Then he stood in the ventilous doorway and stared at the crew canted around.

"To start with, the overheads were off. The only light was diffused U-V out of the flash tank that cut two-foot swaths along opposite bulkheads. In the yellowgreen dimness, the scattered lounging chairs and coffee cups and a tray with a bottle and glasses on the table gave a ridiculous cocktail-bar effect to the whole place. And the first thing he saw was a hippy blonde, in tight black slacks and a loosely tied white shirt, who detached herself from the arm of a chair—and from the encircling arm of what looked like a nubbed honey-dwined mass inside the chair. She ran across the room to fling herself on Deo, who picked her up bodily, kissed her with great passion.

"Where did you wash in from?"

She demanded. "We were waiting for—"

"Whom, hah," Deo started. "If you mean—" He started in turn, began to move forward, to let Terri in, but from a shadow cut a Brewery-like thin man in covering, with grease-stains on his hands.
and his hair and his face, broke in.

"What the hell! Those two give me a pile of pitch about havin' me recall up here to give the new kid a big hello, and all I find is this old s.o.b. instead!" Those two appeared to be the blonde and the naked one. Deke was the s.o.b.

"Ten bitches again, Mike?" The voice was a bull roar; it came from the only member of the Lady's crew Terry had met before. The Captain came down the ladder from Custard, smokers and mildew-coll workcaps first, and then the tremendous bulk of chest and arms, bristled with wavy curling yellow gold hair. The man had looked cowed and bluffed before. With Karl Hilfstrom's two-hundred-twenty pounds added, it was intimated, "Relax," he said. "Have a drink and relax. Nita said she saw the kid comin'..."

Deke had given up trying to interrogate. He turned back to Terry and shrugged. "I told you—" he started, and just then the blonde saw him.

"Oh, my God!" she said, and broke into helpless laughter; so did Deke. She took a step forward toward Terry, trying to talk. He ignored it.

"Captain Hilfstrom?" he said formally, as had as possible. He felt like a school kid in a lousy play, doing a bad job of acting the part of the butler at a masquerade.

The big man turned. "Oh, where you going?" He held out a dusty hand. "This my Deke alrea..." Amits, this is our new IBMon, Terry Custard. Amits Filmore, our Mole. And Mike Gromvich, our Chief—" that was the greaselike one—"and Choon—Choonza Lei, our Bio- tech."

Terry fished in his pocket for the orders the Captain had failed to request, and noted with relief that he and the Bio-tech, Choon, now unfolding himself from his chair, weren't entirely naked after all.

It wasn't till then that he fully realized the hefty blonde was nobody's visiting daughter or friend, but a member of the crew and an officer in the Naval Reserve.

The blonde officer gave a drink to his hand, and his last clear thought that night was that Deke was quite right; it wasn't like the Navy, Not at all.

When they gave him his commission, at the Examiner's Board, they had also delivered elaborate and meaningful expectations about the Great Trust being placed in his hands, how the work of an IBMon on a merchant ship was both more difficult and more important by far than anything done by an officer of equivalent rank on a Navy ship.

He knew all that. The ranking IBMon officer, on any ship, was...
fully responsible for the operation and maintenance of all material connected in any way with either solar navigation or space-warp jumps. On a warp, there was likely to be just one EBM an to do it all—Navy Transports carried a full complement of four officers and five enlisted men. Fresh Academy graduates came on board with just ratings only, and worked in charge of an enlisted maintenance crew on the “jump-along”—that abstract mechanical brain whose function it was to set up the elusive mate, manipulate the ship from time to time, enabling a ship to travel an infinite distance in a finite amount of time.

On a Navy transport, a full Lieutenant EBM would be in charge of the SEAN only, with two petty officers under him, both qualified to handle maintenance, and one at least with a NAVE rating, capable of relaying him on duty at the control board during the five to twelve twenty hours it might take to navigate a jumpship in or out of the solar system of planets and orbits of any given system.

Even the senior officer, on a Navy Transport, would never have to jump the ship except in the rare and uneasy instance of an analog failure; only transps and Navy Scouts ever jumped willingly on anything but a NAVE-computed course. The stellar analog computers were the Navy’s Topmost Secret; when you used one, nothing was required except to make sure the jump-along itself was in perfect condition; and then to pull the switch. The log did the rest.

Merchant ships carried logs for their chartent parts of call—they had two—but the chartent parts were the smallest part of a merchant trip. The number of destinations for which Navy analogs were available was hardly a half full of the galaxy. Without a log to point the way for him, it was up to the EBM to plot coordinates for where a hole ought to be. With luck and skill he could bring the ship out into normal space again somewhere within SEAN reach of the destination. With the tiniest error in computation, a ship might be lost forever in some distant universe with no stars to steer her home.

Every Carnahan had been hoping desperately for a Navy transport job—but only because it was the route to the Scouts: the Navy’s glory-holes, the two-bank blind-jump ships that went out alone to map the edges of man’s universe. It was the Scout job he’d worked for those long eight years—and dreamed about five years before, while he waited for credits to get into Academy.
He didn't argue with his temp assignment, nobody argued with the Board. He knew that most of the men who drew Navy assign-
ments would try him like money was in the Reserve. And most of the men who drew Trans-
port and liked it, were there be-
cause they couldn't jump blind, and they knew it.

He knew all that. But when his orders came, and they told him he drew a transport because he was tenth in his class—that's what they said: temp work was the toughest—he also knew how close he had come to the dream, be-
cause he also knew that the top five men had been sent to Scout training.

Eight years of the most he could give it just wasn't enough. The answer was NO! For good.

But you didn't throw out eight years of training for a good job either. Terry went for his yeas of
and months, and met Captain (U.S.N. Reserve) Karl Hilt-
strom: he took his two weeks' leave and reported for duty.

That first night, he fell asleep with the back-room spinning around him, and an obvious sim-
ple solution to the whole mess spinning with it. Just out of his reach, no matter how fast he
turned. When he stopped whir-
ing, the dreams began, the dreams about naked women, one of whom might have been her, and a
terrible wonderful blonde in a

and not in a heaving transport to the rolling onion-faced girl who
asked him in .

In the morning, Captain Karl Hilstrom showed him around Control. It was shipshape and
dirty up here, and the IBM had pulled gracefully into routine, checking and testing his board, and
running off sample camps. He allowed himself only the brief-
est inspection of the jump-along and the keyboard and calikers attached. His first job, would be
table navigation. Once they were
down in the middle of the System, there'd be three weeks on solar drive before
they jumped—plenty of time to double-check the other equipment.

Right now, the standard compu-
ters and solar fog were what
counted.

He worked steadily till he be-
came aware of the Captain at his
side.

"How does it look?"

"Firse so far, sir." Terry leaned
back.

"Nothing mixed up there, you
can blame it on me. I worked
that board coming in."

Terry remembered now—they
had lost their IBM on Ren-
grene IV, last trip, and came
back short-handed, and with half
the trade load still in the holds. Since no one but an IBM could
jump blind, they'd had to come
back to pick up a new man—
Terry.
The Lady Wins a Trophy

I haven’t found anything wrong, sir," Terry said.

"You can drop the ‘sir’. We go mostly by first names here." There was an edge of irritation in the Captain's voice. "It's your fault, you know. You want to knock off?" Terry hesitated. This wasn't the Navy, it was a lunchroom. If the pilot was drunk half the time, and the Chief had a dirty mouth, and the Captain looked like a pirate or stevedore (the first of which he was, and the second had been), the Hobson was certainly free to work or eat when he chose.

"It just as well stick with it for a while," Terry said cautiously.

"Eat. Suit yourself. Gallery's open. Take what you want when you want it . . ."

He disappeared. For a blessed two hours, alone with machines he knew and trusted, Terry ran off the standard tests and curves, noting with trained precision each minor deviation from perfect performance. The computer had never been built that could navigate without error. Maybe only in the tenth decimal, but that was enough for disaster. You had to know your lag and your hour and your machines, and make your adjustments automatically as a man makes allowance for the sights on a rifle he's known and shot for years.

It took Terry four hours to learn this board, and he had started his first dry-out when the sandwich appeared on his tray. A tall plastic glass with a straw in the top and a tempting fresh cake next.

"Well, thanks," he said, "but you didn’t have to—"

"It's chocolate," she told him.

"I ordered strawberry when your papers came in, but they haven't sent it yet.

"Chocolate is fine," he said weakly, and let himself be.

The house-sized shirt and tight-fitting slacks of the evening had been replaced by standard-issue runners' weight uniforms. The blouse was zipped up, and she seemed to be wearing a bra underneath. Her shorts showed no more than a reasonable length of shapely leg. She wore no makeup, and her face looked scrubbed and clean. You could hardly get mad at a woman for being good-looking. The sandwich looked motor oil and crisp, and he found he was very hungry.

"Well, thanks," he said again, and took a bite, and picked up the pencil with his other hand.

"Earl had to go down to A-4," she said. "He got his own off his paper, and figured that out. Administration didn't know.

"They called him to bring down the Beetle Tag papers," she said. "He asked me to let you know—"

"If he back in the morning."

He nodded, trying to catch her
The bread and rolls were coming back from the shop counter. 
Albion Carnishan would be due for his first induction—
the first on his own command.

"... we could finish your med-check in time for dinner," she was talking, "you want to knock off up here pretty soon?"

He nodded again, and glanced over his head. The run he'd started would take most of an hour. Then some time for adjust-
ments... "Sixteen hours all right?" he asked.

"Fine. Dinner's at nineteen."

He set there and stared at his sandwich and thought it all over, including the staggering fact of the Commander's alert on the woman's faded green shirt col-
lar.

The peanut butte
toasted sandwich was a
good deal of the thing, he tauted. The run he'd started would take most of an hour. Then some time for adjust-
ings... "Sixteen hours all right?" he asked.

"Fine. Dinner's at nineteen."

He set there and stared at his sandwich and thought it all over, including the staggering fact of the Commander's alert on the woman's faded green shirt col-
lar.

The peanut butter
toasted sandwich was a
good deal of the thing, he tauted. He nodded again, and glanced over his head. The run he'd started would take most of an hour. Then some time for adjust-
ings... "Sixteen hours all right?" he asked.

"Fine. Dinner's at nineteen."

He set there and stared at his sandwich and thought it all over, including the staggering fact of the Commander's alert on the woman's faded green shirt col-
lar.
The Lady Was a Trampy

...for smangling later.

"I don't know what you've been doing the past two weeks," she pointed out, and he felt himself sunk at the certainty of what she meant. "And we've got a good long time to be shot up on this ship together." She stood there looking at him. Her smile failed.

"The prospect isn't too appealing, is it?"

"You are! I might have said.

"This isn't the Natty. She was dressed last night, the way she acted."

"Was it one of those dreams? He couldn't be sure, but the memory came clearly."

He had heard a door close, and the murmur of voices, one high and one low. Before he fell asleep again—or in his dream?—a tall figure had entered the bedroom and stepped to the last empty chair.

Five men and one woman..."

"You're goddam right it's not!"

he wanted to say, but he shushed his open mouth, and the leaves on the collar of her short-sleeved shirt were still a Commander's.

He chewed all the putative answers, and returned to subordination.

"Yes, ma'am," he said blankly.

"If you must, ma'am." Five men and one woman..." and Dede had it all right."

"I'm glad to hear you say so, Lieutenant," she answered dead-
slowly. Deke, the pilot, and Captain Hillston were both drunk silently, slowly replacing the half-gone brandy. They just sat on the bed. Hillston had shed his uniform as soon as he got back in the ship; he was bare-chested and reflected again.

Deke at last demanded for dinner. As did Annia. Tonight, the nighttimesacks were red, and she did wear a bra—she hated red—or under her clear plastic skirt.

Mike wasn't dressed and he won't drink. He came up just in time to sit down and eat with the rest, his face and forehead both, if possible, one here greater than the day before. Chandru did not heat often: he emerged from the gray noon, glowing, indescribable, in the virtually nonexistent trousers he'd worn the night before. Annia pushed him a drink.

Obviously, she wouldn't care here—or if—Chand was dressed.

And if she didn't, who should?

Not Karl Hillston, that was clear; or perhaps he was too drunk to notice.

Sleep didn't come easy that night. When all the crew's hands but Deke's were filled, Terry gave up, and went out to the wardroom. He found Deke asleep, alone, watching a film. He tried to watch too, but next to the screen, a red light on the Med's door flashed, non-reflected—and his eyes kept seeing, instead of the picture, the curve of a thigh lined in the fiery red of her slacks, or perhaps of the ball...

He got up and propped the screen.

Deke's brother: "... any time?

The door opened. Karl Hillston came out. It closed behind him, and the light flicked off. She was alone now. She could be disturbed.

Hi... late show? Karl poured himself a drink and held up the bottle. "How about you?"

"I had it." Deke said.

"Terry?"

"Thanks. I will... later."

He pushed his own, a big one, and took it back to his bunk.

... any time... Deke didn't have it tied up, not at all...

At two in the morning, he re-read chapter twenty some provision in the Manual for refuel in space. He had a crew of less than ten, on grounds of personality. That meant a high Board of course—and it had to go through the Med's... well, she might have reason to make it easy for him. This was the Navy, but it was still under Navy charter. Lucky money. His payment, and promised himself to look it up, and want to sleep.

At three, he woke briefly, remembering she had said the Captain would have to have a new
The Lady Won a Trampy

The best jumpman reached the point where he figured his had it—the one more blind trip wouldn't work. Bailey quit cold, and declined even passage back.

This trip, the Lady carried a consignment of precision instruments for the new colony on Albion III. But nobody ever got rich on consignment freight. It paid for the trip, that was all.

The profits came out of the other hold: the souls and whisky and iron pipe and glamour and quick-freeze livestock embryos; the anything-and-whatever barter goods that someone at some uncharted planet off the Analog moon would pay for in some way. That was the lure that kept the crew on merchant ships: you never knew when you'd come back with the barter-hold full of uranium, or carbuided native artifacts, or ruby-egg diamonds.

And if you also never knew for sure what you'd come back, or where from, or whether . . . well, that was the reason why IBMMen went out into space. For a man who could handle the job, there was pay and promotion, and almost anything else he might want.

What Camahans wanted, the Lady didn't have.

For Mike Goetz, that was not the case.

The Lady was a trap. She was scratched and dented and
troubled with age. She'd lost her polish and her shape was out of date. She'd been around, and it showed.

But she had beauty in her still, if you knew where to look, and you cared.

"There's a dance in the old girl yet," Mike said appreciatively, when he saw the Ender's hand linger with pleasure on the smooth perfect surface of the shaft he'd ground the night before. "You must Archy," he added.

Terry shook his head. "What's that?"

"You might not like it," Mike said doubtfully. He opened a locker and pulled out a battered green-stained book. "Here. You can take it up with you if you want."

That night, Terry slept. He took the Manual and Mike's book both to the bunk with him right after dinner, and found what he wanted in one, then turned to the other. Both of them helped, and so did exhaustion.

But somewhere in the night he woke long enough to note that it was Dark who came in last again, and to identify the pattern of repeated sounds from two nights back. It had not been a dream.

You man and one woman ... He wondered why Basley had quit.

Nine years, and then ... If you took it that long ... Well, he had the same way out if he wanted it ... any time ...
... you know what I mean?

Yeah. He was Silent a moment. "I know what you mean, but I don't know if I can explain..."

Look, it's a small ship, and the payload counts. A girl friend for every guy would be nice, but... well, hell, kid, you'll see for yourself once we get going. All I want to do is begin with you. If you get the idea it was all for one guy, you're wrong. Deke's always kind of bopped up before we go, and he's the guy we have to count on to get us out safe. He just naturally... anything, don't let him monopolize anything—not if you want it, that is.

"I don't," Terry said, and they went back to garlic and silences.

And at least one thing emerged: Mike wasn't the only man on board who cared. Just what it was that mattered so much to him or to Chas, Terry wasn't quite sure: their work, or the Lady herself, or the dead dream she stood for. Whatever it was, the feeling was something that Terry could understand—and that Deke and Hillstrom never could...

Hillstrom didn't have to. He owned the Lady. He wasn't obliged to understand her. He just had to pay the bills, and let the hired hands do their work for him. For her..."

The hired help worked, all right. At least, Mike and Chas..."
They wouldn’t jump till after the Aladdin’s lamp. Six weeks out, two weeks in port; there was time to wait and find out whether one Java crew could win the week and the dreams of thirteen years.

As he fell asleep, the JBM man thought with surprise that grace and dignity were perhaps as fitting uniforms in their ways for unique matronesses as his work as knife-edge trimmer dreams were for precision computing.

The thirty-four-wide metal collar that encircled the lower third of the Lady Jazz, in drydock, rose slowly out of the concrete pit. When the Lady had been lifted some twenty feet, the tracks moved in and extended supporting yard-wide jacks up into smaller collars, set in the undersides of the wide, upper flange.

The outer lock, yardships, young open, and the elevator cage started down. Five figures in full gear peeped out and took their places on the flange. They scanned the chains and winches securing the jacks to their sockets and helped themselves in position to keep a watch on the winches during the overload stage.

One by one their voices cleared over the main-mast. "All secure here... Oh... Check... Secure... That’s it... Hill-stern is the last."

“Join?” He waited five seconds, then waved the red flag at his side. The enormous pit fork sunk downward, and the tracks started lifting alone. At fifty feet, the jet tubes were clear of the ramp. The tracks reeled into alignment, and sixty-five earth-shines of wheelchair began to move the Lady away from drydock to lumbering stage.

From his seat on the flange, Terence Hugh Camalan surveyed men’s room, and found it good. Six hours away, the black knife-edge of lunar light slid off the horizon. Ten minutes ahead, the mile-long launching tube yawned empty and waiting.

The sixty-two crackled with small talk and still-slower humor. Terry almost gave in to the urge to turn it off. He’d been through the launching scores a hundred times, in mockery and dry runs, but this was his first time to style a live ship over the face of the noon from the dock to the tube. If the schooner dreams of glory were dead forever... if the battered old hull of the Lady was all he could have... even she had her dubious virtues, and among them the brightness was this... this moment, now, the fulfillment of one childish dream, but the Big Dream of a man, of mankind, for the stars.

It was nerve-tight, nothing left to be approaching the launch-tube with a series of schooners double
The Lady Was a Tramp

excursion, supplying the background music.

He had actually reached for the switch, when a new voice floated in. "Still with us, Li-
utenant?"

"Yes, means?" He let his hand drop. The regulations made sense. Secured as they were in their seats, and spread round the bridge of the Lady, the odds were all the proof they had that each of them was still on post, alive and well.

Even the Mute inside the walled ship, watching the screens, couldn't be sure from what she could actually see, whether a man im-
mobile inside a suit was effectively operative.

They came up to the tube, and the great engine reached out steel fingers, stripping and lifting the Lady out of her wheelchair, wrapp-
ing, pushing and nudging and shifting her into place on the rim-
way. Six monumental figures slid down the jacks into the trucks, and were timed back up to the work by the tube elevators.

There was no time for small talk now. Five hours to see for the last time that the ship was secure; once the word, read, went down, it was too late to look any more.

Terry turned his section with swift mechanical ease. Finally, he went to his chair, and strapped himself in; he did a last double check on his board, then he freed his helmet back on, and be-
going the slow conscious relaxing of muscles and breathing that ended the ritual.

When the count-down began, he was off in a floating dream of sunblaze and sparkling water. Zero minus nine, and he sat up erect. Minute eight, and he forced himself back into limbo before they hit zero. Breathe in, . . . out, . . . hold, . . . in, . . . out, . . . hold, . . . in, . . . out, . . . four, . . . in, . . . three, . . . out, . . . two, . . . in, . . . immovable—out!

Off and out, . . . down and out, . . . blackness and whirling pools and terrors and sick back, up, up, up!

His finger punched the wake-up button before he was fully aware of consciousness again. The light ahead of him flashed green, and there was an instant's deadly-

ful notice that hill was the second green out. Then he forgot to be proud, and forgot to be Jerry Carnahan. Green lights flashed and steadied, then yellow and blue and red. The board was a Chippewa-tree crossroad constellation, each light a word, or a number or place, their shifting patterns spelling out death and life.

Pressure eased, and the voices began—voices of engines and scanners and screens and reports. Some he heard in the helmet and some the board told him with sig-

nals and lights. A voice in the
helmet allowed him to take it off, the vote of the Eio board.
A key on the pilot's board, at the chair up ahead, was depressed by a finger, the short-board, to this chair, flashed questioning lights.
The short-board replied, and new figure lit up ahead, for the hands to see—the hands and direction and eyes of the Lady, up there of the pilot's board, seeing her face of the multitude of receding mites and place and him of wiser and men in the populous planet's system.

The chance of escape began to suit itself, and the old girl whirled on her axis, and pushed her way out to the stars, with a dance in her vet, without tail and the short-board was not alantyplastic but flesh-end blood too part of her, of the streaming single mite which alone in this most-sold single cell-of-Sol was bound to break out of bounds and escape to the endless entropic eminences of Universe.

"Take a break, kid. We got a clear stretch here. Karl can take over."
He looked at the chrono, and didn't believe what he saw, and breathed again. Five hours, and seventeen minutes past noon. Near hiding muscles returned to sensation, and eyes to Terry Corsham.
Arms was standing beside him, one hand on a chair strap, the other held out to help.

"Where?" he said. "Get away, bitch!"
She went away. Terry sat high where he was. What Deke could take, he could take too.

He took it for six hours more, through the last of the deaf and doors of the System. He drank, from the flask when it buzzed his lips, and swallowed the pills she put in his mouth, and gave back what she needed; the readings and scanings and counts and connections that went to the driver's seat, to the pilot's board, to Deke with the strength of ten and a tramp in his heart.

He stared there and took it until there was no more to do. Then he reached for the steps, and her hands were already there, unfettering him.

Bitch! he thought. Trump! You don't want me!
He let her lead him out of the room, down the ladder, through the yellow-green, to the door where the light would be flashing red outside.

And there he stopped. There was something important to ask her, but when he found out what it was, he started to smile. Which one do you want?
Which one? How could she possibly tell.
As well ask, Which one needs her?
He laughed and stepped forward... and the tramp was his.
FRIEND FOR LIFE

by GORDON R. DICKSON

It had been sixteen years, and how Jimmy was dead. Halder Luder sat with the body in his arms in the barn living room of the small, two-room house of the Duker family. Outside, the cold winter of the globe-wide Dakota seemed best like here, grey ghosts on the rocky dunes below the house. Jimmy's fishing boat, laden with its nets, rocked at the dock's end.

Jimmy would be over thirty, now, Halder thought. But under the stabbly of bland boyish, the dead face was still youthful, relaxed and innocent. Gentle Jimmy had not died much—where the altar curve of the neck turned his body below the left shoulder blade, the heavy edge of coarse sandblow was marked by only a small stain of red.

It had happened with such impossible suddenness. Jimmy, Halder had been going to say, remembered when they shopped up from the field.

Bless! And Jimmy had looked at him and coughed a little blood. Then he fell forward into Halder's arms and died, with nine contractions.
of steel and the plastic handle of a net-hook stucking out of his
dark.
Holter had never seen anything could reach a man like this. Rich man, poor
man, beggar-man, thief, Holter had been all of these. But always
on the bright, slick surface of life. Now he crouched like a dog
above another, dead dog, with a
dog's dumb, savage misery in his
heart. Seated years he had fol-
lowed the dark angel of his own
dark spirit until it no longer had
anything more to give him. So
he had come back to what might
have been his bright angel, one
day to live.

There was a small sound be-
yond the front door. Suddenly
purpuse flamed up in Holter. He
reached to the net-hook in Jim-
my's hand and with easy strength
drew it greatly out. Dark and slim
and hard, he moved unnoticed
in the wall alongside the door and
slammed himself out. The stained
net-hook twitched in his hand.

There was a shuffle on the
doorstep, a hustled sound. Then, slowly, the door began to
open. There was a movement—
Holter leaped. A flurry of ac-
tion, and he slammed a slight
fine against the inside wall; and
leapt in there, the needle point
of the net-hook penetrating from
down. A whip face with thin
strands of black straggling beard
shuddered in terror at him.
The Dadian police lieutenant, an older man who wore his naval
destroyer uniform everyday, but neatly, sat on the corner of his desk.
What are you going to do first? asked Holter.
"Don't worry," said the lieu-
tenant. His grey eyes under faded
brows considered Holter. "We'll
check into it."
"Check into it?" Behind Hol-
ter, standing half-crouched in a
corner, the half-wit, Dunny, stirred. "Dunm it?" burst out Hol-
ter. "This is murder!"
The lieutenant drew a long
breath. "Look, Mr. Larenz," he said.
"You're a marine. No offense—but
you don't know Dadian. We're
a young world, geologically as
well as emotionally. Our land is
rock and we make our living from
the sea. We're over-worked and
under-populated." He stood up
from the desk. "I'll do what I can."
Holter stood up also. With the
fury in him, he felt taller even
than he was.
"What did you have against
Jimmy?" he asked softly.
"Have against him?" echoed the
 Inspectors. "There wasn't anyone
I liked better than Jimmy. Every-
boby liked him—he loved him. You
come here after all this time and
ask me what I had against him.
How good a friend were you,
those last sixteen years?"
Holter turned on his heel and
walked out, down several corri-
dors and into the cloud-broken
sunlight of the street. He stopped,
unsaddled, and in that moment
he heard the hesitant whine of
feet behind him. He turned and
saw the half-wit.
"Come here," Holter said.
The little man sidled closer.
"All right," said Holter, inquisi-
tively, "I won't hurt you. Now
listen. Who was Jimmy's closest
friend?"
Dunny didn't understand, put
his thumb in his mouth to bite it.
"How about girl friends? A girl
—did Jimmy have a girl?"
Dunny's thin face lit up.
"Mucky!" he cried, and clapped
his hands. "Mucky!"
Dunny led him by native,
pedestrian streets between the
blackly concrete buildings of the
business section down to the har-
bor, past countless warehouses
and many ships until they came
at last to a cargo warehouse. In
the interior, the dim outlines
of men at work moved to and fro;
on the dock itself, a young girl
in rough work pants and shirt
sat on the end of a mule cable,
giving toward the sea. As soon as
he caught sight of her, Dunny gave
a little whimper, ran ahead and
laughed loud beside her. He hid
his face in her lap and she put one
hand on his head and stroked it
affectionately. She did not look
away from the sea.
Holter hesitated, then approached slowly. The wind which stroked Danny’s tangled black hair was brown and hard, with short, thinned ends; her hair was yellow and a few strands hung about her face, still shiny. She had not been crying but her face was sunken.

"I see you’re heard," said Holter. "Old friend of mine."

"They were all his friends," she said. After a moment she added, "Would you leave me alone, please. I’d like to be alone."

"I want to do something about it," Holter broke out, angrily. "That lieutenant I talked to—he’s worse than nothing. I want to find the man who did it."

"You can’t do anything," she said, experimentally. "You’re a tourist."

"What’s that got to do with it?" he demanded. "He was the only—he was the only."

"I’m going to get the man who did it. You can give me a hand."

"Those," she said. "Go away."

"What’s wrong with you?" he shouted at her. "You’re as bad as the lieutenant. Weren’t you his girl?"

"His girl," she said. "I was his wife."

"His wife," Holter stared at her and the dozen of steel cables on the dock. "What are you doing here? The sea-farm—"

"That was his work. This was mine," her voice had the steely gentleness of the sea in it. "I have to get back to work soon. Will you go now?" She spoke with infinite wistfulness.

Holter stood like a wild animal, buffeted by its chains, for a second. Then he turned away, his hands clenched.

Danny clung to the woman’s knees. She paused gently. "Go with him, Danny," she said. Reluctantly, the little man got to his feet.

For the first few moments, Holter strode along automatically, without plan. Then he saw a knot of men ahead of him, congregating on a dock above one of the little fishingboats. When he reached the group, Holter saw that a stretcher was just being lifted by black and tackle from the bow deck of the boat.

"Save," one of the men on the dock, rushing out to one end of the stretcher. "Easy, don’t jolt him now."

They unhitched the stretcher and four men took the handles of it. Holter could see that it held a boy of about sixteen. He seemed to be unconscious; his eyes were closed and his face white. But his head turned from side to side as he was carried past and suddenly a low moan seemed to bubble from his lips. The whole right side of his body was stained with blood.
"For God's sake!" said Holser. "Why don't they give him a shot of morphine?"

"What morphine?" said the man beside him and turned. He recognized Holser as a tourist and his lips spread in a humorous grin. "Sure, morphine," he said. "And some wine too; thar wouldn't have parted and let him sleep.

Holser held his anger capped within him by force of will.

"Sey," he said. "Do you know Jimmie Moller?"

The other looked up at him with some curiosity. "Sey, sure, I know Jimmy. What about him?"

"He's dead," said Holser.

The wind-toughened face stretched with surprise. "Jimmie? No! He stood at Holser.

"He came home with a satchel in his back."

"What?--the other's eyes narrowed. "Jimmie? That lurcher Rollo, huh?"

"I don't know," said Holser, as calmly as he could. "Was it?"

Their eyes met each other for a waiting moment; and slowly, a certain seemed to draw across the eyes of the other man.

"I wouldn't know," he said, and turned away. Holser reached out and caught his arm and swung him back.

The man looked down at Holser's hand on his arm. "That's no good," he said.

There was a shifting of feet on the planks around them, and Holser looked up to see himself surrounded by a ring of weather-worried faces. They said nothing, only watched, and after a second he let go. He turned away and went across the deck to the land-side stairs and climbed them to the street. He looked back. Doubt was following.

Holser felt weary with the weightness of a great, frustrated rage. Down the street was a bar. He went toward it, turned as, and seated himself on a stool at the narrow, empty counter. The bartender came sliding down behind the bar to him—sliding sideways.

Holser glanced over the bar, saw that the bartender was bandaged, and sitting on a sliding platform that ran on two rails.

"What for you?" asked the bartender.


"Coffee!" cried Dummy, excitedly. "Hot coffee!"

Holser sipped his drink and felt it bite and burn on his tongue. "Pretty busy on the docks this time of year," he said.

The bartender flushed. "Go to hell!" he said.

Holser stared at him. "What's the matter with you?" he said.

The bartender grunted. "For-
get it," he said. "You're a tourist. You don't know any better. If I had two good legs I'd be out there—anybody back on this world unless they have to.

"All right," Holter swallowed his last gulp. "I'm sorry. Maybe you'll tell me why?"

The bartender reached for a huckelbush.

"Know anything about economics?" he asked. "This here's no industrial world. There's no surplus. We live on a subsistence level, and that's all. We got to work that hard to stay alive, day by day.

"I still don't get it," said Holter, watching him. "Why do things the hard way? Why weave cloth out of vegetable fibers? Why rope cable? Why don't you set up a plastics plant and a steel industry?"

"What's to do it?" the bartender swept the cloth in sharp circles. "Food's the main thing. Food comes from the sea. To put people on plastics and steel we'd have to clear ships off the beams. Take them off the fishing boats and there's not enough food coming in. Then we starve. You can't bring it to any emergency things to ships."

"There was a moment's silence. Dummy meek at his cup.

Adrift," said Holter. "I said I was sorry."

The bartender made a half-smiling gesture.

"Forget it. I sit here all alone all day and I get to feeling—all I forget it.

"Sure," said Holter. He leaned a little forward over the bar. "Do you know a man named Bollen?"

"Bollen? You mean Tige Bollen? Yeah, I know him."

"Where would I find him?"

"Up on the salt flats, this time of year," answered the bartender. "There're harvesting now. He works on Farm One Eighty-nine."

"Know him very well?"


"Eh! use a net-book. He'll use anything," replied the bartender, dispassionately, as if considering the instincts of some remote animal. "He's got plenty of guts, but if he can't take you with him and feed, he'll take you with anything that's handy."

"He took Jimmy Moley," said Holter, huskily. "Jinxes?"


The huckelbush was stopped now. I suppose," said Holter, "you don't give a damn, either?"

"Want another drink?" asked the bartender.
“What’s wrong with you?” grunted Holter. “All of you? You scared of something? Everybody claims they liked Jimmy, but nobody’ll move a finger after this bastard that killed him.”

“You better pay me for what you got,” said the bartender.

“That’ll be twenty-two bits.”

“For that mugger you said me?” Holter said. “Fleer the tourist, eh?”

“The seer’s fifty cents,” said the bartender. “The twenty-two for the coffee. I thought you knew what the price was here when Dunny ordered it.”

Holter threw down a twenty-five-cent note and walked away.

Out on the street, he turned to Dunny, who shrank from him.

“It’s all right,” said Holter, sharply. “I’m not mad at you. Listen, do you know this Tige Bollier?”

Dunny nodded, huddling against the wall.

“Good,” said Holter. “You come along. I want you to paint him out to me.”

They went back to the transportation center next to the space-pastry.

“Sorry,” the man on duty told Holter. “All the stickers are out.”

“How about these?” said Holter, and pulped to a row of the light craft perched under a weather overhang.

The thin face of the other smiled pleasantly. “But without res.

“Those are private craft.”

“Aren’t,” said Holter. He thought for a second. “Look—” he said, digging into a pocket and coming out with an envelope, “I have to get moving right away. Here, look at this.”

He opened the envelope and took out a sheet of paper which he unfolded and passed to the transportation agent. The man glanced at it.

“But this is just a map—”

Holter hit him before he finished the sentence and caught the limp body in time to ease it to the ground.

“Come on!” he cried at Dunny, and ran for the nearest of the flowers.

“Which way?” demanded Holter when they were ashore. “Where’s Farm One Eighty-nine?”

Dunny blearily raised his head and pointed north. Holter saw the nose of the ferry in that direction, a slight smile on his face.

It took them about half an hour to reach the farms. Air markers had been set out plainly. Farm 189 was a sprawling patch of rows of thick, closely-knotted spaced as staggered orderly rows. Along one side of the farm was a deep river of clear water, flowing down to the sea. Near the buildings of the farm was a dock, and
holster, then Holter sat on the floor down.

The farmyard was filled at the moment with great stacks of the budding leaves. Beyond, the gnarled black of the artificial soil of the field began and from within the sorcery house came the steady wail and thump of machinery pulling the pulp and waste material of the leaves from the fibers. No one was in sight.

Arriving, Denny to silence, Holter woke up behind one of the leaf piles and pushed through the open door into the dim interior of the sorcery house. Here and there were shadowy bulging machines; and among them came and went the dim outlines of a short, broad figure.

Holter turned to Denny.

"What Bellen?" he whispered.

Denny nodded, his eyes big.

"Stay here," Holter ordered Denny. And he smiled openly forward.

Prepared as he was, the abrupt change from brightness to gloom was still so startling that Holter had to stop and blink for a moment. For a second he was blinded; and then the first thing the expanding pupils of his eyes revealed was a short, broad face, not a yard from his own, that seemed to hang there, regarding him with light green eyes.

"What do you want?" said the face.
his wife today. She was sitting
on the deck chair, looking at
the sea.

"Say—" said Bollen suddenly,
haughtily. "What're you talk-
ing about?"

Halter looked at the shorter
man cautiously. Bollen was a
full head in height less than him-
self, but their weights must be
close to equal. The short farmer
was tough, and the bartender had
said he could be a dirty fighter.

Well, thought Halter, so could
he. He had not bummed around
on a dozen different worlds
without learning a few things. He saw
that Bollen was watching him
with the careful balance of a man
expecting a trick. Maybe though,
he might be led to think that
Halter could be taken by
surprise.

"Why—nothing—" he an-
swered, with the little quaver
of a man whose nerve might have
failed him. "Ah—come to think
of it, it's late than I thought.
I—I guess I'll be going."

He turned away, started to
walk off. And in spite of the fact
that he was bared for it, still he
almost did not hear the soft, rapid
drum of hooves running up behind
him. There was only that
sudden clash, the short man's arms
dropped around his body and the
whole weight of the charging
body against him. But Halter was
ready, crunching, reaching back
over his shoulder to seize and flip
the short man plus his helmet
through the air to the ground.

Bollen landed hard and im-
mediately Halter was diving, on top
of him, digging his knees into the
other's middle. His knee bounced
off surprisingly hard, stomach
munch. He rolled hardly clean.

Halter kicked out at the breed-
ing man's chin, but Bollen
grasped and sawed his body side-
ways. He caught Halter's boot as
it shot past, acted and twisted it,
throwing him. Halter kicked the
hands loose with his other foot
and rolled over onto his back,
giving his knees up just in time to
ward off the short man's driving
body. They crumpled apart and
to their feet; and faced each other.

There was a wariness in them
both now. Each had been sur-
priised by the quality of the oppo-
site. They had rolled out of the
scrupling house into the brilliant
sunlight and they stood between
the wall of the house and a long
high pile of leaves. Slowly, step
by step, Bollen began to back
away along the wall.

Cautiously, looking for an
opening, Halter followed. Slow-
ly, like rhythmic ceremonial
dancers in a pagan of ancient
passion, they moved together
back along the loose plant wall
until Bollen reached the end. Hal-
ter crumpled in spring, turned for
an attempt by the other man to
break and run; but instead, Bul- len’s arm flashed out of sight be- hind the corner of the building, to reappear all in one sweep of motion, swinging the bright, flat blade of a machete high through the air.

Only the fact that he was al- ready braced to keep used Hulter. Instinctively he drew forward, in- side the swing of the weapon, catching Bullen’s wrist in his left hand and bringing his right hand and arm around the other’s body to reinforce his left as he strove to bend Bullen’s machete wrist back.

Bullen was immeasurably strong. Even with the power of both Hulter’s arms against his sin- gle one, the farmer’s wrist re- mained stubbornly before it began slowly to yield. The long blade dropped like a brilliant flower for one long second before Bullen’s fingers loosened and it fell.

Triumph bellowed mote hime, Hul- ter tried about to drive his right leg between Bullen’s to trip him up and throw him down. And then, in the second before Hulter would accomplish this, he felt a terrific explosion of pain in the vast farmer drove his knees upward into Hulter’s groin. The sky above Hulter seemed to black- en with his agony. He felt his grip loosen; he fell, rolling into a ball on the ground.

A shattering kick on his shoul- der sent him tumbling. Instinc- tively, he continued to roll, over and over, in an attempt to get away; but the heels of Bullen found him. In great hammer blows that jarred his undefended body and shook his brain into dizziness. He had one wild sur- face of impression—the chas- ing dirt in his nostrils, the flash- ing picture of Bullen, towering above him; and the reeking kiss that drove through all his attempts to escape . . . And then, suddenly, they ceased.

Groaning, Hulter managed to focus his swimming eyes. He saw Bullen walk away from him over to the fallen machete, pick it up, and turn back toward him. Hulter strained to move, but his muscles responded with agonizing slow- ness.

From the corner of the pile of leaves there was a flicker of sudden motion, and a shrill wordsless cry from Dummy. A pitifully in- effective kick bounced off Bull- len’s shoulder—but it was enough to stop him. He swung angrily, raised the machete threateningly at Dummy’s retreating back.

Hulter drove his battered body as he had never before in his life. He forced it to its feet and into a lunge for Bullen. Chest slammed against lunge, and Bullen was bashed against the wall, dropping the machete, stunned by the im- pact. Hulter jerked him around and clubbed his fist again and again against Bullen’s jaw.
Bollen sagged and they both fell. Bollen still struggled. Kneeling, Holter turned the fingers of both bands to the dark, thick hair of the dead man's head, and, lifting the shorter man's head, drew it against the wall of the building. He lifted and slammed it down again, and Bollen stopped moving.

Panting, Holter forced himself to stop. Murder was in him, now—but he wanted to take Bollen alive. He breathed deeply for several seconds, then he stripped off the dead man's belt and tied Bollen's wrists behind him. A shadow fell across him. Dummer had stolen back and stood hunched above them.

"Bad—had . . ." said the half-wit, squalling at the unconscious Bollen like some small, nervous animal.

Holter laughed grimly.

Bollen came to on the flyer ride back to Dax City.

Holter flew directly to the city hall and landed on the grass before it. He hauled Bollen from the flyer and threw him ahead of him, up the steps and into the doorway of the city hall. Dummer trotted along behind.

They went down the long concrete corridors until they came to the office where Holter had talked to the lieutenant of police that evening. Holter opened the door and pushed Bollen inside.

The lieutenant was at his desk. They also, seated in a chair facing him, was the girl Mincy. Two uniformed policemen stood against a wall.

Holter gave Bollen a shove that sent him half-sprawling across the desk.

"Here's your murderer," he said. "The man that killed Jimmy. I brought him in for you. And don't tell me you can't arrest him; because if I have to, I'll bring in the best talent in the galaxy to dig up evidence he did it."

"I know he did it," said the lieutenant. He walked around the desk, helped Bollen upright, and with a knife cut the belt binding his wrists.

"You know!" said Holter. "You admit it!"

"I never denied it," said the lieutenant, wearily. "Jimmy thought Tige had been short-grabbing him on the fiber he consigned to Mincy's warehouse. Jimmy went out to talk to him about it. It must have come to a fight between them. . . . Am I right, Tige?"

"That's right," grunted Bollen, rubbing his wrists.

"Shut up, Tige," said the lieutenant. "Jimmy was worth three of you. As for you—" he turned to Holter—"your landing privileges are canceled here. I'm sending you back to the oppressor you came on, under guard."

"But what are you going to do
about him?" Halfer almost screamed the words. "He's guilty! You got to make him pay!"

"Get— the lieutenant put both feet on the desk top and for a moment leaned on it like a very old, very dead man— give me patience. Make Tige pay for it? Sure. And who takes over from one? Eight-ninety? You feel, you torture first," he said to Holier, "what do you know about it?"

Holier stared at him.

"No," said the lieutenant, severely, "you don't understand. You can't see that here there's no cash value on being a nice guy, on being kind, or gentle, or a good husband. All that counts here is how much work your two hands can do. Sure, we all loved Jimmy. He was a good man—but he's dead now. There's men and women and children on the farms and on the docks and in the stores, and down here in the city, who'll be minus the catch that Jimmy would have brought in today. Who do you think feels that—who do you think feels that, God help me? I've got a double house, and this is the best I can do."

"I—" began Holier.

"Shut up," said the lieutenant, stiffly. "Listen to me. We're on our own here. We're too far out and too isolated to be rescued if anything goes wrong. We're too many to feed if our food supply fails. We can't afford an abstract justice to punish our moral values or our emotions. Tige killed Jimmy, and nobody blames him for it—but what's to be done? We've got to work. Would you take another one from us? God in heaven, there isn't a person in this room, except yourself, that doesn't work fourteen hours a day or longer and consider himself lucky to have these meals and a bed to sleep in at all. What can we do to punish Tige that wouldn't punish ourselves at the same time? Rehabilitate him? We haven't got the time. Impose him? We haven't got the jailer. Sentence him to a lifetime at hard labor? What do you think he's got now?"

Holier sagged. He made a little defeated gesture with one hand. "I give up," he said, and turned away. "Let me out of here. I'm going back to the ship."

He took one haggard step forward and made as if to push between the two uniformed policemen. Then, abruptly, he had spun like a cat, shooting one man away from him and clawing at the gun to the other's holster. He had the weapon hilt-dragged clear before he'd even dropped about him, wrenched him down. He hung pinned between the two men. The lieutenant walked slowly around the desk to face him.

"You would, wouldn't you?" said the lieutenant with a strange quietness. "You'd be your own judge
and circumstance. You'd risk being departed in items, knowing that's the worst I could do to you. I suppose you think you've got him.

He turned about and walked back to the dock. From a drawer he pulled out a sheet of printed paper and crumpled briefly on it with a pen. He came back with it to Holter.

"Let him go, here," he said, "here." He drew his ownshame and extended it, butt foremost, together with the paper. "Citizenship application. Sign it—and you can have my gun.

The hands on Holter's arms fell away. A sudden silence filled the office.

"Here, take them," said the lieutenant. "One for one's not a bad trade; and we badly need someone to replace Jimmy. Sign—and you can have his boat and his house. You can probably have Mincy, too. She's going to have to marry again, and she feels about Tige the way you do. She's young and healthy and that's a good sawfarm. You could do worse on this planet.

Holter did not answer. They were all looking at him. Mincy, the lieutenant, Dunny, and Bolten. Bolten did not avoid his gaze—he stared back at Holter without emotion, without fear.

"Or is that too much to ask?" demanded the lieutenant, softly. "Is that too high a price for you to pay for your revenge—to freeze at the turn and sweat in the starfield? Because that's the price, Lauren. Take over the work that Jimmy did and you can have everything he had, and more—"you can have justice as well.

Holter still did not move, or speak. He stood before them now with all the battle casing of his dark soul broken and stripped away. High on the wall of the office a clock ticked once, marking a minute gone—a long, long minute dwindling off into eternity, an eternity as grey as the sea, cold as an empty house, agonizing as an aching child, frighten as a legless man. After a while, the lieutenant lowered gun and paper.

"Take him away," he ordered the two policemen. "Take him back to his speedbinder."

The hands of the police closed on Holter's arms. Bolten's face still showed no emotion. Dunny gazed with wondering animal eyes, and the expression of the lieutenant was now indifferent. It was the eyes of the girl Mincy, so the policemen led him out the door, that made a mark deep on Holter's naked soul.

The look on her face he would never forget...
THE QUEER ONES

by LEIGH BRACKETT

Monk ran the town paper, and the hospital called
him in to see the X-rays. They were of a hill girl's
illegitimate boy, and they showed inside no
man child ever had. . . That was the beginning—
the end came on cloud-wrapped buckhorn mountains,
with deadly green lightning flickering, and a sound
in the sky that was not wind or thunder . . .
I ran down Buckhorn Mountain in the cloud and rain, carrying the boy in my arms. The green lightning flashed among the trees. Buckhorn is no stranger to lightning, but this was different. It did not come from the clouds, and there was no thunder with it. It ran low, searching the thickets, the brush-choked gullies, the wet hollows full of brambles and pum-sun ivy. Thick green hungry snakes looking for something. Looking for me.

Looking for the boy who had started it all.

He peered up at me, clinging like a lemur to my coat as I went headlong down the slope. His eyes were copper-colored. They had seen a lot for all the two-and-a-half years there had been open on this world. They were frightened now, not just vaguely as you might expect from a child his age, but intelligently. And in his curiously sweet-sharp voice he asked:

"Why must they kill us?"

"Never mind," I said, and ran and ran, and the green lightning hunted us down the mountainside.

It was Doc Calendar, the County Health Officer, who got me in on the whole thing. I am Hank Temple, owner, editor, feature writer, legion, and general nuisance of the New-hub News,
serving Newhale and the rural and mountain areas around it. Doc Collender, Sheriff Ed Bots and I are old friends, and we work together, helping out where we can. So one hot morning in July my phone rang and it was Doc, sounding kind of hollow.

"Hiya," he said, "I'm at the hospital. Would you want to take a run up here for a minute?"

"What's up?"

"Nobody just thought something might interest you." Doc was being coy, but anything you say over the phone to Newhale's public property. But even to the tune of his voice put prickers between my shoulders.

"Doc," I said, "Eight away."

Newhale is the county seat, a small town, and a high town. It lies in an upland hollow of the Appalachian, a little cluster of old red brick buildings with porches on thin wooden pillars, and frame houses ranging from new white to weathered gray-greens, centered around the dusty courthouse. A snowy stream bends the town.

The tannery and the feed mill are its chief industries, with some mining nearby. The high-rise comes down a nest out on Tanks- hamrock Ridge to the east and goes up a steep cut on Goat Hill to the west. Over all towers the rough, imposing lump of Black Footh Mountain, green on the ridges, shadowed blue in the folds, wrapped more often than not in a mist of cloud.

There is not much money nor any great fame to be made in Newhale, but there are other reasons for living here. The girl I wanted to marry couldn't quite see them, and it's hard to explain to a woman why you would rather have six pages of small-town newspaper that belong to you than the whole of the New York Times if you only work for it. I gave up trying, and she went off to marry a guy named suit, and every time I swallowed my fishing-rod or my deer ribs I'm happy for her.

The hospital is larger than you might expect, since it serves a big part of the county. Sitting on a spur of Goat Hill well away from the tannery, it's an old building with a couple of new wings tack on. I found Doc Collender in his office, with Bueser. Bueser is the resident doctor, a young guy who knows more, in the old phrase, than a jackass could haul drombol- hill. This morning he looked as though he wasn't sure of his own name.

"Yesterday," Doc said, "one of the Taxi girls brought her kid in, a little boy. I wasn't here, I was out testing those walls up by Pine-crest. But I've seen him before. He's a stand-out, a real handsome youngster."

"Precious," said Bueser nervously. "Very precious for his..."
applied. Physically, too. Coordination and muscular control well developed. And his coloring—"

"What about it? I asked.

"Odd. I don’t know. I got it, and then forgot it. The kid looked as though he’d been through a meat-grinder. His mother said the other kids had ganged up and brutally beat him, and he hadn’t been right for several days, so the reckoned he’d better bring him in. She’s not much more than nineteen herself."

Bosmet picked up a couple of pictures from the desk and showed them to me. His hands shook, making the stiff film rattle together.

"I didn’t want to trust myself on these. I waited until Callendar could check these, too."

I held the pictures up and looked at them. They showed a small, frail bony structure and the usual shadowy outline of internal organs. It wasn’t until I had looked at them for several minutes that I began to realize there was something peculiar about them. There seemed to be too few ribs, the articulation of the joints looked queer even to my layman’s eye, and the organs themselves were a hopeless jumble.

"Some of the limbs," said Dee, "we can’t figure out at all. There are organs we’ve never seen nor heard of before."

"Yet the child seems normal and perfectly healthy," said Bosmet.
Doc's station wagon, with County Health Service paint on its side, skidded and spun around the turns of the easy dirt road. Jim Berritt had had to stay at the hospital, but I was sitting inside Doc, hunched forward in a sweat of impatience. The road ran up around the shoulder of Unkshunck Ridge. We had thick dark woods on our right going up, and thick dark woods on our left going down. Buckhorn hung in the north like a curtain across the sky.

"We'll have to be careful," Doc was saying. "I know these people pretty well. If they get the idea we're trying to pull something, we'll never get another look at the kid."

"You handle it," I said. "And by the way, nobody's mentioned the boy's father. Doesn't he have one?"

"Do you know the Tate girls?"

"No. I've been through Possum Creek all right, but through it is all..."

"You must have gone fast," said Doc, grinning. "The answer is physiologically yes, legally you kidding? He shifted into second, taking it easy over a place where the road was washed and gulled. "They're not a bad bunch of girls at that, though," he added reflexively. "A kind of like them. Couple of them are downright married."

We lurched on through the hot green shadows, the great em-
The Queen Ones

ners of civilization like Newhall, forgotten in the distance behind us, and finally to a remote pocket just under Tunkhannock's crest, and then the settlement of Pauness Creek.

There were four ancient houses struggling out along the side of the stream. One of them said casually, and had a gas pump in front of it. Two old men sat on the steps.

"Doe up the road," he said, straight-faced, "live out a little bit from the center of town."

Two more turns of the road, which was now only a double-gutted track, brought us to a rural miller which said TAMS. The house behind it was pretty well run down, but there was grass in most of the windows and only half the bricks were gone from it. The chimney. The playboys were sort of a rusty brown, patched up with nails and ends of tar paper. A woman was washing clothes in an old galvanized tub set on a stand in the side yard. There was a television set in the house. There was a suet with a litter in it. A picture of a horse and a cattled house-trailer were visible among the trees—probably the horses of the married daughters. An ancient man sat in an ancient rocking-chair on the porch and stared at us, and an ancient dog beside him rose up hourly and barked.

I've known quite a lot of families like the Tams. They scarcely eat enough meat for their pigs and their still-houses, and enough garden for themselves. The young men make some of their money at quilts during hunting season, and the old men make chairs selling moonshine. They have electricity now, and they can afford radios and even television sets. City folks call them lazy and shiftless. Actually, they find the simple life so pleasant that they have no time to let hard work spoil their enjoyment of it.

Doe drove his station wagon into the yard and stopped. Instantly there was an explosion of dogs and children and people.

"There he is." Doe said to me, under cover of the whirring and rumbling and the baying of screen doors. "The skinny little chap with the red hair. There, just coming down the steps."

I looked over and saw the boy.

He was an odd one, all right. The run of the Tams tribe all had straight hair ranging from light brown to honey blond. He was close and curly to his head and I saw what Jim Ross had meant about his coloring. The red had instilled of something else in it. One would almost, in that glaze of sunlight, have said silver. The Tams had blue eyes. His were
copper-colored. The Tates were fair and unburned, and so were he, but there was a different quality of fairness in his skin, a different shading to the tan.

He was a little boy. The Tate children were rangy and big boned. He moved among them lightly, a gaunt among young goats, with a usually unchildlike grace and suavity. His loins were narrow, with a very high arch to the skull. His eyes were grave, precociously wise. Only in the mouth was there genuine childishness, soft and shy.

We got out of the car. The kids—a dozen of them, jive or take a couple—all stopped as though on a signal and began to study their hero feet. The woman came from the washhtub, wringing her hands on her skirt. Several others came out of the house.

The little boy remained at the feet of the steps. His hand was new in the hand of a barefoot girl. Judging by Boswell's description, this would be his mother. Not much over nineteen, handsome, big-breasted, full-lipped. She was dressed in tight jeans and a boy's shirt, her bare feet stuck into sundals, and a bunch of yellow hair hung down her back.

Doe spoke to them all, introducing me as a friend from town. They were courteous, but reserved. "I want to talk to Billy," he said, and we moved closer to the steps. I tried not to look at the boy lest the glint in my eye give me away. Doe was being so casual and hearty it hurt. I could feel a curious little tingle run over my skin as I got close to the child. It was partly excitement, partly the feeling that here was a being different from myself, another species. There was a dark bruise on the child's forehead, and I remembered that the others had beaten him. Was this the origin of their resentment? Did they sense it without the need for blood samples and X-rays?

Mutant. A strange word. A stranger thing to come upon here in these friendly familiar hills. The child stared at me, and the July sun turned gold on my back.

Doe spoke to Sally, and she smiled. She had an honest, friendly smile. Her mouth was wide and full, frankly sensuous but without coquetry. She had big blue eyes, and her unburned cheeks were flushed with health, and she looked as uncouthized and warmly attractive as a summer meadow. I wondered what strange freak of genetics had made her the fiancée of a totally new race.

Doe said, "Is this the little boy you brought in to the hospital?"

"Yes," she said. "But he's better now."

Doe bent over and spoke to the boy. "Well," he said. "And what's your name, young man?"

"Nunu's Billy," he answered, in
a grave sweet smile that had a
sound in it of hells being rung far
off. "Billy Tate,"
The woman who had come
from the washhouse and with un-
concealed dislike, "He ain't no
Tate, whatever he might be.
She had been introduced as
Mrs. Tate, and was obviously the
mother and grandmother of this
numerous breed. She had lost
most of her teeth and her gray-
blonde hair stood out around her
head in an unkempt brush. Doc ig-
nored her.
"How do you do, Billy Tate," he
said. "And where did you get
that pretty red hair?"
"From his daddy," said Mrs.
Tate sharply. "Some place he got
his snaky-feet ways and them
eye red like a devil. I tell
you, Doc, if you see a man
looks just like that child, you tell
him to come back and get what
belongs to him!"
A sunny but perfectly fit-
ting counterpoint to her words,
there crashed as Buckhoun's doxy
crept, like the ominous laughter of
a god.
Sally reached down suddenly
and caught up the boy into her
arms...
The thud thundered and died
on the hearth. I stared at Doc
and he stared at me, and Sally
Tate screamed at her mother.
"You keep your dirty mouth off
my baby!"
"That ain't no way to talk to
Man," said one of the older girls.
"And anyway, she's right."
"Oh," said Sally. "You think we,
do you? She turned to Doc, her
cheeks all white now and her eyes
blazing. "They say they're going
on my baby, Doctor, and you
know why? They're jealous. They,
'Ve just sick to these stumps with
it, because they all got big hunkety
kids that can't do nothing but eat,
and big hunkety men that treat
them like they was no better'n
breed cats.
She had reached her peak of
fury as quickly that it was obvious
this row had been going on for
a long while, probably ever since
the child was born.
Possibly even before, judging
by what she said then.
"I mean," she said to her sis-
ters, showing her teeth. "Every
last one of you was dancing up
and down to catch his eye, but it was
me he took to the hayloft. Me.
And if he ever comes back he can
have me again, for as often as
as long as he wants me. And I won't
let no ill of him nor the baby!"
I heard all this. I understood
it. But not with all, or even most
of my mind. That was busy with
another thing, a thing it didn't
want to grapple with at all and
kept shying away from, only to be
driven back shivering.
Doc put it in these words.
"You mean," he said, to no one
in particular, "the boy looks just
like his father?"
"Said on' imague," said Sally finally, kissing the red curls that had that queer glint of silver in them. "Sure would like to see that man again. I don't care what they say, Docer, I tell you, he was beautifu'."

"Handsome is as handsome does," said Mrs. Tate. "He was no good, and I know it the minute I saw—"

"Why, Man," said Mr. Tate, "he had you eating out of his hand, with them spooery ways of his." He turned to Doc Calhendran, laughing. "He'd a gone off to the hayfield with him herself if he'd asked her, and there's a fact. Ain't it, Harry?"

Harry said it was, and they all laughed.

Mrs. Tate said fitfully, "It'd become you men better to do something about getting some support for that least from his father, instead of making fun jokes in front of strangers."

"Seems like, when you bring it up," said Mr. Tate, "it would become us all to wash our dirty linen for people who aren't rightly concerned." He said earnestly to Doc, "Been as you had a reason for coming here. Is there something I can do?"

"Well—," said Doc uncertainly, and looked at the boy. "Just like his father, you see."

And if that is so, I thought, how can he be a woman? A man's got is something new, something different, alien from the parent stem. If he is in the spit and image outside, then build and coloring breed true. And if build and coloring breed true, probably blood-type and internal organ—"

Thunder boomed again on Buckhury Mountain, and I thought, Well, and so his father is a woman, too.

But Doc said, "Who was this man, Sally? I know just about everybody in these hills, but I never saw anyone to answer that description."

"His name was Bill," she said, "just like the boy's. His other name was Jones. Or he said it was."

"He lied," said Mrs. Tate. "Wan't Jones no more than nine is. We found that out."

"How did he happen to come here?" asked Doc. "Where did he say he was from?"

"He come here," Mrs. Tate said, "driving a truck for some appliance store. Gawdy's I think it was, in Newhale. Said the place was just new and was making a survey of stores around here, and offering free service on theirs up to five dollars, just for goodwill. So I let him look at ours, and he fummed it with for almost an hour, and didn't charge me a cent. Worked real good afterward, too. That would 'be the end of it, I guess, only Sally was under his feet all the time and he took a shine to her. Kept coming back,
and coming back, and you see what happened."

I said, "There isn't any Goode's store in Newhale. There never has been."

"We found that out," said Mrs. Tate. "When we knew the baby was coming we tried to find Mr. Jones, but it seems he'd told us a big pack of lies."

"He told me," Sally said dreamily, "where he came from."

Doc said vaguely, "Where?"

Twisting her mouth to shape the unfamiliar sounds, Sally said, "HeySTORE."

Doc's eyes opened wide. "Where the hell is that?"

"Ain't no place," said Mrs. Tate. "Even the schoolteacher couldn't find it in the atlas. It's only another of his lies."

But Sally assumed again, "HeySTORE. Way he said it, it sounded like the most beautiful place in the world."

The stormcloud over Buckhorn was spreading out. Its edges dimmed the sun. Lightning flashed and reared and the thunder rolled. I said, "Could I take a look at your television?"

"Why," said Mrs. Tate, "I guess so. But don't you disturb it, now. Whatever she be done, he fixed that screen good."

"I won't disturb it," I said. I went up the Flagstone steps past the old man and the fat old dog. I went into the cluttered living-room, where the springs were coming out of the sofa and there was no rug on the floor, and six kids apparently slept in the old brass bed in the corner. The television set was maybe four years old, but it was the best and biggest made that year. It formed a sort of shrine at one end of the room, with a piece of red cloth laid over its top.

I took the back off and looked in. I don't know what I expected to see. It just seemed odd to me that a room would go to all the trouble of faking up a truck and tinkering with television sets for nothing. And apparently he had a pole. What I did see I didn't understand, but even to my inexpert eye it was obvious that Mr. Jones had done something quite peculiar to the wiring inside.

A totally unfamiliar component mounted on the side of the case, a little gadget not much bigger than my two thumbs.

I replaced the back and turned the set on. As Mrs. Tate said, it worked real good. Better than it had any business to. I got a peculiar hunch that Mr. Jones had planned it that way, so that no other serviceman would have to be called. I got the hunch that that component was important somehow to Mr. Jones.

I wondered how many other such components he had put in television sets in this state, and what they were for.

I turned off the set and went..."
outside, Doc was still talking to Sally.

"... never further note he wants to make," I heard him say.

"I can take you and Billy back right now..."

Sally looked doubtful and was about to speak. But the dictation was made for her. The boy cuffed out wildly, "No! No!" With the frantic strength of a young animal he twisted out of his mother's arms, dropped to the ground, and sped away into the brush so swiftly that nobody had a chance even to grab for him.

Sally smiled. "All those shilly meddles and she funny smells frightened him," she said. "He don't want to go back. Isn't anything wrong with him, is there? The other doctor said he was all right."

"No," said Doc reluctantly.

"Just something about the X-rays he wanted to check on. It could be important for the future. Tell you what, Sally. You talk to the boy, and I'll come back in a day or two."

"Well," she said. "All right."

Doc hesitated, and then said, "Would you want me to speak to the sheriff about finding this man? If that's his child he should pay something for its support."

A painful look came into her eyes. I always thought maybe if he knew about the baby—"

Mrs. Tao didn't give her time to finish. "Yes, indeed," she said.

"You speak to the sheriff. Trust somebody did something about this. Yes, that hurts a man grown himself."

"Well," said Doc, "we can try."

He gave a last baffled glance at the woods where the boy had disappeared, and then we said goodbye and got into the cotton wagon and drove away. The sky was dark overhead now, and the air was heavy with the smell of rain.

"What do you think?" I said finally.

Doc shook his head. "I'm damned if I know. Apparently the external characteristics bred true. If the others did—"

"Then the father must be a mutant too. We just push it back one generation."

"That's the simplest explanation," Doc said.

"Is there any other?"

Doc didn't answer that. We passed through Possum Creek, and it began to rain.

"What about the television set?" he asked.

I told him. "But you'd have to have two or one of the boys from Nechesville Appliance look at it, to say what it was."

"It smells," said Doc. "It stinks, right out loud."

The bolt of lightning came so quickly and hit so close that I wasn't conscious of anything but a great flare of livid green. Doc yelled. The cotton wagon slowed
on the road that now had a thin
film of mud over it, and I saw
trees springing up, their tops bent
by a sudden wind so that they
seemed to be literally leaping for-
ward. There was a thunder. I
remembered that, I don't know
why. The station wagon tipped
over and hit the trees. There was
a crash. The door flew open and I
fell out through a wet whipping
bundle of branches and on down
to the steep, thin ground below.
I kept on falling, right down the
slope, until a guilty pocket caught
and held me. I lay there dazed,
shaking up at the station wagon
that now hung over my head. I
saw Doc's legs come out of it, out
the open door. He was all right.
He was letting himself down to
the ground. And then the light-
ning came again.
It illuminated the station wagon
and the trees and Doc in a ball
of green fire, and when it went away
the trees were seared and the
paint was blazed on the vesuvius
car, and Doc was rolling over and
over down the slope, very slowly,
as if he was tired and did not
want to hurry. He came to rest
two feet away from me. His hair
and his clothes were melting,
but he wasn't worrying about
it. He wasn't worrying about
anything, any more. And for the
second time there had not been
any thunder, close at hand when
the lightning was.
The rain came down on Doc
in heavy sheets, and put the smol-
dering fire out.

Jim Bean had just come from
posting Doc Callender's body. For
the first time I found myself al-
most liking him, he looked so sick
and beat-out. I pushed the bottle
towards him, and he drank out of
it and then lighted a cigarette
and just sat there shuddering.
It was lightning, he said. "No
doubt at all."
Ed Bean, the sheriff, said.
"Hank will have there was some-
ting screevy about it."

Honest shook his head at me.
"Lightning,"
"Or a heavy electric charge, I
said. "That comes to the same
thing, doesn't it?"
"But you see it hits, Hank."
"Twice," I said. "Twice."

We were in Bean's office at
the hospital. It was late in the
afternoon, getting on for supper
time. I reached for the bottle
again, and Ed said quietly.
"Lightning does do that, you
know, in spite of the old saying."
"The first time, it missed,
I said. "Just, second time it didn't.
If I hadn't been thrown clear I'd
be dead now. And there wasn't any
thanks:
"You were, damn."
Honest said.
"The first shock caused you."
"It was green," I said.
"Freight cars often are.
"But not lightning."
to Jim Boswell. "Give him something and send him home."

Boswell nodded and got up, but I said, "No, I've got to write up a piece on Doc for tomorrow's paper. See you."

I didn't want to talk any more. I went out and got my car and drove back to town. I felt funny. Halos, cold, with a veil over my head so I couldn't see anything clearly or think about anything clearly. I stopped at the store and bought another bottle to see me through the night, and a feeling of cold sweat was in me, and I thought of green, silvery lightning, and little gnomes that didn't belong in a television set, and the grave wise face of a child who was not quite human. The face wandered and became the face of a man. A man from Hollis.

I drove home, to the old house where nobody lived now but me. I went my story about Doc, and when I was through it was dark and the bottle was nearly empty. I went to bed.

I dreamed Doc Collender called me on the phone and said, "I've found him but you'll have to bury him."

And I said, "But you're dead. Don't call me, Doc, please don't!"

But the phone kept ringing and ringing, and after a while I woke up and it really was ringing. It was two-twenty-nine a.m.

It was Ed Betti. "Fire up at the hospital, Harsh. I thought you'd want to know. The south wing, Gotta go now."

He hung up and I began to put clothes on the brands dummy that was me. The south wing, I thought, and steam went whooping up Goat Hill. The south wing. That's where X thoughtful. That's where the patients of the boy's inside are on fire.

What a curious coincidence, I thought.

I drove after the steam up Goat Hill, through the clear cool night with half a moon shining silver on the ridge, and buckbrush standing calm and serene against the stars, thinking the lofty thoughts that seem to be reserved for mountains.

The south wing of the hospital burned brightly, a wreath of flame against the sky.

I pulled off the road and parked well below the center of activity and started to walk the rest of the way. Patients were being evacuated from the main building. People ran with things in their hands. Flames reared and wrinkled with hoses and streams of water arced over the flames. I didn't think they were going to save the south wing. I thought they would be doing well to save the hospital.

Another unit of the fire department came booming and clamoring up the road behind me. I stepped off the shoulder and as I did so I looked down to be sure of my footing. A flicker of movement on
the slope about ten feet below caught my eye. Dimly, in the reflected glow of the fire, I saw the girl.

She was slim and light as a spirit, threading her furtive way among the trees. Her hair was short and curled close to her head. In that light it was merely dark, but I knew it would be red in the sunshine, with glints of silver in it. She saw me or heard me, and she stopped for a second or two, startled, looking up. Her eyes shone like two coppery sparks, as the eyes of an animal shine, set in the pale oval of her face. Then she turned and ran.

I went after her. She ran fast, and I was in horse shape. But I was thinking about Doc. I caught her.

It was dark all around us under the trees, but the firelight and the moonlight shone together into the clearing where we were. She didn't struggle or fight me. She turned around kind of light and stiff to face me, holding herself away from me as much as she could with my hands gripping her arms.

"What do you want with me?" she said, in a breathless little voice. It was accented, and sweet as a lily. "Let me go."

I said, "What relation are you in the boy?"

That startled her. I saw her eyes widen, and then she turned her head and looked toward the darkness under the trees. "Please let me go," she said, and I thought that some new fear had come to her.

I shook her, feeling her small bones under my hands, wanting to torture her because of Doc. "How was Doc killed?" I asked her. "Tell me. Who did it, and how?" She stared at me. "Doc?" she repeated. "I don't understand." Now she began to struggle. "Let me go! You hurt me."

"The green lightning," I said. "A man was killed by it this morning. My friend. I want to know about it."

"Killed?" she whispered. "Oh, no. No one has been killed."

"And you set that fire in the hospital, didn't you? Why? Why were those films such a threat to you? Who are you? Where—?"

"Hush," she said. "Listen."

I listened. There were sounds, soft and steady, moving up the slope toward us.

"They're looking for me," she whispered. "Please let me go. I don't know about your friend, and the fire was—necessary. I don't want anyone hurt, and if they find you like this—"

I dragged her back into the shadows underneath the trees. There was a huge old oak there with a gnarled trunk. We stood behind it, and now I had my arm around her waist and her head pressed back against my shoulder, and my right hand over her mouth.
"Where do you come from?"
I asked her, with my mouth close to her ear. "Where is Hyzozonn?"
Her body stiffened. It was a nice body, very much like the boy's in some ways, delicately made but strong, and with superb coordination. In other ways it was not like the boy's at all. I was thinking of her as an enemy, but it was impossible not to think of her as a woman, too.
She said, her voice muffled under my hand, "Where did you hear that name?"
"Never mind," I said. "Just answer me."
She wouldn't.
"Where do you live now? Somewhere near here?"
She only smiled to get away.
"All right," I said. "We'll go now. Back up to the hospital. The sheriff wants to see you."
I started to drag her away up the hill, and these two men came into the light of the chafing.
One was slender and curly-haired, in that particular way I was beginning to know. He looked pleasantly excited, pleasantly stimulated, as though by a quest in which he found enjoyment. His eye picked up the soft glow of the fire and gleamed softly, as the girl's had.
The other man was a perfectly ordinary type. He was dark and heavy-set and tall, and his khaki pants sagged under his belly. His face was neither exciting nor pleasant. It was obvious that to him there was no game. He carried a heavy automatic, and I thought he was perfectly prepared to use it.
"...to send a dame, anyway," he was saying.
"That's your psychology," speaking, said the curly-haired man. "She was the only one to send." He gestured toward the flames. "Here can you doubt it?"
"She's been caught."
"Not Yalii?"
The girl's lips moved under my hand. I bent to hear, and she said in the faintest ghost of a whisper:
"If you want to live, let me go to them."
The big man said grimly, "She's been caught. We'd better do something about it, and do it quick." He started across the clearing.
The girl's lips shaped one word.
"Please!"
The dark man came with his big gun, and the curly-haired one came a little behind him, walking so a walking cat walks, soft and springy on its toes. If I dragged the girl away, they would hear me. If I stood where I was, they would walk right onto me. Either way, I thought, I would pretty surely go to jail. Out on the cold mountains.
I let the girl go.
She ran out toward them. I
stood stark and frozen behind the maple tree, waiting for her to turn and say the word that would betray me.

She didn't turn, and she didn't say the word. The curly-haired man put his arms around her and they tumbled forward. Perhaps half a minute, and I heard her tell the dark man that she had only wanted to be sure they would not be able to put the fire out too soon. Then all three turned and went quickly away among the dark trees.

I stood where I was for a minute, breathing hard, trying to think. Then I went hunting for the sheriff.

By the time I found Ed Bett, of course, it was already too late. But he sent a car out anyway. They didn't find a trace of anyone on the road who answered the descriptions I gave.

Ed looked at me closely in the light of the dying fire, which they had finally succeeded in bringing under control. "Don't get any false ideas now, Hesh," he said. "But are you sure you saw these people?"

"I'm sure," I said. I could still see it, my eyes still bright. I saw the girl's body in my eyes. "Her name was Viola. Now I want to talk to Conth."

Conth was the Fire Marshal. I watched the boys peering over what was left of the south wing, which was nothing more than a pile of hot coals with some pieces of wall standing near it. Jim Bosco joined on, looking exhausted and gritty. He was too tired even to curse. He just waited a little about the loss of all his fine X-ray equipment, and all his records.

"I met the girl who did it," I said. "Ed doesn't believe me."

"What?" said Bosco, starting.

"Girl. Apparently an expert at this sort of thing." I wondered what the curly-haired man was to her. "Was anybody hurt?"

"By the grace of God," said Bosco, "how did it start?"

"I don't know. All of a sudden I woke up and every window in the south wing was spouting flame like a volcano."

I glanced at Ed, who shrugged. "Could have been a short in that high-voltage equipment."

Bosco said, "What kind of a girl? A Jenaite?"

"Another one like the boy. There was a man with her, maybe the boy's father, I don't know. The third one was just a man. Man looking bandaged with a gun. She said the fire was necessary."

"All this, just to get rid of some films?"

"It must be important to them," I said. "They already killed Doc. They tried to kill me. What's a fire?"

Ed Bett swore, his face twisted between unbelief and worry. Then
Coffie came up. Ed asked him, “What started the fire?”
Coffie shook his head. “Too early to tell yet. Have to wait till things cool down. But I’ll lay you any odds you like it was started by crickets.”

“Doubtful,” said Coffie, and went away again.
I looked at the sky. It was almost dawn, that beautiful black time when the sky is neither dark nor light and the mountains are cut from black cardboard, without patina. I said, “I’m going up to the Totes. I’m worried about the boy.”

“All right,” said Ed quietly, “I’ll go with you. In my car. We’ll stop in town and pick up Judd. I want him to see that reason.”

“The hell with Judd,” I said.
“I’m in a hurry,” And suddenly I was. Suddenly I was terribly afraid for that grave-faced child who was obviously the unwitting key to some secret that was important enough to justify arson and murder to those who wanted to keep it.
Ed humped behind me. He practically shoved me into his car. It had COUNTY SHERIFF painted on its door, and I thought of Dye’s station wagon with its COUNTY HEALTH SERVICES, and seemed like a poor omen but there was nothing I could do about it.
There was nothing I could do about stepping for Judd Spofford, either. Ed went in and rounded him out of bed, taking the car keys with him. I sat smoking and looking up at Tunkhannock Ridge, watching it brighten to gold at the crest as the sun came up. Finally Judd came out groaning and climbed in the back seat, a tall lanky young fellow in blue overalls with Newark Electric Appliance Co. embroidered in red on the pocket. His little wife watched from the doorway, holding her pint wrappers together.
We went away up Tunkhannock Ridge. There was still a black smudge of smoke above the hospital on Goat Hill. The sky over Burt’s Mountain was clear and bright.
Sally Tate and her boy were already gone.

Mrs. Tate told us about it, while we sat on the humpy sofa in the living room and the fat old dog watched us through the screen door, growling. Sally’s sisters, or some of them at least, were in the kitchen listening. “Never was so surprised at anything in my life,” said Mrs. Tate. “To have just gone out to the barn with Harry and J. P.—there’s the two oldest girl’s boudoirs, you know. I end the girls was washing up after breakfast, and I heard this out loud. Sure enough it was him. I went out on the step—.”
"What kind of a car" asked Ed.
"Some grand truck he was driv-
ing before. Only the name was
painted out. Kind of a dirty blue
dull over. Well, I says, I never
expected to see your face around
here again," I says, and he
says—

Ruled down to reasonable
length, the man had said that he
had always intended to come back
for Sally, and that if he had
known about the boy he would
have come much sooner. He
had been away, he said, on business,
and had only just got back and
heard about Sally bringing the
child in the hospital, and known
that it must be his. He had gone
up to the house, and Sally had
come running out into his arms,
his face all shinning. Then they
went in together to see the boy,
and Bill Jones had funded him
and called him Son, and the boy
had looked him deeply and
without affectation.

"They talked together for a
while, private," said Mrs. Tate,
"and then Sally come and said he
was going to take her away and
marry her and make the boy legal,
and would I help her pack. And
I did, and they went away to-
gether, the three of 'em. Sally didn't
know when she'd be back."

She shook her head, smoothing
her hair with touched fingers. "I
just don't know," she said. "I just
don't know."
daughter, and probably the boy too, more than you know.

"I’ve had daughters married before. It was something about this man—something—" Mrs. Tate hesitated a long time, searching for a word. "Queen," she said at last. "Wrong. I couldn’t tell you what. Like the boy, only more so. The boy has Sally in him. This one—" She made a gesture with her hands. "Oh, well, I expect I’m just looking for trouble.

"I expect so, Mrs. Tate," said Ed, "but you be sure and get in touch with me if you don’t hear from Sally in a reasonable time. And now I’d like this young man to look at your niece.

Jed, who had been sitting stiff and uncomfortable during the talk, jumped up and practically ran to the set. Mrs. Tate started to protest, but Ed said fiercely, "This may be important, Mrs. Tate. Jed’s a good servoman, he won’t upset anything."

"I hope not," she said. "It does run real good."

Jed turned it on and watched it for a minute. "It sure does," he said. "And in this house, too."

He took the back off and looked inside. After a minute he let go a long low whistle.

"What is it?" said Ed, going closer.

"Elecromech thing," said Jed. "Look at that wiring. He’s loaded up the circuits, all right—and there’s a couple tubes in there like I never saw before." He was getting excited. "I’d have to tear the whole thing down to see what he’s done, but somewhere he’s boosted the power and the sensitivity was up. The guy must be a witch!"

Mrs. Tate said loudly, "You ain’t making anything down, young man. You just leave it like it is," she said. "What about that dregna on the side?"

"Frankly," said Jed, "that stops me. It’s got a wire to it, but it don’t seem to hitch up anywhere in the set." He turned the set off and began to joke gently around.

"See here, this little holline wire that comes down and bypasses the whole chassis is cut in here on the live line, so it draws power whether the set’s on or not. But I don’t see how it can have anything to do with the set operating."

"Well, take it out," said Ed. "We’ll take it down in the shop and see whether we can make anything of it."

"Okay," said Jed, ignoring Mrs. Tate’s cry of protest. He reached in and for the first time actually touched the esmographic tube, feeling for the what held it to the side of the case. There was a sharp pop and a small bright flash, and Jed jumped back with a howl. He put his wrinkled fingers in his mouth and his eyes watered. Mrs. Tate cried, "Now, you’ve done it, young man..."
ruined my nerves! There was a smell of burning in the air. The girls came running out of the kitchen and the old dog barked and clawed the screen.

One of the girls said, "What happened?"

"I don't know," Judd said. "The goddamned thing just popped like a bunch when I touched it."

There was a drift of something gritty—oh or dirt—and that was all. Even the halfline wire was consensual.

"It looks," I said, "as though Mr. Jones didn't want anybody else to look over his technological achievements."

Ed grunted. He looked puzzled and irresolute. "Hunt the set any?"

"Don't," said Judd, and turned it on.

It ran as perfectly as before.

"Well," said Mrs. Tate, "thank goodness."

"Yeah," said Ed. "I guess that's all, then. What do you say, Hank? We might as well go."

I said we might as well. We climbed back into Ed's car and started—the second time for me—back down Tumbhannah Ridge. Judd was still sucking his fingers. He wondered out loud if the firecracker boxes in the set would explode the same way if you touched them, and I said probably, Ed didn't say anything. He was frowning deeply. I asked him what he thought about it.

"I'm trying to figure the marks," he said, "the Bill Jones. What does he get out of it? What does he make? On the television gig, I mean. People usually want to get paid for work like that."

Judd offered the opinion that the mark was a nut. "One of those crazy guys like in the movies, always inventing things that make trouble. But I sure would like to know what he plans to do next time."

"Well," said Ed, "I can't see what more we can do. He did come back for the girl, and apart from that he hasn't broken any law."

"Haven't he?" I said, looking out the window. We were coming to the place where Doc had died. There was no sign of a stir on the road. Everything was bright, serene, peaceful. But I couldn't feel the cold feeling of being watched. Someone, somewhere, knew me. He watched where I went and what I did, and decided whether or not to send the good lightning to strike me. It was a revelation, like the memory you have as a young child when you become acutely conscious of God. I began to shiver. I wanted to crawl down into the back seat and hide. Instead I sat where I was and tried to keep the nasty terror from showing too much. And I watched the sky. And nothing happened.

Ed didn't mention it, but he began to drive faster and faster until I thought we weren't going
so need any green lightning. He didn’t slow down until he hit the valley. I think he would have been glad to get rid of me, but he had to lead me all the way back up Great Hill to get my car. When he did let me off, he said gruffly,

“I’m not going to listen to you again till you’ve had a good twelve hours’ sleep. And I need some myself. So long.”

I went home, but I didn’t sleep. Not right away. I told my assistant and right-hand man, Joe Stockfis, that the paper was all his today, and then I got on the phone. I drove the local exchange crew, but by about five o’clock that afternoon I had the information I wanted.

I had started with a map of the area on my desk. Not just Newdale, but the whole area, with Buckhorn Mountain roughly at the center and showing the hills and valleys around its northern periphery. By five o’clock the map showed a series of red pencil dots. If you connected them together with a line, they formed a spreading, irregular, but unbroken circle drawing around Buckhorn, never exceeding a certain number of miles as distance from the peak. Every pencil dot represented a television set that had within the last three years been serviced by a red-tailed man—for free.

I looked at the map for a long time, and then I went out in the yard and looked up at Buckhorn.

It seemed to me to stand very high, higher than I remembered. Even back to count the grass unbroken forest covered it. In the winter the men hunted there for bear and deer, and I knew there were a few hunting lodges, hastily rowed there sheds, on its lower slopes. These were not used in summer, and apart from the hunters no one ever bothered to climb those almost perpendicular sides, hanging onto the trees as onto a ladder, up to the fog and storm that plagued the summit.

There were clouds there now. It almost seemed that Buckhorn pulled them down over his head like a roof, until the gray trolley edges hid him almost to his feet. I shivered and went inside and shut the door. I climbed my automatic and put in a full clip. I made a sandwich and drank the last couple of drinks in last night’s bottle. I laid out my boxes and my rough-country pants and a khaki shirt. I set the alarm. It was still broad daylight. I went to bed.

The alarm woke me at eleven thirty. I did not turn on any lamps. I don’t know why, except that I still had that naked feeling of being watched. Light enough came to see anywhere from the instrument swelling down the sky. There was a low manner of chamber in the wind. I put the automatic in a shoulder holster under my shirt, not to hide it but
because it was out of the way there. When I was dressed I went downstairs and out the back door, heading for the garage.

It was quiet, the way a little town can be quiet at night. I could hear the crickets singing over the street, and the million little songs of the crickets, the peppers, and the frogs were almost distinctly loud.

Then they began to stop. The Frogs feet, in the mushy places beside the creek. Then the crickets and the peppers. I stopped too, in the black dark beside a clump of rhododendrons my mother used to be almost extremely proud of. My skin turned cold and the hair bristled on the back of my neck and the hair bristled on the heavy, hot.

Two people had waded the creek and come up into my yard. There was a dare and a giggle in the sky and I saw them close by, standing on the grass, looking up at the unlighted house.

One of them was the girl Vodi, and she carried something in her hands. The other was the heavy-set dark man with the guns.

"It's okay," he told her. "It's sleeping. Get back."

I slid the automatic into my palm and opened my mouth to speak, and then I heard her say:

"You won't give him a chance to get out?"

Her voice said she knew the answer to that one before she asked it. But he said with furious sarcasm:

"Why certainly, and then you can call the sheriff and explain why you burned the house down. And the hospital, Christ, I told Arvath you weren't to be treated." He gave her a rough shove. "Get with it."

Vodi walked five careful paces away from him. Then very slowly she threw away, in two different directions, whatever was she carried. I heard the two things fall, falling among grass and branches where it might take hours to find them even by daylight. She span around. "Now," she said in a harsh, defiant voice, "what are you going to do?"

There was a moment of absolute silence, so full of meaning that the face-off lightning seemed feeble by comparison. Then he said:

"All right, let's get out of here."

She moved to join him, and he waited until she was quite close to him. Then he hit her. She made a small blunting sound and fell down. He started to kick her, and then I jumped out and hit him over the ear with the flat of the automatic. It was his turn to fall down.

Vodi got up on her hands and knees. She searched as I, searching a little with rage and pain. Blood was running from the corner of her mouth. I took the man's gun and threw it far off and it splashed...
in the creek. Then I got down beside the girl.

"Hey," I said. "Have my hand,

She took it and held it to her mouth. "You were outside here all the time," she said. She sounded almost angry.

"It just happened that way. I still owe you thanks for my life. And my house. Though you weren't so kind to the hospital."

"There was no one to be killed there. I made sure. A building can always rebuild, but a life is different."

She looked at the unconscious man. Her eyes burned with that callous brilliance in the lightning flares.

"I could kill him," she said, "with pleasure."

"Who is he?"

"My brother's partner. He glanced toward Rockburn and the light went out of her eyes. Her head became bowed.

"Your brother sent you to kill me?"

"He didn't say so."

"But you know."

"When Martin came with me I knew."

"She had begun to tremble."

"Do you make a career of this?"

"Aren't? Oh. The setting of fire. No, I am a chemist. And I wish I..."

She caught herself fiercely and gulped not finish.

I said. "Those things are listening devices, then."

"She had to ask me what I meant. Her mind was hazy with some heavy darkness of its own."

"The little gadgets your brother put in the television sets," I said. "I figured that's what they were when I saw how they were placed. A string of sentry posts all around the center of operations. Little ears to catch every word of gossip, because if any of the local people get suspicious they're bound to talk about it and so give warning."

He heard we called this afternoon, didn't he? That's why he sent you. And he heard Doc and me at the Taps. That's why..."

Moving with that uncanny swiftness of hers, she rose and ran away from me. It was like before. She ran fast, and I ran after her. She went splashing through the shallow stream and the water flew back against me, wetting my face, splattering my clothes. On the far bank I caught her, as I had before. But this time she fought me.

"Let me go," she said, and beat her hands against me. "Do you know what I've done for you? I've asked for the little for myself. Let me go, you clumsy fool..."

I held her tighter. Her soft curls pressed against my cheek. Her body pressed against me, and it was not soft but excitingly strong....

—before I regret it," she said, and I kissed her.
It was strange, what happened then. I've kissed girls who didn't want to be kissed, and I've kissed girls who didn't like me particularly. I've kissed a couple of the tough-no-nose kind who shrieked from any sort of contact. I've had my face slapped. But I never had a girl withdraw from me the way she did. It was like something closing, folding up, shutting every avenue of contact, and yet she never moved. In fact she had stopped moving entirely. She just stood with my arm around her and my lips on hers, and kind of a coldness came out of her, a rejection so total I couldn't even get mad. I was shocked, and very much puzzled, but you can't get mad at a thing that isn't personal. This was too deep for that. And suddenly I thought of the boy.

"A different breed," I said. "Would you be in that?"

"Yes," she said quietly. "Would you?"

And the coldness spread through me. I stood on the bank of the stream in the warm night, the bark where I had stood ten thousand times before, boy and man, and saw the strange slitting of her eyes, and I was more than mad. I was afraid. I stepped back away from her, still holding her but in a different way.

"It wasn't like this," I said. "Between your brother and Sally Tom."
VENTURE SCIENCE FICTION

She didn't mean that, either. She said with sudden fierceness, "All right, then, come on. Climb Buckhorn and see. And when you're dying, remember that I tried to stop you."

She didn't speak again. She led me without protest to the car parked on the dirt road. It was a panel truck. By day it would have been a dirty blue.

"He's going to kill them, isn't he?" I said. "He killed Doc. You admit he wants to kill me. What's going to save Sally and the child?"

"You torture me," she said. "This is a world of torture. Go on. Go on, and get it done."

I started the panel truck. Like the television set, it worked better than it had any business to. It fed with uncanny strength and stubborn over the dirt roads toward Buckhorn, soft-sprung as a cloud, silent as a dream.

"It's a pity," I said. "Your brother has considerable genius."

She laughed. A bitter laugh.

"He couldn't pass his second year of technical training. That's why he's here."

She looked at Buckhorn as though she hated the mountain, and Buckhorn, invisible behind a curtain of steam, answered her look with a solemn curse, spoken in thunder.

I stopped at the last gas station on the road and barked the owner out of bed and told him to call Sheriff Betts and tell him where I'd gone. I didn't dare do it myself for fear Vaili would get away from me. The man was very resentful about being waked up.

I hoped he would not take out his resentment by forgetting to call.

"You're pretty close to Buckhorn," I told him. "The neck you save may be your own."

I left him to ponder that, racing on toward the dark mountain in that damned queer car that made me feel like a character in one of my own old stories, with the girl beside me—the damned queer girl who was not quite human—

The road dropped behind us. We began to climb the knees of the mountain. Vaili told me where to turn, and the road became a track, and the track ended in the thick woods beside a rickety little lodge she said was a piano-box, with a garage behind it. The garage only looked rickety. The headlights showed up new and sturdy timbers on the inside.

I cut the motor and the lights and reached for the handbrake. Vaili must have been set on a hair-trigger waiting for that moment. I heard her move and there was a snap as though she had pulled something, from a clip underneath the dashboard. The door on her side hanged open.

I shouted to her to stop and clung out of the truck to catch...
The Quiet One

The rain and the little red-headed kid, and I thought how Ed Best might already be up there somewhere, plowing his way through the woods looking for me. I didn’t know how long I’d been out.

I made sure I still had my gun, and I did have. I wished I had a drink, but that was impossible. So I started out. I didn’t go straight up the mountain. I figured the girl would have had time to find her brother and give him warning, and that he might be looking for me to come this way. I angled off to the east, where I remembered a ravine that might give me some cover. I’d been up buckhorn before, but only by day.

I climbed the steep flank of the mountain, leaving almost into it, working and stumbling and pulling my way between the trees. The rain fell and soaked me. The thunders was a monotonous presence, and the lightning was a great torch that somebody kept tossing back and forth so that sometimes you could see every vein of every leaf on the tree you were fighting with, and sometimes it was so dark that you knew the sun and stars hadn’t been in view yet. I just the ravine. I only knew I was still going up.

There wasn’t any doubt about
that. After a while the rain slackened off and almost stopped.

In an interval between clashes of thunder I heard voices.

They were thin and far away, I tried to place them, and when I thought I had them pegged I started toward them. The steep pitch of the ground fell away into a slanting downslope and I was almost running into a sort of long, shallow trough, thickly wooded, its bottom hidden from any view at all except one directly overhead. And there were lights in it, or at least a light.

I slowed down and went more carefully, hoping the storm would cover any noise I made.

The voices went on, and now I could hear another sound, the scritch and screech of metal rubbing on metal.

I was on the clearing before I knew it. And there wasn't a clearing at all really, just one of those natural open places where the soil is too thin to support trees and rains to brush instead. It wasn't much more than ten feet across. Almost beside me were a couple of trees so cleverly hidden among the trees that you practically had to fall on them, as I did, to find them at all.

From one of them came the sleepy sobbing of a child.

In the moonlight Vadil and Anmek were watching a jointed metal mast build itself up out of a pit in the ground. The top of it was already out of sight in the cloud but it was obviously taller than the mast. The lamp was on the ground beside the pit.

The face of Vadil and her brother were both angry, both set and stubborn. Perhaps it was their mutual pity that made them seem less human, or more subhuman, than ever, the cold bone-structure of cheek and jaw accentuated, the whole head elongated, the silvered hair finely braiding, the copper-colored eyes glinting with that unpleasantly tangle brilliancy in the light.

They had been quarreling, and they still were, but not in English. Anmek had a look like a raven's eye.

Vadil, I thought, was frightened. She kept glancing at the trees, and in a minute the big man, Merlin, came out of one of them. He was pressing a small bandage on the side of his head, over his ear. He looked tired and wet and furs-tipped, as though he had not had an easy time getting back to base.

He started right in on Vadil, cursing her because of what she had done.

Amek said in English, "I didn't ask her to come here, and I'm sending her back tonight."

"That's great," Merlin said. "That's a big help. We'll have to move our base anyway now."

"Maybe not," said Amek definitely. He watched the alien mast
A stretch up was up with a soft thump of its jets.

"You're a fool," said Merlin, for a man of cold and bitter contempt. "You asted this mess, Arnoch. You had to play around with that girl and make a kid to give the show away. Then you pull that half-cocked trick with those guys in the station wagon and you can't even do that right. You kill the one but not the other. And then she leaves you the only chance we got left. You know how much money we're going to lose? You know how long it'll take you to find a location half as good as this? You know what I ought to do?

Arnock's voice was sharp, but a shade uncertain. "Oh, stop bitching and get into those scanners. All we need is another hour and then they can whack. And there are plenty of mountains."

"Are you?" said Merlin, and looked again at Vadi. "And how long do you think she'll keep her mouth shut at your end?"

He turned and walked back into the tent. Arnoch looked uncertainly at Vadi and then fixed his attention on the mass again. Vadi's face was the color of chalk. She started once toward the tent and Arnoch caught her roughly and spoke to her in whatever language they used, and she stopped.

I slid around the back of the tents to the one Merlin was in. There was a humming and whis-
Marlin turned around and saw it wasn't Arnek. He moved faster than I would have thought possible. He scraped up the light stool he was sitting on and threw it at me, sending sideways himself in a continuation of the same movement. In the second in which I was getting my head out of the way of the stool he pulled a gun. He had had a space, just as he must have had a car stashed somewhere in or near the temple.

He did not quite have time to fire. I shot him twice through the body. He dropped but I didn't know if he was dead. I kicked the gun out of his hand and jumped to stand flat against the canvas wall beside the front flap, out of his way. The canvas was light-proof, and the small lamp near the control panels did not throw shadows.

Arnek did not come in.

After a second or two I got nervous. I could hear him shout-"Marlin! Marlin!" I ran into the narrow space behind the banks of equipment, being extremely careful how I touched anything. I did not see any power leads. It dawned on me that all this stuff had come up out of a pit in the ground like the mast and that the generator must be down there below. The front wasn't canvas at all, but some dark gray material in which the equipment was housed.

I got my knife out and started to slit the canvas at the back. Had suddenly the hood of the tent was full of green fire. It sparked off every metal thing and jolted the gun out of my hand. It nearly基准 was out again. But I was shielded by the equipment from the full force of the shock. It flicked off again almost at once, I got the canvas cut and pumped through it and then I put three or four shots at random into the back of the equipment just for luck.

Then I moved around the front and caught Arnek just as he was deciding not to enter the tent after all.

He had a weapon in his hand like the one Vadi had used on me. I said, "Drop it," and he hesitated, looking evil and squat. "Drop it!" I told him again, and he dropped it. "Now stand away," I said. "Walk out toward your sister, real slow, one step at a time."

He walked, and I picked up the weapon.

"Good," I said. "Now we can all relax." And I called Sally Tate, telling her it was safe to come out now.

All this time since I was where I could see her Vadi had stood with one hand on her hip, looking up into the mist.

Sally Tate came out of the other tent. She was carrying the boy, and both their faces were
pale and puff-eyed and streaked with tears.

"It's all right now," I said. "You can go." I was going to say "home," and then there was a sound in the sky that was not wind or thunder, that was hardly a sound at all, but more of a great sigh. The air pressed down on me and the grass was flattened as by a down-driven wind and all the branches of the trees bowed. The mist rolled, boiled, was rent, torn apart, scattered.

Something had come to rest against the top of the mast.

Arneck turned and ran to Valt and I did not stop him. I moved closer to Sally Tate, standing with her mouth open and her eyes big and staring.

The mast began to contract downward, bringing the thing with it.

I suppose I knew then what the thing was. I just didn’t want to admit it. It was cylindrical and slender, about fifty feet long, with neither wings nor fins. I reached it come slowly and gracefully down, attached by its needle-sharp nose to the magnetic grapple on top of the mast. The mast acted as an automatic guide and stabilizer, dropping the ship into a slot between the trees or merely as you would drop a slice of bread into the slot of a toaster.

And all the time the bitter breath of ice was blowing on me and little things were falling into place in my mind and I realized that I had known the answer for some time and had simply refused to see it.

A port opened in the side of the ship. And as though that was the final, incalculable trigger I needed, I got the full impact of what I was seeing. Suddenly the friendly protecting sky seemed to have been torn open above me as the vaulting cloud was torn, and through the rent the whole Outside poured in upon me, the black freezing spaces of the galaxy, the blue and strangeness of a billion billion stars. I shrank beneath that vastness. I was nothing, nobody, an infinitesimal flick in a cosmos too huge to be home. The stars had come too close. I wanted to get down and howl and grovel like a dog.

No wonder Arneck and Valt and the boy were queer. They were not mutants—they were not even that Earthly. They came from another world.

A little ladder had extended itself downward from the port. A man came briskly to the ground and spoke to Arneck. He resembled Arneck except that he was dressed in a single close-fitting garment of some dark stuff. Arneck pointed to me, speaking rapidly. The man turned and looked at me, his body quivering slightly. I felt childish and silly standing there with my little gun. Lorne ran out

The Querry One 99
Earth at an incredible Three-year
ball, dating. "You shall not land."
All the time Arvok and the
stranger had been talking there
had been other activity around
the ship. A hatch in the stern had
opened and now from both hand-
caps people began to come out let-
ter-decker as though borne was the
chief necessity. There were men
and women both. They all looked
human. Slightly odd, a little queer
perhaps, but human. They were
different types, different colors,
toos, and build, but they all fit-
ted in somewhere pretty close to
Earthly types. They all looked a
little excited, a little scared, con-
siderably bewildered by the place
in which they found themselves.
Some of the women were crying.
There were maybe twenty people
in all.
I understood then exactly what
Arvok and Madrin had been up to
and it seemed so grotesquely fa-
miliar and preposterous that I began
to laugh.
"Verdicts," I said aloud.
"That's what you're doing, smug-
gling aliens.
"Aliens? Yes indeed.
It did not seem so funny when
I thought about it.
The stranger turned around
and chanted an order. The men
and women stopped, some of
them still on the ladders. More
voices chanted. Then those on
the ladders were shoved aside and
eight men in uniforms jumped
out, with weapons in their hands.
Sally Tate let go one wild wea-
ting shriek. The child fell out
of her arms. She sat on the wet
ground with the wind knocked
out of him so he couldn't cry,
blinking in shocked dimness. Sally
sobbed. Her big strong healthy
body was stunned and collapsed,
every muscle slack. She turned
and made a staggering lunge for
the door and fell partly in through
the doorway, crawled the rest of
the way like a hurt dog going
under a porch, and lay there with
the flag pulled over her head.
I didn't blame her. I even knew
what immense force kept me
from joining her.
"Of the eight men, five were not
human. Two of them not even
remotely.
I can't describe them. I can't
remember what they looked like,
not clearly.
"Let's be honest. I don't want
to remember.
I suppose if you were used to
things like that all your life it
would be different. You wouldn't
think anything about it.
I was not used to things like
that. I knew that I never would
be, not if we somehow achieved
space-flight tomorrow. I'm too
did, too set in the familiar pat-
tern of existence that has never
been broken for man since the
beginning. Perhaps aliens are
more resilient. They're welcome
to it.
The Queer Ones

I picked up the boy and ran.
It came on again to rain. I ran down Blackhorn Mountain, carrying the boy in my arms. And the green lightning came after us, burning us along the precipitous slip.

The boy had his breath back. He asked me why we had to die. I said never mind, and kept on running.

I fell with him and rolled to the bottom of a deep gully. We were shaken. We lay in the dripping brush looking at the lightning leaping across the night above us. After a while it stopped. I picked him up again and crept silently along the gully and onto the slope below.

And nearly got shot by Ed Beets and a scratch gnom, picking their cautious way up the mountainside.

One of the men took the child out of my arms. I hung on to Ed and said indubitably, "They're landing a herd of verharks."

"Up there?"

"They're up a ship," I told him.
"They're alone, Ed. Real alone."
I began to laugh again. I didn't want to. It just seemed such a half-baked, clichejoke on words that I couldn't help it.

Five blizzards suddenly in the night above us. A second later the noise of the explosions reached us.
I stopped laughing. They must be destroying their installations. Pulling out Menhin said they'd have to. Christ. And Sally is still up there.

I ran back up the mountainside, clattering boulders through the trees. The others followed.

There was one more explosion. Then I came back to the edge of the clearing. Ed was close behind me. I don't think any of the others were really close enough to see. There was a lot of smoke. The tents were gone. Snarling trees were slowly toppling in around the edges of a bit new crater in the ground. There was no trace of the instruments that had been in the tents.

The ship was still there. The crew, human and unhuman, were checking the last of the passengers back into the ship. There was an altercation going on beside the forward port.

Vadi had her arm around Sally Tate. She was obviously trying to get her aboard. I thought I understood then why Sally and the boy were still alive. Probably Vadi had been insisting that her brother and her along where they wouldn't be any danger to him, and he hadn't quite had the nerve to cross her. He was holding uncertain over, and it was the officer who was making the refusal. Sally herself seemed to be in a trance.

Vadi thrust past the officer and led Sally toward the ladder. And Sally went willingly. I like to remember that, now, when she's gone.
I think—I hope—that Sally's all right out there. She was younger and simpler than I; she could adapt. I think she loved till Jones—found—enough to leave her child, leave her family, leave her work, and still be happy near him.

Ed and I started as we ran across the clearing. Ed had not said a word, but his face was something to look at.

They saw us coming but they didn't bother to shoot at us. They seemed in a tremendous hurry. Vall screamed something, and I was sure it was in English and a warning to me, but I couldn't understand it. Then she was gone inside the ship and so were Anek and Sally and the officer and crewmen, and the ladders went up and the ports shut.

The meaning of it dawned on Ed and so did the ship, and the trees were bent with the force of its flight.

I knew then what the warning was.

I yelled to Ed hastily and handed him back. The ship didn't have to be very high. Only above the trees, I judged as far as blind instinct told me I could go and then I yelled, "Get down! Get down!" to everybody within earshot and made frantic motions. It all took possibly thirty seconds. Ed understood and we leaped and hugged the ground.

The blast blew.

Dirt, rocks, pieces of tree rained down around us. The shock wave pounded our ears. A few moments later, definite and powerful, a long thin whistling stream tore upward across the sky, and faded, and was gone.

We got up after a while and collected the moiled and startled group and went to look at what was left of the clearing. There was nothing. Sally Tate was gone as though she had never existed. There was no shred of anything left to prove that when Ed and I had seen was real.

We made up a story, about a big helicopter and some alien racket. It wasn't too good a story, but it was better than the truth. Afterward, when we were calmer, Ed and I tried to figure it out for ourselves. How it was done, I mean, and why.

The "how" was easy enough, given the necessary technology. Pick a remote but not too inconveniently isolated spot, like the top of Bacthorne Mountain. Set up your secret installation—a simple one, so compact and carefully hidden that hunters couldn't walk right over it and never guess it was there when it was not in use. On nights when conditions are right—what it to say, when the possibility of being observed is remote—to run your cargo in and load it. We figured that the ship we saw wasn't big enough to transport that many people...
for. We figured it was a landing craft, ferrying the passengers down from a much bigger mothership way above the sky.

A mile up, it wobbled riddled when you said it. But we had seen the members of the crew. It was generally acknowledged by nearly everybody now that there was no intelligent life of any terrestrial sort on the other planets of our own system. So they had to come from further out.

Why? That was a tougher one to solve. We could only guess at it.

"There must be a hell of a big civilization out there," said Ed, "to hold the ships and travel in them. They obviously know we're here."

"Unnerving thought. Why haven't they spoken to us?" he wondered. "Let us in on it too."

"I suppose," I said, "they're waiting for us to develop space-flight on our own. Maybe it's a kind of test you have to pass to get in on their civilization. Or maybe they figure we're so backward they don't want to have anything to do with us, all our ways and all. Or both. Pick your own reason."

"Okay," said Ed. "But why dump their people on us like that? And how come Marlin, one of our own people, was in on it?"

"There are Earthmen who'll do anything for money," I said. "Like Marlin. He'd not be too hard to contact men like him, use them as local agents."

"As for why they dump their people on us, I want to say, it probably isn't legal. They came from elsewhere. Remember what Marlin said about Ved? How long will she keep her word? Shot at your end?"

"My guess is her brother was a failure at home and got into a dirty racket, and she was trying to get him out of it. There must be other worlds like Earth, too, or the racket wouldn't be financially sound. Not enough volume."

"But she wouldn't," Ed said. "Were they failures, too? People who couldn't compete in the kind of society they must have? And how the hell many do you suppose they've run in on us already?"

I've wondered about that myself. How many aliens have Marlin, and probably others like him, taken off the star-boats and dressed and instructed and furnished with false papers, in return disutilities for all the valuables the poor devils had? How many of the people you see around you every day, the anonymous people that just look a little odd somehow, the people about whom you think briefly that they don't even look human —the queer ones you notice and then forget—how many of them aren't humans at all in the sense that we understand that word? Like the boy...

Solly Tatt's family obviously didn't want him back. So I had
myself appointed his legal guardian, and we get on fine together. He's a bright kid. His father may have been a failure in his own world, but he sure the half-breed child has an I.Q. that would frighten you. He's also a good youngster. I think he takes after his mother.

I've thought of getting married since then, just to make a better home for the boy, and to fill up a void in my own life I'm beginning to feel. But I haven't quite done it yet. I keep thinking maybe Vadi will come back some day, walking with swift grace down the side of Bighorn Mountain. I do not think it is likely, but I can't quite put it out of my mind. I remember the cold realism that there was between us, and then I wonder if that feeling would go on, or whether you couldn't get used to that kind of separation in time.

The trouble is, I guess, that Vadi kind of spoiled me for the general run of women.

I wonder what her life is like in Hyllion, and where it is. Sometimes on the lower frosty nights when the sky is diamond-clear and the Milky Way glitters like the mouths of hell across it, I look up at the stars and wonder which one is hers. And old Buckhorn six black and silent in the north, and the deep wounds on his shoulders are healing into grizzly scars. He says nothing. Even the thunder now has a hollow sound. It is merely thunder.

But, as Aeneas said, there are plenty of mountain men.

IN THE NEAR FUTURE...

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Levarden trapped Dan Fairlane by posing as a salesman of electronics equipment. That way, he not only gained access to Fairlane's Malbecum laboratory, but he was able to bring the translator to with him as a piece of demonstration equipment.

There were guards in front of the building and before the door of Fairlane's private office, of course, but they let the translator go in with him when he showed his fake credentials. The original owner of the condensate was in the river, dead. They searched him for weapons, and, of course, found him smashed. He had taken care of that differently.

"It's a very compact power pack," Levarden said, telling part of the truth as he set the translates on Fairlane's big desk. "As you see, it isn't plugged in anywhere. Now, I'll demonstrate its operation.

Fairlane leaned forward to watch the control board as Levarden flicked the switch. Both Fairlane and Levarden, together with the desk and Fairlane's chair, were within the radius of the translator's effectiveness.

The walls of the office, its furnishings and fixtures, disappeared from around them in that instant. They were on the tiny island, its shores lapped by a red sea, which had become familiar to Levarden. He had kidnapped Fairlane from the midst of his armed guards.

Levarden stopped and stopped the plane from the ground, where he had parked it carefully the last time he was on the island. He leveled it at Fairlane, just in time. Fairlane's astonishment had not lessened his lightning reactions. The scientist's hand already was in his desk drawer.

"Raise your hands, empty, and back away from the desk," warned Levarden. Fairlane complied. Levarden followed him. To make sure that Fairlane was not armed, he made Fairlane strip and throw his
clothes to one side. He went to the desk, found Fairlane's Lager and handed it into the red sea, forty feet away.

"Stay back from the desk—at least twenty feet," Leverard ordered. When Fairlane moved back farther, Leverard sat on the edge of the desk, toy ing with his weapon.

"It is a power-pack, Fairlane," he said, "but it's more. It has a self-contained power unit, but, within its effective radius, it displaces matter out of the normal space-time field. It probably works on a principle similar to your matter-transmitter. It isn't my invention, but I can assure you from experience it works very effectively."

Fairlane leaned around him curiously. The island was bare except for a grass-like purple vegetation. The red sea stretched in every direction, and near the horizon a lavender sun lowered.

"Where are we?" asked Fairlane.

"All I can tell you is that we're somewhere completely outside of our normal space-time framework," assured Leverard. "When we reverse the switch and return to space-time, we enter it at the point of least resistance—which is the point one infinitesimal instant after we left it, before the air can rush in to fill the vacuum left by our departure."

"It works in reverse, too. If we leave this island and return to it, we return at the instant we left, even if we should meanwhile live years in our own space-time."

"Theoretically possible," admitted Fairlane thoughtfully. "But your attitude indicates you didn't bring me here just for a demonstration, Mr. - . . ."

"Leverard. No, I didn't. I want the specifications for your matter-transmitter."


Leverard inclined his head.

"It doesn't matter what I am, Fairlane. You may as well do as I say. There's something you should know: I can return to space-time without you, if you are out of the translator's range."

"I can keep you here until you starve. Meanwhile, I can return to space-time, eat, sleep, live a normal life—and my return here will be the instant I left, so you'll have no chance to get any closer to me."

"I can hardly be expected to take your word for that," returned Fairlane with a wry grin.

"No? I'll give you a demonstration. I'll return to space-time, change clothes and be back in an instant. Note carefully what I'm wearing."

He gave Fairlane a moment to study his attire. Then he reversed the switch. Fairlane was well out of range.

Leverard was back in Fairlane's
officer, the translator on Fairlane's desk.
But across the desk from him stood Fairlane, naked!

For an instant, Leverand thought that Fairlane somehow had been within the radius of the translator's effective area and returned with him. Then he realized what had happened.
The Fairlane of now was still stranded on the island in the red sea. But later, Fairlane would, somehow, return to spacetime. And, returning, naturally he returned to the same instant he left.
So this was a Fairlane of a later time, after Leverand had gone back to the island, after they had negotiated. The thing that puzzled Leverand was that he fully intended to leave Fairlane stranded on the barren island, after he got the matter-transmitter specifications, and Fairlane shouldn't be back at all.
Leverand still had the pistol. He held it on Fairlane while he thought furiously. Fairlane looked a bit puzzled at first, then his brow cleared. He evidently had figured it out, too.
"You must have given me the specifications for the matter-transmitter," Leverand said slowly, "or you'd still be up there, at point-point, isn't that right?"
"You wouldn't remember, would you?" countered Fairlane. "You couldn't, because it hasn't happened to you yet. Yes, I did even better, Leverand. I made a matter-transmitter for you."
Suddently Leverand saw it in a flash—why, later, he was to decide to bring Fairlane back instead of leaving him up there in the Fairlane was his order out of the building, through the ring of guards.
But what had made him decide he couldn't just walk out, a departing sullen? And why hadn't he made Fairlane dress? Well, he couldn't leave Fairlane here now to assure the guards.
"Got any clothes here?" he asked Fairlane.
"Another suit in the closet."
"Put it on.
Fairlane dressed. With the translator under one arm, his other hand holding the gun on Fairlane to his side pocket, Leverand forced Fairlane out of the building ahead of him. The guards let them through, and Fairlane made no effort to alert them.
"I'm surprised you didn't call the guards, even at the cost of your life," remarked Leverand.
"Not necessary," replied Fairlane cryptically.
A black alley, Leverand made Fairlane turn into a blind alley. Ten feet down the alley, they stopped. There was no one in sight.
Leverand took the pistol off, and pointed it toward Fairlane.
"Come closer, Fairlane," he ordered.

"Wait a minute," demanded Fairlane, backing away. Leverard rose between him and the entrance to the alley. "I'm not going back to the island. You don't realize what you're doing.

"You can't get away," said Leverard. "It's a blind alley.

"There's a door—" said Fairlane, still retreating.

"There's death," replied Leverard. "I'll shoot!"

Fairlane stopped and turned, spreading his hands to appeal. His face was pale.

"You don't understand," he said. "I've got to find the—"

His point at the translator.

"It's here," said Leverard, advancing.

Fairlane backed away. "No," he exclaimed. "We'll both be dead!"

"Just you," said Leverard. "If you don't stop.

"Well," said Fairlane resignedly, "it's better quick." He turned and dashed for the door at the end of the blind alley.

Leverard shot him down. He went over and examined Fairlane's body. Fairlane was quite dead.

That took care of Fairlane. There was no problem in disposing of the body. It was within range of the translator.

He flicked the switch.
remember I've already been back and I returned to the instant I left. You're going back, and you'll return to the instant you left. That's the same instant, as we met there.

You can assume you that you will get back to space-time, and I can assure you from what you've already told me after you get back that you're going to give me the matter-transmitter. Not just the specifications, the transmitter itself.

Fairlane set down on the grass and thought a while.

"Why don't you have the matter-transmitter then?" he asked at last.

"Because you haven't given it to me yet. Remember, when I was back, that was in my past but it was in your future. You told me then you had given me the matter-transmitter."

"I'll have to believe you," Fairlane said. "Because the transmitter is so simple a proposition that it would be easier to make a small one than to draw the specifications without the proper instruments. All right, Leverard. Let me make you a list of the materials I need. If you'll get them for me, I'll make you a small transmitter."

A small transmitter was all Leverard needed—all that his country's scientists would need to figure out its workings. Maybe Fairlane was thinking of stopping him after he got back to space-time, but that die was cast. Fairlane didn't know it, but he was already dead.

What he still couldn't figure was why, after the transmitter was completed, he wouldn't just leave Fairlane here and have walked out of Fairlane's office alone. It was the simple way. But one couldn't change what had already happened in the future—or could one?

Leverard pulled out a pad and pencil and traced it to Fairlane. Fairlane made out a fairly long list and tossed it back. Leverard returned to space-time.

Leverard was in the blind alley. Fairlane's body was gone. That was explainable. Fairlane's body had left here when Leverard had left here before, and the body would appear on the island at that future moment when Fairlane would leave the island. And the fact that it was not here now, the instant after it had left, was proof that it would never be here—that Leverard would leave it forever on the island, which was exactly what he planned to do.

Pleased by this indication of the success of his plan, Leverard went shopping. He had to visit every electronic and electronic shop in town to find the things Fairlane wanted. It took him about two hours. At last the list was complete, and Leverard took all his purchases to his apartment.
With the equipment in half a dozen bundles under his arm, Levered scooted the translator and returned to the island. Fairlane was sitting naked on the grass, twenty feet away.

Levered took the package halfway to Fairlane, put them down, and backed away.

"Pick them up and take them back where you are now," he commanded. "I want you to stay out of range of the translator. And, remember, you'll have to demonstrate this gadget to prove to me you're making one that works."

"I planned to do that," said Fairlane, advancing to pick up the materials. "I'll make two small sending and receiving stations, and transfer an object from one to the other of them over a distance of twenty or thirty feet."

It took Fairlane forty hours to do the job. And, since Levered wanted his vitamin to make no mistakes, he allowed Fairlane to sleep twice. He even returned to his apartment in space-time and birded steaks for both of them. It was quicker bettering the steaks back to the island than it would have been carrying them into the living room.

At last Fairlane finished. There were two identical matches, about a foot on each edge, one face of each covered with a maze of disks.

"These things don't have power built in them like your mirror," said Fairlane. "Where can I get a source?"

"I told you this translator is a power-pack, and it is," replied Levered. "You can plug them into it. But do you have enough wire to separate them by thirty feet?"

"The two stations of the matter-transmitter can transmit power, one to the other," said Fairlane. "We'll just have to plug in one of them."

"Good," said Levered. "I'll keep one station over here, and you can send me something from the other station, where you are."

Fairlane took one of the small matter-transmitters in the halfway point, and went back to the other. Levered thrust his index into his pocket, picked up the station, took it back and plugged it into one of the outlets on the translator's side. The matter-transmitter's power cable was only three inches long.

"What can I send?" asked Fairlane.

"Send me one of your shoes," said Levered.

Fairlane picked up one of his shoes and put it in the cubicle of the station at his end. He stood away from the station.

"Send it away from the station,"Fairlane warned. "You might get a shock."

Levered backed away from the cubicle. Fairlane depressed a switch.

Levered was watching the matter-transmitter station at his end.
The translator vanished from before him.

"The cube is a blindness," said Fairlane calmly. "The matter-transmitter, like your machine, operates on objects wholly contained within a radius of about two feet. It transmits by switching the stations, one for the other!"

Appalled, Leveread looked toward him. The translator was in Fairlane’s hands. In sending the shoe to him, Fairlane had transmitted the translator to himself.

Fairlane disconnected the transmitter and was edging away from Leveread and the transmitter, fumbling for the switch of the translator. Now Leveread realized how it was that Fairlane had returned naked to his office.

Leveread reached into his pocket frantically—and hopelessly—for his pencil. Fairlane pressed the switch.

The translator was gone from the red island.

The red sun leaped at the shores of the island. The lavender sun was in the sky. A faint breeze filled the purple grass. A crumpled form lay thirty feet away.

Fairlane had returned to space-time at the instant he left it—in his office, to be shot and killed in the blind alley by Leveread. The translator had returned at the instant it left—to Leveread’s empty apartment.

If anybody, anywhere, were going to come to the red island with the translator that could take Leveread back to the world he knew... ever... they would be there that instant.

But he was alone on the island—except for the two small matter-transmitters, a heap of clothing, a few dirty dishes, and Fairlane’s dead body...
THE dot of revolving or the artillery was only faintly audible in the dugout. The girl sat quietly picking at her hands while the colonel spoke. She was only a slip of a girl, all breath and eyes, but there was an intensity about her that made her unmistakably beautiful, and the colonel kept glancing at her sidelong as if his eyes refused to share the impersonal manner of his speech. The light of a single bare bulb gleamed in her dark hair and made dark shadows under deep jade eyes already shadowed by weeping. She was listening intensely or not at all. She had just lost her child.

They will not kill you, zakhov, if you can get safely past the lines... They may do other things to you—forgive me—it is war.

VENGEANCE
FOR NIKOLAI
by
WALTER M. MILLER, JR.

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They will not kill you, zakhov, if you can get safely past the lines... They may do other things to you—forgive me—it is war.
thing to you—forgive me!—it is war." He stopped pacing, cradled her shadow, and looked down at her with paternal pity. "Crown, you have said nothing, nothing at all. I feel like a scamp for asking it of you, but there is no other hope of beating back this attack. And I am ordered to ask you. Do you understand?"

She looked up. Light filled her eyes and danced in them with the moist glimmering of a fresh grief already an ancient grief old as Man. "They killed my Nikolai," she said softly. "Why do you speak to me so? What can it mean? The bemedicated—I know nothing—I cannot think of it. Why do you torment me?"

The color drained no impatience with her, although he had gone over it twice before. "This morning you tried to leap off the bridge. It is such a shame to die without purpose, daughter. I offer you a purpose. Do you love the Fatherland?"

"I am not a Party member, Toward Polesworth."

"I did not ask if you love the Party, my dear. However, you should say 'party,' now that we are substituting these accursed Minnabian devolutionists again. Bah! They even name members of the Grandest Toward these days. We are becoming a two-party republic. How sickening! Where are the old warior Rakshaksa? It makes one weep. . . . But that is not the question. I asked if you love the Fatherland."

She gave a hesitant nod. "Then think of the Fatherland, think of vengeance for Nikolai. Would you trade your life for that? I know you would. You were ready to throw it away."

She stared a little; her mind seemed to re-enter the room. "This, Aind Gyanvar. Why do you wish me dead?"

"He is in the garden behind this house, my child. Who would have thought the Americans would have chosen such an unlikely place for an invasion? And the manner of it? They parachuted an army ninety miles inland, instead of assaulting the fortified coastline. He committed half a million troops to deliberate encirclement. Do you understand what this means? If they had been unable to drive to the coast, they would have been cut off, and the war would very likely be over. With our victory, As it was, the coast defenders panicked. The airborne army swept to the sea to capture their headquarters without need of a landing by sea, and now there are two million enemy troops on our soil, and we are in full retreat. Flight is a better word. General Rufus MacAulay gambled his country's entire future on one operation, and he won. If he had lost, they would likely have shot him. Such a man is necessarily mad. A megalomaniac, an evil genius,
Oh, I admire him very much! He remind me of one of their earlier generals, forty years ago. But that was before their Fascism, before their Blue Shirts.

"And if he is killed?"

The colonel sighed. He seemed to listen for a time in the dimly shuttered. "We are all a little superstitious at wartime," he said at last. "Perhaps we attach too much significance to this one man. But they have no other generals like him. He will be replaced by a competent man. We would rather fight competently men than fight an unpredictable devil. He keeps his own counsel, that is so. We know he does not rely heavily on his staff. His will rules the operation. He accepts intelligence but not advice. If he is struck down—well, we shall see."

"And I am to kill him. It seems unthinkable. How do you know I can?"

The colonel waved a sheaf of papers. "Only a woman can get to him. We have his character clearly defined. Here is his psychoanalytic biography. We have plucked the leavings of medical records from Washington. We have interviews with his ex-wife and his mother. Our psychologists have studied every inch of him. Here, I'll call you—but no, it is very dry, full of psychological jargon. I'll boil it down.

"MaxAmend is a champion of the purity of womanhood, and yet he is a vile old lecher. He is at once a baby and an old man. He will smell and kiss your hand—yes, really. He is a worshipper of womanhood. He will court you, convert you, pay you homage, and then expect you—pursuit to take him to bed. He could not possibly make advances on you untrusted, but he expects you—as a goddess rewarding a worshipper—to make advances on him. He will be your object servant, but with courtly dignity. His life is full of breast confessions. He chokes in his sleep. He has visited every volcano in the world. He collects anatomical photographs; his women have all been beauty brunettes. He is still in what the Freudians call the oral stage of emotional development—emotionally a two-year-old. I knew Freud was bad politics, but for the Amis, it it sometimes so."

The colonel stopped. There was a sudden terror in the car. The colonel fumbled, lost his balance. The floor batted him against the wall. The girl sat still, hands in her lap, face very white. The air shock followed the earth shock, but the thunder clap was muted by six feet of concrete and steel. The ceiling leaked dust. "Tactical A-minus!, the colonel hissed. "Another of them! If they keep it up, they'll drive us to suicide. This is a mud dog war. Neither side uses the H-bomb, but in the end one side or the other will have to use it. If the Germans
some certain detail, we'll use it. So would Washington. If you're being watched, you might as well take your killer with you if you can. Ball! It is a madness I. Purphy's Opferer, am as mad as the rest. Listen to me, Marya Dmitriyevna. I met you a year ago, and now I am madly in love with you. Do you know? Look at you! Only a day after a bomb fragment dished the life out of your baby, your husband still swells with unclaimed milk and dumb grief, and yet I dare stand here and say I am in love with you, and in another breath ask you to go and kill yourself by killing an Ami general! Ah, ah! What insane apps we are! Forget the Ami general. Let us both desert, let us run away to Africa together, to Africa where apps are simple. There! I've made you cry. What a brute is Purphy, what a brute!

The girl breathed in gasps.

"Peace, Toward, Fellowes! Please say nothing more! I will go and do what you ask, if it is possible."

"I only ask it, shhh, I cannot command it. I advise you to refuse."

"I will go and kill him. Tell me how! There is a plan! There must be a plan. How shall I pass the lines? How shall I get to him? What is the weapon? How can I kill him?"

"The weapon, you mean? The medical officers will explain that. Of course, you'll be too thoroughly searched to get any a slyglint past the lines. They often use froxanropy, so you couldn't even swallow a weapon and get it past them. But there's a way— I'll let the rogue explain it. I can only tell you how to get captured, and how to get taken to Macawunor after your capture. As for the rest of it, you will be directed by post-hypnotic suggestions. Tell me, you serve an officer in the Woman's Defense Corp, the house guard, were you not?"

"Yes, but when Nikki was born, they asked for my resignation."

"Yes, of course, but the enemy people's don't find out you're inactive. You have your uniform still! . . . Good! Wear it. Your former company is in action right now. You will join them briefly."

"And be captured?"

"Yes. Bring nothing but your ID tags. We shall supply the rest. You will carry in your pocket a certain memorandum addressed to all home guard unit commanders. It is in code the Ami have already broken. It contains the phrase: Tactical bacteriological weapons immediately in use. Nothing else of any importance. It is enough. It will drive them frantic. They will question you. Since you know nothing, they can torture nothing out of you."
"In another pocket, you will be carrying a book of love poetry. Tucked in the book will be a photograph of General Rusia Mac-Annawa, plus two or three religious items. Their Intelligences will certainly send the communication to Mac-Annawa; both sides are that anxious about germ stripped. It is most probable that they will send him the book and the picture—for reasons both humorous and practical. The rest will take care of itself. Mac-Annawa is all age. Do you understand?"

She nodded. Porphyry Grigoryevitch reached for the phone.

"Now I am going to call the surgeon," he said. "He will give you several injections. Eventually, the infection will be fatal, but for some weeks, you will feel nothing from them. Post-hypnotic urges will direct you. If your plan works, you will kill Mac-Annawa in the literal sense. Literally, he will kill himself. If the plan fails, you'll kill him another way if you can. You were an actress, I believe?"

"For a time. Never get to the Bebras."

"But excellent! Your mother was an actress. You speak English. You are beautiful, and full of grace. It is enough. You are the one. But do you really love the Fatherland enough to carry it out?"

Her eyes burned. "I hate the livers of my son!" she whispered. The colonel cleared his throat.

"Yes, of course. Very well, Maria Dmitrievna, it is death I am giving you. But you will be sung in our legends for a thousand years. And by the way—" He cocked his head and looked at her oddly. "I believe I really do love you, docdka."

With that, he picked up the phone.

Strange exhilaration surged within her as she crawled through the break along the crest of the flood embankment, crawled hastily, panting and perspiring under a smoky sun in a desert sky while Anti fighters stalked the opposite bank of the river where her companion was retreating. The last of the Russ troops had crossed, or were killed in crossing. The terrains along the bank where she crawled was now the enemy's. There was no hold in the din of battle, and the ugly burling of artillery mingled with the sound of the planes to batter the scene with a relentless avalanche of noise, but the Ani infantry and mercenary divisions had passed for regrouping at the river. It would be a short business for the Americans to consume on across the river at once before the Russians could reorganize and prepare to defend it, but perhaps they could not. The assault had carried the Anti forces four hundred miles in-
land, and it had to stop somewhere and wait for the supply lines to catch up. Mary’s guess—
and it was the educated guess of a former officer—was that the
Ame would bridge the river im-
mediately under air cover and
send mechanical killer-units
cross to harass the remaining
units without involving infantry in
an attempt to occupy territory
beyond the river.

She fell flat and hugged the
earth as machine gun fire na-
tured the ridge. A tracer hit rock
a yard from her head, splintering
her with dust, and sang like a
snapped wire as it shot off to the
south. The spray of bullets trav-
elled on along the ridge. She
moved ahead again.

The danger was spread. It was
all part of an explosive symphony.
She had the moment. She could
not be harmed. Nothing but ven-
geance lay ahead. She had only
to cover on.

Was it the deep that made her
think like that? Was there an
emotional strain to the movement?
She had felt nothing like this dur-
ing the raids. During the raids
there was only fear, and the strug-
gle to remember whether she had
left the lagoon bellowing while she
sailed down the

Macbeth. Once she had played
Lady Macbeth upon the Moscow
stage. How did it go? The seven
Ame of arrows that cracks the
front entrance of Duncan under

Vengeance

my soul. Come, you spirits
that round my mortal thoughts,
meet me here, and fill me with
fear, for I am full of dire

But that wasn’t quite it. That
wasn’t quite what she felt. It was
a new power that dwelt in her
bone, a something else.

Her guard uniform was caked
with mud, and the insignia was
torn loose from her collar. The
ears scissored her knees and the
brush scratched her arm. She
kept falling flat to avoid the tak-
ing fire of her own machine gun.
And yet it was necessary that she
stay on the ridge and appear to be
seeking a way across the river.

She was too intent upon watch-
ing the other side to notice the
sergeant. She crawled over a
corpse and aimed fell in the
fore-
hole with him. She had been crawl-
ing along with her pistol in hand, and
the first she saw of the ser-
geant was his boot. It stamped
down on her gun hand. He
jabbed the amulet of a tummy
gun against the side of her throat.

"Drop it, smit! Your ways are
yours.

She gasped in pain—her hand
—and turned up at him with wide
eyes. A look young Ame with curly
hair and a quizz of unbalance in
her eyes.

"Mya roka—my hand?"

He kept his boot heel on
the gun, but let her get her hand free.
"Get down in here!"
She rolled into the hole. He kicked the gun toward the river.

"Hey, Capt!" he yelled over his shoulder. "I got a guest. One of the commander's ladies." Then to the girl: "Before I kill you, what are you doing on this side of the river, anyway?"

"Mrit chasym uurbaa ..."

"I don't speak it. No savvy. Ya nee gerger..."

Marya was suddenly terrified. She was lean and young and pale with an unnatural fear that would easily allow him to fire a bullet into her body at close range. The Ami forces had been taking no prisoners during the running battle. The papers called them sub-human beasts because of it, but Marya was sufficiently a solider to know that prisoners of war were a luxury for an army with such a heavy load of problems, and often the luxury could not be afforded. Once Russian hussar had brought his men to the Amis under a white flag, and the Ami captain had shot him in the face and ordered his platoon to pick off the others with rifle fire as they tried to flee. In a sense, it was retaliatory. The Russian had taken Ami prisoners during the Ami ambush landings, and she had seen some Ami soldiers hard-edged together and machine-gunned. She hated it. But as an officer, she knew there were times of necessity.

"Please don't shoot," she said in English. "I give up. I can't get across the river anyway."

"What are you doing on this side?" he demanded.

"My company was retreating across the bridge. I was the last to cross across. Your artillery hit the bridge. The jeep finished it off with their rockets." She had to shout to be heard above the roar of battle. She pointed down the river. "I was trying to make it down to the farm. Down there you can wash across."

It was all true. The sergeant thought it over.

"Hey, Capt!" he yelled again. "Didn't you hear me? What'll I do with her?"

If there was an answer, it was drowned by shouting.

"Understood!" the sergeant barked.

"What?"

"I said to take off your clothes. And no tricks. Strip to the skin."

She went sick inside. So now it started, did it? Well, let it come! For the Fatherland! For Nilashi. She began undressing her blouse. She did not look at the Ami sergeant. Once he had finished undressing, she looked up defiantly. His face had changed. He unbuttoned his lips and swore softly under his breath. He turned himself and walked away. Deep within her, something smiled. He was only a boy.

Well, what are you caring about?" she asked suddenly.
"If I didn’t think you would I mean I wish this gun if I had time I’d but you’d nab me to the back but when I think about what they’ll do to you back there . . ."

"Jealous?" he said frowning, wagging his head and rolling his eyes into the other cheek. "Put the underwear and the whole back on, pull up the rest of it, and start crawling down the slope. Aim for that hill, right down there. You’ll be right behind you."

"She’s quite a little dish, incidentally," the Ami captain was saying on the field telephone. "Am I shooting prisoners now, or are we sending them back . . ." "Yeah?" he listened intently. A mortar shell came screaming down nearby and they all sat down in the trench and opened their mouths to save earplugs. "To whom?" he said when it was over. "Sigh! Oh, to you . . . Yeah, that’s right, a photograph of Old Bess Butt in person. I can’t read the stuff. It’s in Bemidji . . . just a minute."

He covered the megaphone and looked up at the sergeant. "Where’s the rest of your squad, Sergeant?"

The sergeant swallowed sublimely. "I lost all my men except Price and Vittorio, sir. They were wounded and went to the rear."

"Damn! Well, they’re sending us replacements tonight, and we’re all going back for a breath, or as soon as they get here. So you might as well march her out back yourself." He glanced thoughtfully at the girl. "Good God!" he murmured.

Mary was surrounded by several officers. They were all looking at her hungrily. She thought quickly. "You have searched me," she said coolly. "Would you gentlemen allow me to put on my skirt? I have submitted to capture. As an officer, I expect . . ."

"Look, lady, what you expect doesn’t matter a damn!" snapped a lieutenant. "You’re a prisoner of war, and you’re lucky to be alive. Besides, you are now about to have the high privilege of lying down with six . . ."

"Quiet, Sam!" grunted the captain. "We can’t do it. Lady, put on the rest of your clothes and get going."

"Why?" the lieutenant yelled. "That damn sergeant is going to . . ."

"Shut up! Can’t you see she’s no peasant? Christ, man, this war doesn’t make you all certain does it? Sergeant, take that Chikop typewriter for a forty-five, and take her back to Major Kline for interrogation. Don’t batch her, you hear?"

"Yes, sir." The captain scrawled an order in his notebook, tore out the page, and handed it to the sergeant. "You can probably hitch a ride on the chow wagon part of the way.
It's going to get dark pretty soon, so keep a look out. If anybody starts a song, blow his guts out." He grinned ruefully. "If we are going to pass it up ourselves, by damn, I want to make sure everybody else does it." He glowered at the Russian girl and nodded. "My apologies, lieutenant. We're not really biddies. We're just a long way from home. After we wipe out this Red Division (the spot the words like bits of tasted metal) you'll see we're not so bad. I hope you'll be treated like an officer and a gentleman, even if you are a Pansy." He bowed slightly and offered the first salute.

"But I'm not—well, thank you, Captain," she said, and returned the salute. . . .

They sat sprawled-legless in the back of the truck as it bounced along the shell-pocked road. The guns had fallen silent, but the sky was full of Amti squadrons jetting toward the sunset. Flaming planes and rocket missiles painted swift vapor trails across the heavens, and the sun colored them with blood. She breathed easier now, and she was very tired. The Amti sergeant sat across from her and kept his gun trained on her and appeared very ill-tempered. He blushed several times for no apparent cause. She tried to shut him out of her consciousness and think of nothing. He was a chubby sort of a pup, and she disliked him. The Amti were all doggy pups. She had met them before. There was something of the Spaniard in them.

"Nikolai, Nikolai, my breasts ache for you, and they burn with your blood, and I cannot sleep without you before I die of it. My baby, my baby, my baby, for my sake, for my sake, my Nikolai Andrejevich, come milk me—

but no, now it is death, and we can be one again. How wretched it is to ache and hunger you... ."

"Why are you crying?" the sergeant growled at last.

"You killed my baby."

"What?"

"Your hammers. They killed my baby. Only yesterday."

"Damnation! So that's why you're here."

He looked at hertiere and reddened again.

She glanced down at herself. She was leaking a little, and the pressure was maddening. So that's what he was blushing about!

There was a crumpled paper cup in the back of the truck. She picked it up and unfolded it, then glanced decorously at the sergeant. He was looking at her in a kind of pained amusement.

"Do you mind if I turn my back?" she asked.

"Hell's bells!" he said softly, and put away his gun. "Give me your word! You won't jump out, and I won't even look. This way gives me a stick knot in the gut."
He stood up and leaned over the back of the cab, watching the road ahead and not looking at her, although he kept one hand on his holster and one boot heel on the lens of her skirt.

Marya tried to dislike him a little less than before. When she was finished, she threw out the cup and buttoned her blouse again.

"Thank you, sergeant, you can turn around now."

He sat down and began talking about his family and how much he hated the war. Marya sat with her eyes closed and her head tilted back in the wind and tried not to listen.

"Say, how can you have a baby and be in the army?" he asked after a time.

"Not the army, the house guard. Everybody's in the house guard. Please, won't you just be quiet awhile?"

"Oh, well, sure, I guess."

Once they bullied out of the truck and lay flat in the ditch while two Russian jets screamed over at low altitude, but the jets were headed elsewhere and did not make the road. They climbed back in the truck and rolled on. They stopped at two road blocks for MP checks down before the truck pulled up at a supply dump. It was pitch dark.

The sergeant vaulted out of the truck. "This is as far as we ride," he told her. "We'll have to walk the rest of the way. It's dark as the devil, and we've only allowed a pale light." He flushed it in her face. "It would be a good chance for you to try to break for it. I have to do this to you, uh, but put your hands together behind your back."

She submitted to having her wrists bound with telephone wire. She walked ahead of him down the ditch while he pointed the way with the flash light and held one end of the wire.

"I'd sure hate to shoot you, so please don't try anything."

She stumbled once and felt the wire jerk taut.

"You've cut off the circulation; do you want to cut off the hands?" she snapped. "How much further do we have to go?"

The sergeant seemed very remorseful. "Stop a minute, I want to think. It's about four miles." He fell silent. They stood in the ditch while a column of tanks thundered past toward the front. There was no traffic going the other way.

"Well?" she asked after awhile.

"I was just thinking about the three Russian women they captured on a night patrol south of here. And what they did to them at interrogation."

"Go on."

"Well, it's the Blue Shirt boys that make it ugly, not so much the army officers. It's the political head phones you've got to watch out for. They see red and hurt Russian. Listen, it would be a lot..."
safe for you if I took you in after daylight, instead of at night. During the day, there’s sometimes a Red Cross fellow hanging around, and everybody’s mostly sober. If you tell everything you know, then they won’t be so muggin’ on you.”

“Yeah?”

“There’s some deserted gun emplacements just up the hill here, and an old commuted post. I guess I could stay awake until dawn.”

She paused, wondered whether to trust him. No, she shouldn’t. But even so, he would be easier to handle than half a dozen drunks offiers.

“All right, And, but if you don’t take these wires off, your neighbors will have to anestitate my hands.”

They climbed the hill, crawled through splintered legs and burned timbers, and found the commuted post underground. Half the roof was caved in, and the place smelled of death and cartridge casings, but there was a canvas cot and a gasoline lantern that still had some fuel in it. After he had freed her wrists, she sat on the cot and rubbed the numbness out of her hands while he opened a X-cotton and shaved it with her. He washed her rather wishfully while she ate.

“It’s too bad you’re on the wrong side of the war,” he said. “You’re okay, as Russians go. How come you’re fighting for the commies?”

She paused, then reached down and picked up a handful of dirt from the floor, handed it, and showed it to him, while she nibbled cheese.

“Ah, this has the blood of my ancestors in it. This ground is mine. Now it has the blood of my tears and its; don’t speak to me of terrors, or fonders, or politics.”

She held the soil out to him.

“There, look at it. But don’t touch. It’s mine. No, when I think about it, to ahead and enseal. Feel it, smell it, taste a little of it the way a peasant would to see if it’s ripe for planting. I’ll even give you a handful of it to take home and mix with your own. It’s mine to give. It’s also mine to fight for.”

She spoke calmly and watched him with deep jade eyes. She knew working the dirt in her hand and offering it to him. “Here! This is Russia. See how it crumbles? It’s what they’ll bury you in. Here, take it.” She tossed it at him. He grunted angrily and looked to his feet to brush himself off.

Marja went on eating cheese.

“Do you want our argument, And?” she asked, chewing hungrily while she talked. “You will get terribly dirty, if you do. I have a simple mind,” she said, standing up. “I can only keep making bundles of Russia at you to answer your endless questions.”

She did an unpronounceable thing. He sat down on the floor and began—well, almost sobbing. His shoulders heaved convulsively for
a moment. Marya stopped eating, looked up at him in amazement. He put his arms across his knees and smiled in satisfaction. When he looked up, his face was blank as a frightened child.

"God, I want to go home!" he cried.

Marya put down her eating utensils and went to bend over him. She pulled his head back with a handful of his hair and kissed him. Then she went to lie down on the cot and turned her face to the wall.

"Thanks, Sergeant," she said.

"I hope they don’t bury you in it after all.

When she awoke, the lantern was out. She could see him bending over her, silhouetted against the stars through the torn roof. She felt a shiver.

"Take your hands away!"

He took them away at once and made a choking sound. His elbows vanished. She heard him stumbling among the broken timbers, making his way outside. She lay there thinking for awhile, thoughts without words. After a few minutes, she called out.

"Sergeant! Sergeant!"

There was no answer. She stood up and kicked something that clattered. She went down on her knees and felt for it in the dark. Finally she found it. It was his gun.

"Sergeant!"

After awhile, he came stumbling back. "Yes?" he asked softly.

"Came here."

His silhouette blotted the patch of stars again. She felt for his holster and threw the gun back in it.

"Thanks, Ami, but they wouldn’t shoot you for that."

"I could say you grabbed it and ran."

"Sit down, Ami."

Ghastly he sat.

"Now give me your hands again,", she said, then, whispering: "No, please! Not there! Not there."

The last thing would be vengeance and death, but the next to the last thing was something else. And it was clearly in violation of the captain’s orders.

It was the beating of the old man that aroused her fury. They dragged him out of the bunker being used by Major Klaus for quarters, and they beat him about the head with a piece of hydraulic hose. "They were irregularly tallied Blue Shirts of the Americanist Party, and he was an elderly Russian major of non-retirement age. Two of them held his arms while the third kicked him to his knees and whipped him with the hose."

"Just a little speaking, centurie, to learn you how to retire for teacher, aye?"

"Whip the bejezus out of him."
"Fill him with gasoline and stick a stick in his mouth."

"Give it to him!"

They were very methodical about it, like men handling an unusually sensitive animal. Marys stood in line with a dozen other prisoners, waiting her turn to be interrogated. It was seven in the morning, and the sun was evaporating the last of the dew on the tents in the camp. The sergeant had gone into the bunker to report to Major Ellis and present the articles her captors had taken from her person. He had been gone ten minutes. When he came out, the blue shirts were still whipping the prisoners. The old man had fainted.

"He's fainting."

"Wake him up with it, Mac. Teach him."

The sergeant walked straight toward her but gave no sign of recognition. He did not look toward the whistle and slip of the boot, although his face seemed slightly pale. He drew his gun in approaching the prisoners and a guard stepped into his path.

"Halt! You can't..."

"Major Ellis's orders, Corporal. He'll see Marys Emptystress Le- Stiths next. Right now, I'm to show her in."

The guard turned blankly to look at the prisoners.

"That one," said the sergeant.

"The girl? Okay, you! Shaggy march!"

She stepped out of line and went with the sergeant, who took her arm and hissed, "Make it easy on yourself," out of the corner of his mouth. Neither looked at the other.

It was dark in the bunker, but she could make out a fat little major behind the desk. He had a poker expression and a small mustache. He kept drumming his fingers on the desk and spoke in comic grunts.

"So she is the wound," he muttered at the sergeant. He stared at Marys for a moment, then thundered: "Attention! Hit a brick! Has nobody taught you how to submit?"

Her fury exploded into a cold blast. She ignored the command and refused to answer in his own language, "Ya two gawurra na Anglish?" she asked.

"I thought you said she spoke English," he grunted at the sergeant. "I thought you said you'd taught her."

She felt the sergeant's fingers tighten on her arm. He hesitated. She heard him swallow. Then he said, "Yes, sir. I did. Through an interpreter."

Here you, little sergeant! the thought, not daring to look her in the eyes, went. "Hey, McCoy!" the major bellowed toward the door. The man who came in was not McCoy, but one of the American-Indian Blue Shirts. He gave the major
Vengeance for Nikolai

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a considered American white
and barked the slogan: "American
First!"

"American First!" echoed the ma-
jor without vigor and without re-
taining the political salute. "What
is it now?"

"I swear to god, uh, that the court is dead at a hostile con-
dition, and can't answer me
questions."

"I told you to loosen him up,
not kill him. Damn! Well, no help
for it. Get him out. That's all.
Punish, that's all."

"An ash cake!"

"Yeah."

The Blue Shirt nudged his
heels, whistled, and exited. The
interpreter entered in.

"McCoy, I hate this job. Well,
there she is. Take a gander. She's
the one with the bacteriological
marks and the map of MacAr-
ward. I'm scared to touch it. I'll
want this one更高 up.
Look at her. A fine piece, eh?"

"Distinctly," said McCoy,
who looked legal and regal
and private-school-polished.

"Yes, well, let's begin. Ser-
guard, wait outside till we're
through."

"She was suddenly standing
alone with them, eyes bright with
fury."

"Why did you begin using bac-
teriological weapons?" Kline
hurled.

The interpreter repeated the
question in Russian. The question
was a silly beginning. No one had
yet made official accusations of
gene warfare. She answered with
a crisp sentence, causing the in-
terpreter to make a long face.

"She says they are using such
weapons because they dislike us,
sir."

The major coughed behind his
hand. "Tell her what will happen
to her if she does that again. Let's
start over." He squinted at her.

"Naive?" echoed McCoy.

"Marina Dmitriyevna."

"Familia?"

"Linier."

"It means 'four', sir. Possibly a
lie."

"Well, Marina Dmitriyevna,
Fox, what's your rank?"

"V akhore vy shutoff?" snapped
McCoy.

"Shure mlyotyemn," said the
girl.

"Sergeant, sir."

"You see, god! It's all straight
from Russia. Name, rank, serial
number, that's all. You can trust
us. Ask her if she's with
Intelligence."

"Ruscko, dnestoy novy shubail?"

"Vive?"

"Eh, how many divisions
are ready at the front?"

"She's no freesty slavish"

"Ta sny pospecu?"

"She says she doesn't remem-
ber."

"Who is your battalion com-
mander, Linier?"
front of her skirt. There was a bullet hole in front and in back where the slug had passed between her thighs. She raised softly and frowned the slate.

"Tell her I am a terrible marksman, but I will do better next time," chuckled Kline. "Good thing the light showed through that skirt, eh, sir. McCoy—or I might have burned the 'bitch's dimples.' There! Is she still coughing now?"

"Yes, sir!

"I must have burned her little white hole. Give her a second to cool off, then ask what division she's from."

"Kahoro, to polka?"

"Ya war pewnya.

"She has a very poor memory, yo."

The major sighed and inspected his nails. They were gnarly.

"Tell her," he mumbled, "that I think I'll have her assigned to C company as an official prostitute after our parachutists make her a symphonium."

McCoy translated. Marus spat.

"What did I tell you?"

"You know, in any battle, wagon?" he groaned.

"Ya kahoro, schoy protay ky orusya nului?"

"Ya war pewanai."

"She says…"

"Yeah, I knew. It was a silly question." He handed the interpreter her file. "Give these to the sergeant and have him take her up to Parus. I haven't the heart
to whip information out of a woman. She's queer; he loves her. He passed, looking her over. "I don't know whether to feel sorry for her, or for Purvis. That's all, McCay."

The sergeant led her to the Blue Shirt's tent. "Listen," he whispered. "I'll sneak a call to the Red Cross." He appeared very nervous in her behalf.

The pain lasted for several hours. She lay on a cot somewhere while a nurse and a Red Cross girl took blood samples and swabs. They kept giving each other grim little glances across the cot while they ministrated to her.

"Well see that the ones who did it to you are tried," the Red Cross worker told her in bad Russian.

"I speak English," Marya muttered, although she had never admitted it to her interrogators, not even to Purvis.

"You'll be all right. But why don't you cry?"

But she could only cry for Nikolai now, and even that would be over soon. She lay there for two days and waited.

After that, there was General MacAanvarde, and a polite form of questioning. The answers, though, were still the same.

"Is she possessed?"

What quality or quantity can be, laughably gallant, transub-

stantially splendid, that abides in the souls of heroes and has been known to man, although he wished to be only a soldier.

There are also men who love the Fatherland, and militiamen who love the Motherland, and the difference between them is as distinct as the difference between the drinkers of bourbon and the drinkers of rye. There are the non-Patriotic revolutionaries in jockeys who suffer their mates to make themselves the masters of the Fatherland, but MacAanvarde was not one of them. MacAanvarde was a Moondog man, and Mother was never much interested in machines. Mother raised babies into champions, and a champion is mightier than the State; never is he a tool of the State. So it was with Rufus MacAanvarde, evil genius by the same word of Periphrastic Gogartyvitch.

Consider a towering vision of Michael the Archangel carrying a swagger stick. Fresh from the holy wars of Heaven for ever, stinging the sons of white gloved officers standing in silver shone, their halos (M-1, official number), studded with brass spikes. The archangel's headgear is a little nibble, crowned with gold laurel and adorned by a devil's devil's braid. He ignores the thrones and dominations, but utters democolitically at a Jew's throng and passes to inquire after
the health of his grandchildren.

Grandmother is greatly impressed.

Immanently reassured, General MacArthur strides into his quarters and bunks up his hat. The room is in darkness except for the light from a metal wall lamp that casts its glare around the great chair and upon the girl who sits in the great chair at the far end of the room. The girl is wearing a gown of white, and her dark hair coils in thick masses about her silk-clad shoulders. The silk is in virtue of the negligence of the general's co-wife in forgetting to pack. The great chair can be a place of war, having been taken from a Soviet People's Court where it is no longer wanted. It is massive as an episcopal throne—a fitting seat for an archangel—and it is placed on a low dais at the head of a long table flanked by heavy chairs. The room is used for staff conferences, and none would dare to sit in the great chair except the general—of course, a lovely g знающих мадам.

The girl stands at him from out of two pools of shadow. Her head is slightly inclined and the downlight catches only the tip of her nose. The general raises with his hand on his hat. He turns slowly away from the hat rack, brings himself slowly to attention, and gives her a solemn salute. It is a tribute to beauty, the acknowledged edges it with a nod. The general advances and sits in the simple chair at the far end of the long table. The general sits with fre

vou, as if he had not breathed since entering the door. His eyes have not left her face. The girl puts down the glass.

"I have come to tell you," she said. "I have come to accuse you to death with the milk of a murdered child."

The general whoosh. She had said it three times before, once for each day she had resided in his house. And for the third time, the general ignored it.

"I have seen to it, my child," he told her gruffly. "Captain Purvis faces court martial in the morning. I have directed it. I have directed him that he be summarily forthwith, if it is your wish, for this is only common justice after what that monster has done to you. Now however let me implore you to remain with us and quit the forces of gallantry until the war is won and you can return to your home in peace."

Mary watched his shadowy figure at the far end of the table. He was like Raleigh at the court of Besh, as once eager and humble. Again she felt the surge of exaltation, as when she had crept along the ridge at the river, ducking machine gun lips. It was the voice of Macha's wiles whispering within her. Come to my woman's breast, and take my...
with its gory, murdering motions, wherever in your ravenous subsidence you want me mother's mischief! It was the power of death in her benam, where once had been the power of life.

She arose silently and leaned on the table to stare at him fiercely. “Murderer of my child!” she blazed.

“May God in His mercy—”

“Murderer of my child!”

Marya Danilovna, it is my deepest sorrow. He sat watching her gravely and seemed to lose none of his lofty composure. “I can say nothing to comfort you, it is impossible. It is my deepest sorrow.”

“Then is something you can do.”

“You are right. Tell me quickly.”

“Came here.” She stopped from the table to the edge of the dais and beckoned. “Come to me here. I have secrets to whisper to the killer of my son. Come.”

He came and stood down from her so that their faces were at the same level. She could see now that there was still pain in his eyes. Good! Let it be. She must make him understand. He must know perfectly well that she was going to kill him. And he must know how. The necessity of knowing was not by any command of Plimpkin’s; it was a must that she had created within herself. She was smiling now, and there was a new, quickness in her gestures.

“Look at me, high killer. I cannot show you the broken body of my son. I can show you no token or relic. It is all buried in a mass grave.” Briefly she replaced the silk robe. “Look at me instead. See? How splendid I am again. Yes, here! A token after all. A simple deed. Look, it is his; it is Nikolai’s.

She turned away and went white. He stood like a man hypnotized.

“See? To nourish life, but now to nourish death. Your daughter, high killer. But now! My son was conceived in love, and you have killed him, and now I come to you. You will give me another, you see. Now we shall conceive him in hate, you and I, and you’ll die of the death of my son. Come, make hate to see, killer.”

His jaw trembled. He took her shoulders and ran his hands down her arms and closed them over hers.

“You hands are ice,” he whispered, and leaned forward to kiss her. She kept her lips tight, and somehow she was certain that he understood. It was a precocious understanding, but it was there. And still he kissed her.

Come, sit down, and tell that in the dimness smoke of hell, that my heart is too hot for you to smite it still. I wake... Of course the general had been intellectually convinced that it was entirely a figure of speech.
The task's work was quickly done. A bacterial mutiny, swiftly lethal to the non-immunized, slowly lethal to Marea who could pass it on in her milk as it fermented. The general slept for half an hour and woke up with a raging fever. She sat by the window and watched him die. He tried to shout, but his throat was constricted. He got out of bed, took two steps, and fell. He tried to crawl toward the door. He fell flat again. His face was crimson.

The telephone rang.

Someone knocked at the door.

The ringing stilled and the knocking went away. She watched him breathe. He tried to speak, but she turned her back to him and looked out the window at the dull-pale countryside. Roula, Nikhol, and even the Amt sergeant who had wanted to go home. It was for those that she listened to his gasping. She lies one of his American cigarettes and found it very enjoyable. The phone was ringing furiously again. It kept on ringing.

The gasping stilled. Someone was hammering on the door and shooting. She stood enjoying the cigarette and watching the crows flocking to a newly planted field. The earth was rich and black here, the same not she had found at the Amt sergeant. It belonged to her, this soil. Soon she would belong to it. With Nikhol, and maybe the Amt sergeant.

The door crashed loose from its hinges. Three blue rifles burst in and stopped. They looked at the body on the floor. They looked at Marea.

"What happened here?"

The Russian girl laughed. Their expressions were quite control. One of them raised his gun. He pulled the trigger six times.

"Come... ...Nikhol Andreyevich... come..."

One of them went over and nudged her with his boot, but she was already dead. She had beaten them. She had beaten them all.

The American newspaper retailed the truth. They said that General MacKenzie had died of poisoned milk. But that was all they said. The whole truth was only sung in Russian legend for the next one thousand years.

NOTE: If you're read Zemstov (see page 3), you have probably realized that we think this time of Vietnam contains a group of especially interesting and particularly violent tales. We would be greatly pleaeed if you would drop me a line and let me know what you think of this month's stories. Just address The Editor, Venture SF, Magazine, 1217 Madison Ave., N. Y. 22, N. Y.

Incidentally, the next issue of Venture will be out on March 12th.
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