

DISMAL LIGHT

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Right there on his right shoulder, like a general, Orion wears a star. (He wears another in his left armpit; but, for the sake of wholesome similes, forget it.)

Magnitude 0.7 as seen from the Earth, with an absolute magnitude 4.1; it was red and variable and a supergiant of an insignia; a class M job approximately 270 light-years removed from Earth, with a surface temperature of around 5,500 degrees Fahrenheit; and if you'd looked closely, through one of those little glass tents, you'd have seen that there was some titanium oxide present.

It must have been with a certain pride that General Orion wore the thing, because it had left the main sequence so long ago and because it was such a very, very big star, and because the military mind is like that.

Betelgeuse, that's the name of the star.

Now, once upon a time, circling at a great distance about that monstrous red pride of Orion, moving through a year much longer than a human lifetime, there was a dirty, dead hunk of rock that hardly anyone cared to dignify to the extent of calling it a world. Hardly anyone, I say. Governments move and think in

strange ways, though. Take Earth for an example . . .

It was decided - whenever big organizations don't want to blame a particular person, they tend to get all objective and throw "it" around like mad - it was decided that because of the shortage of useful worlds, maybe that hunk of rock could be made to pay off somehow.

So they got in touch with Francis Sandow and asked him if it could be done, and he told them, "Yes."

Then they asked him how much it would cost, and he told them that too, and they threw up their hands, then reached to close their briefcases.

But, aside from being the only human worldscraper in the business, Sandow did not become one of the wealthiest men around because of inheritance or luck. He made them a proposal, and they bought it, and that's how Dismal was born.

Now let me tell you about Dismal, the only habitable world in the Betelgeuse system.

A scant improvement over the bare hunk of rock, that's Dismal. Sandow forced an atmosphere upon it, against its dead will, an atmosphere full of ammonia and methane. Then he did frightening things to it, involving hydrogen and carbon; and the storms began. He had a way of accelerating things, and Earth's physicists warned him that if he didn't watch it, he'd have an asteroid belt on his hands. He told them, I understand, that if that happened, he'd put them back together again and start over - but that it wouldn't happen.

He was right of course.

When the storms subsided, he had seas. Then he stoked the world's interior, and amidst cataclysms he shaped the land masses. He did various things to the land and the seas, purged the atmosphere, turned off the Krakatoas, calmed the

earthquakes. Then he imported and mutated plants and animals that grew and bred like mad, gave them a few years, tampered again with the atmosphere, gave them a few more, tampered again, and so on - maybe a dozen times. Then he set about screwing up the weather.

Then one day, he took some officials down to the surface of the world, whipped off his oxygen helmet, raised an umbrella above him, took a deep breath and said, "This is good. Pay me," before he started coughing.

And they agreed that it was good, and this thing was done, and the government was happy for a time. So was Sandow.

Why was everybody happy, for a time? Because Sandow had made them a mean sonofabitch of a world, which was what they'd both wanted, for various reasons, that's why.

Why only for a time? There's the rub, as you'll see by and by.

On most habitable worlds, there are some places that are somewhat pleasant.

There are some small islands of relief from bitter winters, stifling summers, hurricanes, hail, tidal waves, terrific electrical storms, mosquitos, mud, ice, and all the rest of those little things that have prompted philosophers to concede that life is not without a certain measure of misery.

Not so Dismal.

You'd hardly ever see Betelgeuse, because of the cloud cover; and when you did see it you'd wish you didn't, because of the heat. Deserts, icefields and jungles, perpetual storms, temperature extremes and bad winds - you faced various combinations of these wherever you went on Dismal, which is the reason for its name. There was no island of relief, no place that was pleasant.

Why had Earth hired Sandow to create this hell?

Well, criminals must be rehabilitated, granted. But there has always been a certain punitive tenor to the thing, also. A convicted felon is currently granted a certain measure of distasteful experience along with his therapy, to make it stick - I guess - to the hide as well as the psyche.

Dismal was a prison world.

Five years was the maximum sentence on Dismal. Mine was three. Despite everything I've just said, you could get used to the place. I mean, the housing was good - air-conditioned or well insulated and heated, as necessary - and you were free to come and go as you would; you were welcome to bring your family along, or acquire one; and you could even make money. There were plenty of jobs available, and there were stores, theaters, churches and just about anything else you could find on any other world, though a lot sturdier in structure and often even underground. Or you could just sit around and brood if you wanted. You'd still be fed. The only difference between Dismal and any other world was that you couldn't leave until your sentence was up. There were approximately three hundred thousand persons on the entire planet, of which probably ninety-seven percent were prisoners and their families. I didn't have a family, but that's beside the point. Or maybe it isn't. I don't know. I was part of one once.

There was a garden where I worked, all alone except for the robots. It was half underwater all the time and all underwater half the time. It was down in a valley, high trees on the crests of the hills above, and I lived there in a shiny watertight quonset with a small lab and a computer, and I'd go out barefoot and in shorts or in underwater gear, depending on the time, and I'd random harvest my crops and reseed the garden, and I hated it at first.

In the morning it would sometimes look as if the world had gone away and I was adrift in Limbo. Then the emptiness would resolve itself into simple fog, then into reptiles of mist, which would slither away and leave me with another day.

As I said, I hated it at first; but as I also said, you could get used to the place. I did, maybe because I got interested in my project.

That's why I didn't give a damn about the cry, "Iron!" when I heard it, partly.

I had a project.

Earth couldn't - strike that - wouldn't pay Sandow's rates when it came to building them a world miserable enough to serve either as a prison or a basic-training site for the military. So Sandow made his proposal, and that was what decided the destiny of Dismal. He gave them a cut rate and guaranteed plenty of therapeutic employment. He controlled so many of the industries, you see.

Laboratories are all right, I guess, for just simply testing equipment. You get all sorts of interesting figures concerning stress limits, temperature resistance, things like that. Then you turn a product loose in the field, and something you hadn't thought to test for goes wrong. I guess Sandow had had this happen to him lots of times, which is why he'd decided to pick up a piece of the field and add it to his lab facilities.

Dismal, all full of vicissitudes, was the testing ground for countless things.

Some guys just drove vehicles back and forth through different climate belts, listing everything that went wrong. All the fancy, sturdy dwellings I mentioned were test items also, and their counterparts will doubtless one day spring up on other worlds. You name it, and somebody was living with it on Dismal. Mine was food.

And one day there came the cry, "Iron!" I ignored it, of course. I'd heard the rumors, back before I'd asked to serve out my sentence on Dismal, even.

My sentence had been up almost a year before, but I'd stayed on. I could leave any time I wanted, but I didn't. There had been something I'd wanted to prove, I guess, and then I'd gotten wrapped up in the project.

Francis Sandow had been testing lots of things on Dismal, but so far as I was concerned the most interesting was a byproduct of the local ecology. There was something peculiar to my valley, something that made rice grow so fast you could see it growing. Sandow himself didn't know what it was, and the project for which I'd volunteered was one designed to find out. If there was anything edible that could be ready for harvest two weeks after it was planted, it represented such a boon to the growing population of the galaxy that its secret was worth almost any price. So I went armed against the serpents and the water tigers; I harvested, analyzed, fed the computer. The facts accumulated slowly, over the years, as I tested first one thing, then another; and I was within a couple harvests of having an answer, I felt, when someone yelled, "Iron!" Nuts!

I'd half dismissed what it was that I'd wanted to prove as unprovable, and all I wanted to do at that moment of time was to come up with the final answer, turn it over to the universe and say, "Here. I've done something to pay back for what I've taken. Let's call it square, huh?"

On one of the infrequent occasions when I went into the town, that was all they were talking about, the iron. I didn't like them too much - people, I mean - which was why I'd initially requested a project where I could work alone. They were speculating as to whether there'd be an exodus, and a couple comments were made about people like me being able to leave whenever they wanted. I didn't

answer them, of course. My therapist, who hadn't wanted me to take a job off by myself, all alone, also didn't want me being belligerent and argumentative, and I'd followed her advice. Once my sentence was up, I stopped seeing her. I was surprised therefore, when the visitor bell rang and I opened the door and she almost fell in, a forty-mile wind at her back and wet machine-gun fire from the heavens strafing her to boot.

"Susan! . . . Come in," I said.

"I guess I already am," she said, and I closed the door behind her.

"Let me hang your stuff up."

"Thanks," and I helped her out of a thing that felt like a dead eel and hung it on a peg in the hallway.

"Would you care for a cup of coffee?"

"Yes."

She followed me into the lab, which also doubles as a kitchen.

"Do you listen to your radio?" she asked, as I presented her with a cup.

"No. It went out on me around a month ago, and I never bothered fixing it."

"Well, it's official," she said. "We're pulling out."

I studied her wet red bangs and gray eyes beneath matching red brows and remembered what she'd told me about transference back when I was her patient.

"I'm still transferring," I said, to see her blush behind the freckles; and

then, "When?"

"Beginning the day after tomorrow," she said, losing the blush rapidly. "They're rushing ships from all over."

"I see."

". . . So I thought you'd better know. The sooner you register at the port, the earlier the passage you'll probably be assigned."

I sipped my coffee.

"Thanks. Any idea how long?"

"Two to six weeks is the estimate."

" 'Rough guess' is what you mean."

"Yes."

"Where're they taking everybody?"

"Local pokeys on thirty-two different worlds, for the time being. Of course, this wouldn't apply to you."

I chuckled.

"What's funny?"

"Life," I said. "I'll bet Earth is mad at Sandow."

"They're suing him for breach of contract. He'd warrantied the world, you know."

"I doubt this would be covered by the warranty. How could it?"

She shrugged, then sipped her coffee.

"I don't know. All I know is what I hear. You'd better close up shop and go register if you want to get out early."

"I don't," I said. "I'm getting near to an answer. I'm going to finish the project, I hope. Six weeks might do it."

Her eyes widened, and she lowered the cup.

"That's ridiculous!" she said. "What good will it be if you're dead and nobody knows the answer you find?"

"I'll make it," I said, returning in my mind to the point I had one time wanted to prove. "I think I'll make it."

She stood.

"You get down there and register!"

"That's very direct therapy, isn't it?"

"I wished you'd stayed in therapy."

"I'm sane and stable now," I said.

"Maybe so. But if I have to say you're not, to get you probated and shipped off-world, I will!"

I hit a button on the box on the table, waited perhaps three seconds, hit another.

". . . to say you're not, to get you probated and shipped off-world, I will!"

said the shrill, recorded voice behind the speaker.

"Thanks," I said. "Try it." She sat down again.

"Okay, you win. But what are you trying to prove?"

I shrugged and drank coffee.

"That everybody's wrong but me," I said, after a time.

"It shouldn't matter," she said, "and if you were a mature adult it wouldn't matter, either way. Also, I think you're wrong."

"Get out," I said softly.

"I've listened to your adolescent fantasies, over and over," she said. "I know you. I'm beginning to think you've got an unnatural death wish as well as that unresolved family problem we-"

I laughed, because it was the only alternative to saying, "Get out" again, in a louder voice.

"Okay," I said. "I'll agree with anything you say about me, but I won't do anything you tell me to do. So consider it a moral victory or something."

"When the time comes, you'll run."

"Sure."

She returned to her coffee.

"You're really getting near to an answer?" she finally said.

"Yes, I really am."

"I'm sorry that it had to happen at just this time."

"I'm not," I said.

She looked about the lab, then out through the quartz windows at the slushy field beyond.

"How can you be happy out here, all alone?"

"I'm not," I said. "But it's better than being in town."

She shook her head, and I watched her hair.

"You're wrong. They don't care as much as you think they do."

I filled my pipe and lit it.

"Marry me," I said softly, "and I'll build you a palace, and I'll buy you a dress for every day of the year - no matter how long the years are in whatever system we pick."

She smiled then.

"You mean that."

"Yes."

"Yet you stole, you . . ."

"Will you?"

"No. Thanks. You knew I'd say that."

"Yes."

We finished our coffee, and I saw her to the door and didn't try to kiss her.

Hell, I had a pipe in my mouth, and that's what it was there for.

I killed a forty-three-foot water snake that afternoon, who had thought the shiny instrument I was carrying in my left hand looked awfully appetizing, as well as my left hand and the arm attached to it and the rest of me. I put three splints into him from my dart gun, and he died, thrashing around too much, so that he ruined some important things I had growing. The robots kept right on about their business, and so did I, after that. I measured him later, which is how I know he was a forty-three-footer.

Robots are nice to work with. They mind their own business, and they never have anything to say.

I fixed the radio that night, but they were worried about iron on all frequencies, so I turned it off and smoked my pipe. If she had said yes, you know, I would have done it.

In the week that followed, I learned that Sandow was diverting all of his commercial vessels in the area to aid in the evacuation, and he'd sent for others from farther away. I could have guessed that without hearing it. I could guess what they were saying about Sandow, the same things they always say about Sandow: Here is a man who has lived so long that he's afraid of his own shadow. Here is one of the wealthiest men in the galaxy, a paranoid, a hypochondriac, holed up on a fortress world all his own, going out only after taking the most elaborate precautions - rich and powerful and a coward. He is talented beyond his own kind. Godlike, he can build worlds and feature them and populate them as he would. But there is really only one thing that he loves: the life of Francis Sandow. Statistics tell him that he should have died long ago, and he burns incense before the shrine of statistics. I guess all legends have unshined

shoes. Too bad, they say that once he was quite a man.

And that's what they say whenever his name comes up.

The evacuation was methodical and impressive. At the end of two weeks there were a quarter million people on Dismal. Then the big ships began to arrive, and at the end of the third week there were 150,000 remaining. The rest of the big vessels showed up then, and some of the first ones made it back for a second load. By the middle of the fourth week, there were 75,000, and by the end of it, there was hardly anybody left. Vehicles stood empty in the streets, tools lay where they had been dropped. Abandoned projects hummed and rumbled in the wilderness. The doors of all the shops were unlocked and merchandise still lay upon the counters, filled the shelves. The local fauna grew restless, and I found myself shooting at something every day. Vehicle after vehicle tore at the air and sank within the cloud cover, transporting the waiting people to the big unseen vessels that circled the world. Homes stood abandoned, the remains of meals still upon their tables. All the churches had been hastily deconsecrated and their relics shipped off-world. We sampled day and night, the robots and I, and I analyzed and drank coffee and fed the data to the computer and waited for it to give me the answer, but it didn't. It always seemed to need just another scintilla of information.

Maybe I was crazy. My time was, technically, borrowed. But to be so close and then to see the whole thing go up in flames - it was worth the gamble. After all, it would take years to duplicate the setup I had there, assuming it could be duplicated. The valley was, somehow, a freak, an accidental place that had occurred during millions of years of evolution compressed into a decade or so by a science I couldn't even begin to understand. I worked and I waited.

The visitor bell rang.

It wasn't raining this time, in fact the cloud cover showed signs of breaking up for the first time in months. But she blew in as though there was a storm at her back again, anyway.

"You've got to get out," she said. "It's imminent! Any second now it could-"

I slapped her.

She covered her face and stood there and shook for a minute.

"Okay, I was hysterical," she said, "but it's true."

"I realized that the first time you told me. Why are you still around?"

"Don't you know, damn you?"

"Say it," I said, listening attentively.

"Because of you, of course! Come away! Now!"

"I've almost got it," I said. "Tonight or tomorrow, possibly. I'm too close now to give up."

"You asked me to marry you," she said. "All right, I will - if you'll grab your toothbrush right now and get out of here."

"Maybe a week ago I would have said yes. Not now, though."

"The last ships are leaving. There are less than a hundred people on Dismal right now, and they'll be gone before sundown. How will you get away after that, even if you decide to go?"

"I won't be forgotten," I said.

"No, that's true." She smiled, slightly, crookedly. "The last vessel will run a last-minute check. Their computer will match the list of the evacuees with the Dismal Directory. Your name will show up, and they'll send a special search

vessel down, just for you. That'll make you feel important, won't it? Really wanted. Then they'll haul you away, whether you're ready or not, and that'll be it."

"By then I might have the answer."

"And if not?"

"We'll see."

I handed her my handkerchief then and kissed her when she least expected it - while she was blowing her nose - which made her stamp her foot and say an unladylike word.

Then, "Okay, I'll stay with you until they come for you," she said. "Somebody's got to look after you until a guardian can be appointed."

"I've got to check some seedlings now," I said. "Excuse me," and I pulled on my hip boots and went out the back way, strapping on my dart gun as I went.

I shot two snakes and a water tiger - two beasts before and one after the seedlings. The clouds fell apart while I was out there, and pieces of bloody Betelgeuse began to show among them. The robots bore the carcasses away, and I didn't stop to measure them this time.

Susan watched me in the lab, keeping silent for almost an entire hour, until I told her, "Perhaps tomorrow's sample . . ."

She looked out through the window and up into the burning heavens.

"Iron," she said, and there were tears on her cheeks.

Iron. Well, it's something you can't just laugh off. You can't make it go away by ignoring it. It only goes away after its own fashion.

For ages upon ages, Orion's insignia had burned hydrogen in its interior, converting it to helium, accumulating that helium. After a time the helium core

began to contract, and the helium nuclei fused, formed carbon, produced the extra energy Orion had wanted to keep his uniform looking snappy. Then, to keep up a good front when that trick began to slip, he built up oxygen and neon from the carbon, increasing the temperature of the core. Afraid that would fail him, he moved on to magnesium and silicon. Then iron. Certain spectroscopy techniques had let us see what was going on at the center. General Orion had used up all his tricks but one. Now he had no recourse but to convert the iron back into helium by drawing upon the gravitational field of his star. This would require a rather drastic and rapid shrinking process. It would give him a blaze of glory all right, and then a white dwarf of an insignia to wear forevermore. Two hundred seventy years later the nova would become visible on Earth, and he'd still look pretty good for a little while, which I guess meant something. The military mind is funny that way.

"Iron," I repeated.

They came for me the following morning, two of them, but I wasn't ready to go yet. They set their ship down on the hill to the north of me and disembarked.

They wore deep-space gear, and the first one bore a rifle. The man behind him carried a "sniffer," a machine that can track a man down on the basis of his personal body chemistry. It was effective for a range of about a mile. It indicated the direction of the quonset, because I was between them and it.

I lowered my binoculars and waited. I drew my splinter gun. Susan thought I was in the garden. Well, I had been. But the minute that thing came down and settled between the blaze and the mists, I headed toward it. I took cover at the end of the field and waited.

I had my gear with me, in expectation of just such a visit. See, the B.O.

machine can't sniff you out under the water.

They must have slowed when they lost the scent, but eventually I saw their shadows pass above me.

I surfaced, there in the canal, pushed back my mask, drew a bead and said, "Stop! Drop the gun or I'll shoot!"

The man with the rifle turned quickly, raising it, and I shot him in the arm.

"I warned you," I said, as the rifle fell to the trail and he clutched at his arm. "Now kick it over the edge into the water!"

"Mister, you've got to get out of here!" he said. "Betelgeuse could blow any minute! We came to get you!"

"I know it. I'm not ready to go."

"You won't be safe till you're in hyperspace."

"I know that, too. Thanks for the advice, but I'm not taking it. Kick that damn rifle into the water! Now!"

He did.

"Okay, that's better. If you're so hot on taking someone back with you, there's a girl named Susan Lennert down in the quonset. Her you can push around. Go get her and take her away with you. Forget about me."

The man holding his arm looked to the other who nodded.

"She's on the list," he said.

"What's wrong with you, mister?" the first one asked. "We're trying to save your life."

"I know it, I appreciate it. Don't bother."

"Why?"

"That's my business. You'd better get moving." I gestured toward Betelgeuse with

the barrel of my pistol.

The second man licked his lips, and the first one nodded. Then they turned and headed toward the quonset. I followed all the way, since they were now unarmed and the garden pests weren't.

She must have put up a fuss, because they had to drag her off, between them. I stayed out of sight, but I covered them all the way back to the ship and watched until it lifted off and vanished in the bright sky.

Then I went inside, gathered up the records, changed my clothes, went back outside and waited.

Were my eyes playing tricks on me, or did Betelgeuse flicker for just a second?

Perhaps it was an atmospheric disturbance.

A water tiger broke the surface and cut a furrow straight toward me, where I stood upon the trail. I shot it, and a snake appeared from somewhere and began eating it. Then two more snakes showed up, and there was a fight. I had to shoot one of them.

Betelgeuse seemed to brighten above me, but apprehension could account for that seeming. I stood right there and waited. Now my point would either be proved or disproved, once and for all time, so far as I was concerned; and, either way, I'd rest afterward.

It wasn't until much later that afternoon, as I drew bead upon a rearing water snake and heard his voice say, "Hold your fire," and I did, that I realized just how petty I might have been.

The snake slowly lowered its great bulk and slithered past me. I didn't turn. I couldn't. It was so long and kept slithering by, and I kept wondering, but I couldn't turn around.

Then a hand fell upon my shoulder, and I had to; and there he was, and I felt about three inches tall.

The snake kept rubbing up against his boots and turning to do it again.

"Hello," I said, and, "I'm sorry." He was smoking a cigar and was maybe five feet eight inches tall, with nondescript hair and dark eyes, when I finally brought myself to look into them. I'd almost forgotten. It had been so long. I could never forget his voice, though.

"Don't be sorry. There's no need. You had to prove something."

"Yes. She was right, though-"

"Have you proven it?"

"Yes. You're not what they say you are, and you came here for one reason - me."

"That's right."

"I shouldn't have done it. I shouldn't have expected it of you. I had to know, though, I just had to - but I shouldn't have."

"Of course you should. Maybe I needed it, too, to prove it to myself, as much as you needed to see it. There are some things that should mean more than life to a man. Did you find what you were looking for in your garden?"

"Days ago, sir."

" 'Sir' isn't what you used to call me."

"I know . . ."

"You had to see how much Francis Sandow cared for his son. Okay, I spit on Betelgeuse. I blow smoke rings back at it. Now I'm going to leave it. The Model T is parked on the other side of the hill. Come on, we're going to make it."

"I know that, Dad."

"Thanks."

I picked up my luggage.

"I met a nice girl I'd like to tell you about . . ." I said, and I did, while we walked.

And the snake followed after, and he wouldn't turn it away. He brought it aboard, its bulk coiled about the cabin, and he took it along, out of that lopsided Eden. I'll never forget that he did that, either.