

## The Operator

*In a harsh environment, you find tough organisms. In a really savage environment, the only ones left are also smart!*

CHRISTPHER ANVIL

Illustrated by George Wilson

The rats and greenvils were gnawing in their burrows as Jim Fielding, his teeth chattering, joined Dave Hunsacker at the cast-iron stove.

"Shove over," said Fielding. "Don't hog the whole thing."

Hunsacker coughed, and spat phlegm in a basin on a high split-log stool. He shifted grips on the pole that ran crosswise of the cabin, and rested his head on his hands as the blessed heat flowed up from the stove. From near his ear, came a *sqrueek-creeq-greak* noise that set his teeth on edge.

"Damn the pests," he growled, and was sorry he'd spoken. His voice came out in a half-whisper that reminded him how he felt.

Fielding drew a shuddering breath, and murmured, "Thank God we've finally got a foundry, anyway. We needed this stove, and the freight by supply ship would have sunk us."

Hunsacker, afraid to try his voice again, gave a grunt of assent.

"Snow's melting out there," said Fielding. "The air can't be below freezing, can it?"

"Unh," said Hunsacker, turning to get the heat from another angle. It was impossible to get enough, but too much would make his skin tender, even though too much wasn't enough, either.

"Well," said Fielding, "I had on my fur boots, wool socks under that, long johns, fleece undervest, fur vest, and fur jacket, long fur leggings, two wool hoods and a fur hat, and I was shaking all over before I got halfway to Pete's. Seemed like around forty below to me. There wasn't any wind, either."

Hunsacker grunted, and with an effort cleared his throat. "While you were at it, you should have heated a stone—put it in your pocket."

"You're right. I didn't think of it."

"How's Pete?"

"He's got it, too."

"Bad?"

"He says it's nothing. You know Pete. He was shaking too bad to go out to his woodpile. I carried in enough to last him through tomorrow. I think that's where I got this headache."

"He should have got a stove. He can't keep that fireplace in wood."

"He claims you can put in bigger pieces."

"How far did you go?"

"Out to the overlook."

"No wonder you're shaking."

"That isn't any distance."

"It is when you've got the grakes. Ease back, you've taken half the space already."

"Sorry. Well, I was curious."

Hunsacker roasted some more, then Fielding's last comment penetrated to his consciousness. It reminded him of a little quirk in his friend's makeup.

Hunsacker cleared his throat again. "Curious about *what*?"

"Unh?" said Fielding. He changed position and swore. "Do we have to stand and bake like lizards on rocks? I've got work to do."

"Go do it, then. Before you leave, what was it you were curious about?"

"I just saw it out of the corner of my eye."

Hunsacker waited. Fielding said no more. Hunsacker swore mentally, but saved his vocal cords for harder work.

"Saw *what* out of the corner of your eye?"

"That was just after I left Terrill's."

"After you *left* Terrill's."

"Yeah."

"I didn't know you *stopped* at Terrill's."

"Abe was having a fight with his wife."

Hunsacker started to turn his head, but a hammering headache burst into consciousness. He coughed, and spat up a quantity of phlegm. Then he had to blow his nose. He put his head back in place, eyes shut, and the *greak-sqrueek-creeq-sqreek* noise came through clearly.

"You stopped at Terrill's?" said Hunsacker.

"Not for long. Abe and his wife were embarrassed. Thought I might have overheard them." Fielding snorted. "You could have heard them half-a-mile away. One of the logs of their cabin powdered, a bunch of pack-badgers came in while they were asleep, and got into their stores."

*Greak-sqreek*, went the greenvils by Hunsacker's ear, *sqrueek-greak*, as they reduced the hard wood to tunnels of dust. From a corner of the room came a *grak-grak-grak* noise as a rat ate its way along the join of the log.

Hunsacker shivered, started to speak, then concentrated on a more important fact: He had started to shake, despite the fact that he was practically on top of the stove.

He worked the leather glove from the hip pocket of his leggings, opened his eyes cautiously, and crouched, to turn the stove-door handle, and look in. He was greeted by a white powdering of ash over a bed of glowing coals. He reached out to the stack of dry wood heaped against the wall, selected some small pieces, put them in side-by-side on the coals, laid others crosswise atop them, and put some medium-sized pieces on top of that.

Fielding murmured, "Heat seems to be letting up. What kind of apprentice firemen we got, anyway?"

"I've been too busy trying to find out what it was you saw after you left Terrill's."

"Didn't I mention that? There is some kind of camp down there."

Hunsacker growled, "Down *where*?"

"You can see it from the overlook."

Hunsacker noted the small flames spurting from the smaller pieces laid atop the coals, and shut the stove door. Cautiously, he straightened.

Fielding said, "Watch it!" and steadied Hunsacker by the elbow.

A spell of reeling dizziness passed over.

"Thanks." Hunsacker got his grip on the pole, waited a moment, and said, "How come you saw something from Terrill's that led you to go to the overlook? Terrill's is a half-mile this side, anyway, with big woods in between."

Fielding's manner was carefully offhand.

"There was a girl looking down from the trail when I came out of Terrill's."

Hunsacker didn't move.

*Greak-sqrueek* went the greenvils in the pole by his ear.

"A girl," said Hunsacker cautiously.

"Yeah. Just at the head of the trail, where it bends downhill. She turned when I came out, and went back into the woods."

Methodically, Hunsacker considered whether Fielding might be a lot sicker than he seemed. But, in that case, he wouldn't have made it back.

Fielding cleared his throat. "She was wearing some kind of form-fitting one-piece outfit, with a . . . like a bubble over it. I stared at her, and took a step in that direction. Well, you see the picture. I had on all that fur and leather, and some of it isn't exactly in the best of condition. Anyway, she got out of there. Pretty little thing."

Fielding's voice thickened slightly, and he coughed and spat, and was silent.

Hunsacker asked himself whether his friend had gone stumbling and shouting after her. It would be interesting to go out and check the tracks—if he dared to leave the stove.

Fielding, apparently realizing the mental picture he had created, said, "I already had the shakes. Terrill's cabin was cold as ice; worse than outdoors, because the sun hadn't warmed it up. I plodded after the girl, but I tell you, I didn't rush. I was too busy checking to see if the trees kept their shape. I thought maybe I'd gone through the fever and hit the delirium ahead of schedule."

"Did you see her again?"

"Not once. Her tracks were funny, too—as if she walked *on* the snow. But of course it was too soft to support her weight."

"Not in the woods, necessarily. Where the sun didn't hit it, it might still be hard—provided it was compacted to start with."

"Then this wasn't compacted too much, because I went right through it."

"When she turned away, did she have any kind of pack on?"

"I don't know. She turned out of the sun into the shade, and I'd just come out of Terrill's so I didn't see that any too clearly."

"Did you tell Terrill about it?"

Fielding snorted.

"What for? He's *got* a woman."

Hunsacker considered the situation. Since the pack-bears had got Barrow, Hunsacker was theoretically the settlement's leader. The fact was occasionally acknowledged when a colonist, stuck with a problem he couldn't work out himself, brought it to Hunsacker. There was also an occasional deference, or an air of defiance, traceable to the fact that in a vague kind of way Hunsacker represented authority. To try to assert the authority would have been too ludicrous to think about, but nevertheless it imposed on him some obligations.

"Where she comes from," he said carefully, "that may not matter."

"It matters to me. That's what I care about."

"I mean," said Hunsacker warily, "this woman may represent as much of a threat to us as anything else."

Fielding started to object, then gave a grunt of assent. "Could be. Pretty, though."

"Could you see the camp from the overlook?"

"Easy. Just the ship, and two tents maybe fifty feet from its base. They were small tents."

"What kind of ship?"

"One of these base-standers. I guess they call it a yacht."

"Any hatch open in it?"

"Not that I could see from where I stood. I was shaking too bad to think about going around to the other side. This camp was down in that big clearing below the overlook. Not the one at a distance, but right below."

Hunsacker cleared his throat. "Nice spot. The pack-bears hole up for the winter at the base of the bluff."

"Sure. When the melt hits, they'll come out."

"And they'll be famished."

"Right. That makes it nice when they smell flesh."

Hunsacker thought it over. Obviously, he had yet to extract the full story from Fielding. He spat phlegm, and eased his head around into a position that served to minimize the headache.

"What happened when you looked down on this camp?"

"Nothing, at first. I was shaking all over, thinking about this spot they'd picked to camp in, when one of the tents opened up. Another girl, wearing some kind of skimpy two-piece outfit, came out, saw me, went back in for a second, came out, and knocked about a quarter-ton of snow out of the trees onto my head."

"You mean she fired at you?"

"At me, or over me. I didn't stick around to make sure."

Hunsacker considered it from various angles.

"So there are *two* girls?"

Fielding said dryly, "That's the only reason I'm telling *you* about this, friend."

"What did the second one look like?"

"Beautiful. The first was pretty, so far as you can judge at a glance. The second was beautiful, so far as you can tell in one brief look."

"You saw her *twice*."

"I'm not talking about the second time. Anybody that fires at me is ugly. I figure you can have the second one, and I'll take the first one. Just as a rough start to the negotiations."

"See any men around?"

"Nope."

"Anything we might decide, these girls could chop into mincemeat."

"I know that. We found *that* out back before the pox."

"We were green. Spoiled by civilization, and didn't know it."

*Sqrueek-greak* went the greenvils at Hunsacker's ear, as if adding their bit to the conversation.

"What," said Hunsacker, to get his mind off his memories, "were Terrill and his wife fighting about?"

"About which one was responsible for the pack-badgers getting in. That was the standby. They threw all kinds of other stuff in, too. You could hear them way down the trail. They should have treenailed some sticks and leather over that hole first, and stuffed some hay inside, and they could have had the fight in private. As it was, their voices came right out the opening. Their kids were crying, and she was grabbing up this one and that one, and telling them to look at their father and see who was responsible for their being stuck in this godforsaken place, and he was telling her to shut up, he could only take so much, and one of them was smashing up furniture—there's another of those logs they better take a look at, because when they hit it, dust spurted out onto the snow. Anyway, they put things together fast when I came up coughing and clearing my throat. When they opened up, the place looked about as neat as any." Fielding paused, then added, "If they'd fixed that log first, they probably wouldn't have *had* a fight. The sight of that would drive anyone nuts."

"Probably so cold in there from that hole that they didn't get up to start the fire, so the kids started whimpering, and then they found the hole, and the provisions missing, and that did it."

"Whatever started it, they've got the fight to add to what the badgers did. It's a simple question of survival to avoid that."

"You think back before the pox, and tell me how many of us avoided it."

"Not many. And a lot didn't survive, either."

Hunsacker again struggled to get off the subject.

"Both of these girls had on bubble outfits, eh?"

"The first one did. I could see it reflect—glint—in the sun. The second one I don't know about. Why?"

"Unless they've changed them since we've been out here, there's just a thin plastic layer filled with warm air by a backpack heater. That's fine as long as the plastic is all right. But what happens if she steps too close to a needle bush?"

"Rip the plastic."

"And the only protection under this bubble was a little thin cloth?"

Fielding grinned. "Protection? Decoration."

The stove suddenly popped and snapped as the wood caught.

Hunsacker nodded sourly.

"Green. They're as green as we were when we got here, maybe worse. They've paid their money for some dude-camping outfit, and they think they're as safe as in a park on their home planet. Meanwhile, they're going around eighty percent naked on a part of the planet where the women have been cut by a third for two years; but, of course, they're enlightened, so *that* doesn't matter. Those two girls could be the worst disaster to hit this place since the pox."

That night, after the fire had been left to gnaw its way through the big dry chunk he had worked in atop the coals, Dave Hunsacker lay awake, lying on his side, the packbear robe and a down comforter over him, and heat flowing around him from the cloth-wrapped rock at his feet, and the cloth-wrapped

rock that he lay curled around. Despite the heat, he shivered involuntarily, but that didn't stop his thoughts.

Two girls camped alone on the packbear flats. Two girls from *civilization*. Two girls who fired on crude unkempt colonists, or fled at the sight of them. Then weird pictures began to flit before his eyes, so he knew the delirium had started. Across the room, he could hear the frame of Fielding's bunk rattle, and knew that he had it even worse. After all that exposure, the grakes would speed up, and Fielding would go through the whole sequence in a day and a night, where Hunsacker had done his best to stretch the thing out for two days. It wasn't the headache, the shaking, and the chills that bothered him the worst. It was the delirium. It had a tendency to focus on some strong emotional experience, and stay with it, to work variations and contrasts that became so intense as to threaten a man's power of endurance. Afterward, the memory faded, which was fine afterward, but no consolation beforehand. Hunsacker held his mind on the two girls, struggling to make the delirium take some new track, to force it to yield him pictures of the packbear flats, or Terrill's cabin, from which Fielding had seen the first girl.

Just then, the picture came clear. The low fern tree, green against the white of the snow, and green against the grayish brown of the slightly weathered logs, sifted down snow as the wind blew around Terrill's, and Lila Terrill, her pretty face framed in the white fur hood, called out, "Dave! Lou! Hey, don't you dare go by until you see this slinky new fur outfit Abe made for me!" She laughed, and breathed out a cloud of frosty breath. "Oh, isn't everything wonderful?" Eyes sparkling, she looked up at the trees, at the sky bright-blue through the green branches edged in white, at the white snowflakes drifting gently down. "And they told us we were crazy to risk a new planet! *They* were the crazy ones!"

The scene vanished.

The lump of dirt landed on Lou's upturned face, the spots half-hidden by the flour she used to conceal from Dave the fact that she had it, so that he would let her go on working with him as the cold settled its teeth in and the fireplace sucked the cold through every track where the pack badgers nightly dug out the clay in search of a gap big enough to get through.

"There is no help available," crackled the communicator, and the voice came through clear and sharp. "We can't risk personnel. We suggest that you simply avoid exposure, rest in bed in a warm room, avoid all exertion, take frequent hot, sweet, citrus drinks, and see to it that the patients have plenty of fresh air and sunshine, but are not directly exposed to the cold. A steam or electrically heated solar shelter will be ideal. Regular records of body temperature, taken orally, should be kept for future reference, and—"

The snow blasted through the hole where the window had been torn out, sifting down the slope of the drift like a fast-shifting living curtain, scattering across the floor, to be picked up and whirled around the cabin by the hurricane blast that came in under the door where he had shoveled it clear when the snow stopped yesterday, and the sun came out, and they knew the storm was over.

"Lou," he cried, "why didn't you wake me up! You've got to rest!"

"You were so tired," she said. "You worked so hard yesterday."

Then the clump of dirt landed on Lou's upturned face, where she had put the flour to hide the fact that she was sick.

Abe Terrill said, "Lila's got it. I could see the spots yesterday. And now today she's got this awful cold, too. She shakes all the time, and I can't get it hot enough for her. I can't get through the snow to get the wood back fast enough. You and Jim have both lost . . . I mean, you're both *alone*. If you could move in together, and split the work, would it be all right if I took the extra wood you've got piled? I was so busy working on other things last fall I got behind cutting firewood. I never thought we could have a storm like this. I've got to get wood somehow! I'll carry it up myself. Look, it'll be good for you, too, it'll keep you from going crazy thinking about it, and the work will be lighter."

Hunsacker groaned and turned over, and his forearm touched a corner of the rock where his tossing had pulled the cloth away. He struggled out of the delirium.

"Lou?" he murmured, and there was no answer. He sat up in darkness dimly lit by moonlight. From across the cold cabin came racking sobs. But it was a man sobbing.

Hunsacker groped backwards and forward, trying to locate himself in time. The whole sequence

mentally unreeled to the end, and he lay back, the pain as fresh and new as when it had happened. He shivered, and the snow whirled, and he looked dizzily around, resting the saw on the log.

Lou was there laughing.

"Come on," she said. "Stop cutting wood for a while. A little more, and you'll be a registered termite, just like we've got in our walls."

"Did you ever see snow, woman? I want to cut wood now, while I can get it. And those aren't termites. They're greenvils. Learn the *patois* of the planet if you want to communicate with me."

"Why should I communicate with a termite? Abe Terrill has time enough to make his wife a fur outfit, no less. Now, *that's* what I call adaptation to the environment."

The clump of dirt landed on Lou's upturned face. The bitter cold sapped his strength and made him regret every minute wasted in the pleasant days of fall, when the snow was a mere ornament.

Dave turned over, and the delirium shifted its grip, and came at him from a new angle, bringing a fresh memory before him as, across the dimly moonlit room, Jim Fielding cried out, and neither man heard the other.

Toward morning, it began to let up.

Dazed, Hunsacker struggled awake, to rest dizzily on his elbows amongst the tangled covers.

"Merciful God!" said Hunsacker.

The memories flooded his mind, and then at once began to fade.

From across the cabin, Fielding spoke in a croaking voice.

"You alive?"

"I guess so."

"That's the last time I concentrate it all in one day."

The memories of the delirium were evaporating fast, and suddenly Hunsacker felt ravenous.

"Pretty bad?" he said.

Fielding said grimly, "I got contrasts and ironies this time I never dreamed of before. There was even one—" He paused. "Good. I can't remember it."

"It's not dawn, but I'm getting up. You?"

"Yeah. I'd be afraid to go back to sleep after that. Besides, I'm a little hungry."

"You light the lamp. I'll take care of the fire."

"O.K."

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Roughly two hours later, the sun was just casting shadows across the gray surface of the snow. Hunsacker and Fielding, heavily dressed against the cold, lay stretched out in the snow, looking down on the silent camp below the bluff.

"Late risers," murmured Fielding.

"Where they come from, this could be the middle of the night." Hunsacker eased slightly to his left, so that his gun, inside its long fur case, didn't press into his side.

"What's that?" murmured Fielding.

From down below came the faintly echoing sound of light footsteps crunching through the snow.

In the dim shadows, a small figure, heavily dressed, and carrying something large and long on its shoulders, came into sight at the edge of the clearing. There was a sound somewhat like sand dumped from a sack as the figure dropped what it was carrying, and it sank in grainy snow.

Fielding murmured, "What's that?"

"Looks like a log."

"Too big."

"Could be pithwood. That's light enough."

"I think you're right. What would they want with that stuff?"

The light, reaching into the woods, showed it more clearly, and Hunsacker corrected himself.

"Rotten pithwood."

"Maybe they know more than we think. You suppose they're planning to smoke out the bears?"

"Don't ask me. Which one is this?"

The two men watched the small figure, carrying what looked like a double-bitted ax in one hand, slowly start up a sloping slender ramp extruded from the yacht. The surface of the ramp was free of snow, but whoever it was slipped on stepping onto the ramp, and nearly fell.

Fielding murmured, "I *think* it's the one I saw first. Is that ax sheathed?"

"Not that I can see."

A beam of sunlight was now streaming through the trees, to light the tops of the tents, and the lower half of the yacht. The figure, wearily climbing the ramp, passed through the light, which flashed on the blades of the ax.

Fielding grunted. "Where she slipped, I could have lost my half of this bargain. What's she carrying the thing bare for?"

Hunsacker watched the girl lean the ax against the side of the ship while she felt in her pockets. The way she leaned the ax against the ship was to set the end of the ax handle on the sloping ramp, and rest the head of the upright ax against the side of the ship.

Fielding muttered to himself.

She paid no further attention to the ax, but paused to blow on her cupped hands and work her fingers. Again she felt through her pockets.

She stamped her feet, as if to start the circulation.

The ax head began to slide, along the hull of the ship, picked up speed, then the ax flipped over the side of the ramp, to vanish in the snow below.

Fielding let his breath out with a hiss.

She had some kind of small box in her hand now. She turned an intensely bright light on the side of the ship, then held something cylindrical against the ship. A sizable door slowly opened out at the head of the ramp, the door swinging wide against the ship.

The girl started slowly in, paused, came back, looked blankly around on the ramp, looked at the door, and then turned wearily and went inside. As the door started to close, a feminine voice called, "Where have *you* been?"

"Lost."

The door shut, and Fielding uttered pungent profanity.

Hunsacker rested his head on his forearm, and shook with silent laughter.

"Lost," growled Fielding. He stared at the track lit in the snow by the sun, and that was bound to be visible by the girl's handlamp, or by moonlight.

"Well," growled Fielding, "I guess they *don't* know what they're doing."

"Probably panicked," said Hunsacker, keeping his voice low. He paused, studying the tents.

A faint vibration sent a very light powdering of snow sifting down the slope of the nearer tent. Some sort of fastening in the front opened up, and a tall girl wearing, apparently, a two-piece bathing suit, stepped out and looked around. She sent an intent glance over the heads of the two men, who lay motionless in the confusion of light and shade.

"That one," growled Fielding, "is yours. But now, this totals up to *three*."

The girl turned away, and saw the log.

"Good! Phyl *did* get some wood!"

A shapely blond girl looked out of the tent, and gave a scream of delight. "Now we can have a cookout!"

"Four," grunted Fielding.

There was a drumming sound, and snow flew from the other tent. Gales of girlish laughter echoed around the clearing. Two more girls burst out and rolled in the snow, pounding each other with handfuls of snow. The laughter abruptly changed to cries of dismay.

"Oh! It's *cold!* Stop, Stacey. Please stop."

These latest two plunged through the snow to the base of the ramp, and ran up, to bang on the side of the ship.

"Open up! We're *freezing!*"

Fielding growled, "*Six* of them."

"So far," said Hunsacker.

From somewhere down below came a whistle, then a masculine voice called, "Hey, *hey!*"

Fielding and Hunsacker, moving only their eyes, glanced around.

Floating over the clearing at the extreme end, from the direction of the more distant clearing, came a dish-shaped grav-skimmer, that now swooped forward, to hover over the ramp. In the grav-skimmer were four men in their early twenties. One was wearing a loincloth, one a kind of old-fashioned bathing suit, one a pair of green form-fitting trousers creased up the front, and imitation deerskin jacket fringed on the bottom and along the cuffs. One was wearing a set of brief silver trunks, and gold paint apparently intended to show off his large muscles.

The two girls on the ramp screamed in mock panic. One of them shouted, "The pirates are after us! Help!"

Fielding belched, and muttered profanity.

Hunsacker alertly studied the reactions of the girls, noting that the tall girl had an unreadable expression. The shapely blonde looking out of the tent went back inside without saying anything. The door of the ship opened, and a neat intelligent-looking brunette glanced out coolly, wearing what appeared to be some sort of dark lounging pajamas.

Hunsacker, still not moving his head, glanced back at the grav-skimmer, noting, as it idly turned, the snout of some kind of weapon that jutted up at an angle.

Fielding growled, "How much younger than us is this crew?"

"Four or five years, I think. Why?"

"For just a minute there, I felt about ninety years old."

On the grav-skimmer, the male figure wearing the breech clout pointed at the girl in the doorway of the space yacht. He half-crouched, and clapped his hand on his knee.

"Ha, ha, ha," he shouted, his voice creating a peculiar crowing sound that reverberated around the clearing. "Ha, ha, hee, hee, hee, ho-*ho*-ha. Look at that, fellers, a *lay* dee!"

The girl stepped inside and the two girls on the ramp ran in. The door swung shut.

From the direction of the other, more distant, clearing, came a loud croaking sound, rapidly repeated. A second grav-skimmer floated into view. This one carried five more men, two heavily dressed and silent, the other three dressed as for a masquerade. One of the latter called out jubilantly.

"Hey, we got fun later! This planet's got *colonists!*" He pronounced "colonists" with a peculiar jeering emphasis.

"*Colonists,*" shouted one of the occupants of the first skimmer, mimicking the tone.

Hunsacker studied the angled gun on this second skimmer.

Fielding murmured, "This looks nice, doesn't it?"

"Doesn't it?" With no extra motion, Hunsacker undid the fastenings of his gun-cover.

"*Colonists! Colonists!*" the men were chanting in the clearing, with the exception of the silent two in the second skimmer.

The tall girl went back into her tent.

Hunsacker said, his voice low: "It looks to me as if that gun has a target-seeking sight—the gun on that skimmer turned toward us."

"I see it."

Hunsacker left the wrapper just covering his gun, and carefully pressed the carrying straps back out of reach in the snow, lest he forget and try to pick it up by the straps out of habit.

Down below, the chanting had reached a pitch and volume that strained the voices of the chanters. Their voices cracked, and then there was a sudden silence.

From somewhere came a low muffled questioning bark.

Hunsacker squinted at the sky. The sun, now above the horizon, was warming the snow-covered landscape with a burning heat that was undiluted by any cloud cover, wind, or really cold air. Down in the clearing below the bluff, the heat was bound to become more intense as the day went on, since the bluff would reflect the heat of the sun back into the clearing.

There was a soft *shush* of snow behind them, instantly followed by Terrill's voice, pitched low.



"It's me . . . Abe."

Hunsacker, who had tensed himself, relaxed at the familiar voice.

Terrill gave a low laugh. There were further *shush-shush* sounds, and he lay down full length, and crawled up beside Hunsacker.

"If I'd been a bear, I'd have eaten you both."

Fielding, his voice low, said, "Take a look at this gun, Abe, but keep your head down."

Terrill squirmed around, and gave a low fervent grunt.

Hunsacker glanced aside, to see Fielding flip the cover back over his gun. The gun was reversed inside its wrapping, the snout aiming back down the trail, the butt lightly depressed in the snow; a squeeze of the trigger would have sent the bullet waist-high over the place where the trail began to level out behind them.

Fielding murmured, "I hate things creeping up on me from behind."

Terrill murmured, "I was going to bear-bark at you for the fun of it. I'm glad I didn't follow *that* whim. What have we got here, anyway?"

Hunsacker said, "Take a look. Maybe you can tell us."

Fielding said, "It's a little hard to explain."

Terrill peered down at the clearing, where the two skimmers had set down, and the occupants, still standing in the skimmers, were talking to one another with expansive gestures. There seemed to be some kind of disagreement between those dressed as if for a masquerade, and the two wearing heavy winter clothing.

"Well," said the one wearing a heavy coat, "*you* do it if you want. Count me out."

"Scared? Of washouts?"

"I keep seeing that woman's face when she picked up the baby. She looked straight at me."

"So what?"

"I'm not getting in that spot again."

"That was an accident."

"I'm not getting in a spot where that accident can happen again."

"That baby would have died anyway."

"How do *you* know?"

"Colonist mortality is better than eighty percent."

"That's overall. We don't know about *that* baby."

"What's the difference? They don't relate. They're out of the socioeconomic system. They're washouts. Hell, they're only human by courtesy. We don't have to worry about what happens to them."

"It's all yours. I don't get anything out of it but nightmares."

"It's like if you crack up anything. You want to do it again right away. That makes it all right."

"Not me. That woman said something with her eyes, and I can't forget it."

"We *could* take you, whether you want to go or not. We could . . . kind of . . . make you do it, whether you want to do it or not."

There was an ugly silence, then the first voice carried, very low.

"*You'll* make me?"

The silence stretched out, then broke in a nervous laugh.

"I was just kidding, Barn. But—"

"I'm not going."

"O.K. So, O.K."

"Hack feels the same way. We both aren't going. We all agreed before we came, we wouldn't tell each other what to do. We're sticking by it."

"O.K., Barn. I was just kidding. Look, here we are arguing about *what*? A bunch of mudfeet. You do what you want. But there're nine of us, and only eight girls. So how do we work that out?"

"Leave it up to the girls. They'll figure it out some way."

"O.K., Barn. Hey, who's got the battlewagons?"

The collision broke up in nervous laughter, and shouts of, "Who's got the battlewagons?" Someone

began handing out something too small to make out as they milled around in the two skimmers, bending over to pick up small pipes with curved stems and small bowls, into which they put whatever it was that had been handed out, and then lit the pipes.

From somewhere came a gruff peremptory questioning bark, muffled but insistent, with overtones of ill temper.

Terrill murmured, "The damned fools are in the middle of packbear flats, and it's a warm day."

Fielding looked around at Hunsacker and murmured, "Well, Dave, what do we do?"

Hunsacker kept his mouth shut.

Terrill twisted toward him, to murmur, "You're the Settlement Leader, Dave."

Hunsacker growled, "Where's the problem?"

Fielding murmured, "We need women, and there are *eight* of them. Right under us in the bluff, there's a whole pack of bears, and you can hear the sentinels getting short-tempered. When the day gets warmer, those packbears will come out. They'll eat anything in sight, plant or animal. When they come out, they'll spot the girls."

Hunsacker grunted. "They've got their protectors down there. Look at the armament on those skimmers."

"Will it stop a rushing bear?"

"How would I know if it will stop him? But it will *kill* him."

"What do we do about the girls?"

Terrill put in, "A few well-placed shots while that bunch is doping themselves up, and we will end the thing."

"Don't kid yourself," said Hunsacker. "The racket from a few well-placed shots will bring those bears out of there in a rage. On top of that, that yacht probably has an automatic device recording—and maybe broadcasting to a satellite—everything that happens around it. And, on top of *that*, what do the girls do while we're picking off this bunch?"

Terrill said, "Where *are* these girls you're talking about? I don't see any girls."

Fielding said, "There are two of them in that tent nearer to the ship. And from what's been said, there must be half-a-dozen more in the ship. We've only seen four of those."

"Good lookers?"

"What?"

"Are the girls pretty?"

"Yes, but green."

"They'll get over that."

"Say," said Fielding in a low drawl, "I thought you were married."

Terrill didn't answer for a moment. "I was thinking of Pete. He's over at our place helping out so much lately, I . . . well, I'm glad to see some more women around here."

Hunsacker said dryly, his voice low, "I don't think they came here to settle."

Fielding said, "Well, what do we *do*, Dave?"

Hunsacker said nothing. He was still trying to fit the pieces together.

Terrill murmured, without conviction, "We could warn them about where they are."

Hunsacker squinted at the clearing.

"How?" said Fielding, his voice low and sarcastic.

"Stand up and yell to them."

Fielding growled, "I almost got my head split yesterday, because one of the *girls* saw me. We're supposed to warn *this* bunch?"

Down below, the men were sprawled in odd positions, in the skimmers and on blankets stretched on the snow, the sun now plainly glinting from the bubbles of their warm-suits. Each was drawing on his pipe, his face blissful, save for the one who'd been called Hack, who had a look of horror. The one wearing silver trunks and gilt, played with the controls of the gun with his toes, twitching his biceps and admiring it sidewise as he let smoke drift out his nose.

"O.K.," said someone, his voice now strong and assured. "Now, I say, let's take a look at the local

washouts."

Terrill said, "Where do they get this 'washout' business?"

"Give a dog a bad name," murmured Fielding, "and kill him."

Someone else spoke in the clearing, his voice flat. "And I say Hack and Barney Baby come with us. Or we break their heads."

"Yeah. Maybe *Barney* wants to be a washout. How about it, Barn-head?"

The cold voice answered, "Anybody wants to force me gets it in the guts. Who's first?"

"Yeah? Tough, huh? *Jump him!*"

Half-a-dozen of the masquerade figures sprang up, and a violent struggle began.

Hunsacker watched intently, his mind a maze of calculations.

Fielding growled, "Do we stand by while this goes on?"

Just then, it all fit together. Hunsacker growled, "Spread out to either side, and stay *low*. Don't fire until they shoot first, then aim to get any at those guns. I think those are automatic guns. If the bears come out, kill any that start toward that tent nearest the ship."

Terrill and Fielding wormed backwards, and eased rapidly to either side.

Hunsacker studied the scene below.

The flailing knot was still struggling. "Barney" was plainly putting up a formidable resistance, and now "Hack," throwing the pipe away, stood up.

The gilded figure by the gun breathed out a cloud of smoke, and came easily to his feet, swaying slightly. He reached out, gripped Hack around the throat, and jerked him backwards.

Hunsacker wormed sidewise, leaving his gun where it was, and stood up, unarmed.

He shouted, "You down there! Look up! Look up here!"

From somewhere in the bluff below him came a short-tempered muffled ugly bark.

Up off the snow, the day felt hot already, and a current of heated air seemed to be rising up the face of the bluff.

Studying the guns on the skimmers, Hunsacker was sure now they were automatic.

"Hey!" shouted someone below. "A *mudfoot!*"

"Look, a *colonist!*"

Hunsacker, without turning his head, glanced sidewise, to fix the location of his gun.

The gilded figure dropped the motionless Hack, stood up, faced the bluff, and flexed his muscles.

Barney, staggering to his feet as the others turned, stood breathing fast and deeply.

The door of the space yacht started to come open, and then shut again.

Hunsacker instantly shouted, "I want to warn you! You're in danger!"

"*You're* in danger, washout!"

Hunsacker kept his mind on what he had to do.

"I'm in no danger here. You've landed in the wrong place! *Listen* to me!"

Barney was now breathing a little more evenly.

"Listen to the guy," he said. "He's trying to tell you something." His voice was low, and his words came out between breaths. As he spoke, he was looking directly at Hunsacker, his gaze intense.

Hunsacker seemed to catch some significance in the look, and without conscious intent, his glance as he looked back showed approval.

One of the masquerade figures glanced around to say jeeringly, "You don't sound so tough, any more, Barnhead. Better start doubling up on the wagons. O.K., *gun the slob down!*"

The heat rising up the face of the bluff made Hunsacker, in his heavy furs, almost faint. He noted the masquerade figures diving for the guns of the skimmers, saw Barney plant his booted foot in the belly of the gilded giant, and then Hunsacker dove for cover.

There was a sizzling *crack* like a lightning bolt passing over his head, and then the heavy double *boom* as Fielding and Terrill opened up.

Hunsacker eased his gun out of its wrapping, aimed carefully, and fired from one side of a small low evergreen growing near the edge of the bluff. The roar of the gun all but deafened him as the charge, meant to throw a slug that could stop packbears, sledgehammered his shoulder through the heavy

clothing.

Below, two of the opposition were down, but one of the two guns was swinging around by itself. Having been once aimed more or less correctly, it would seek the target, using heat and metal-detectors.

Hunsacker fired at the center of the detector.

There was a blinding flash, a deafening *crack!*

He lay dazed, vaguely conscious that that one had been meant for him alone.

He seemed to spiral through a kind of blackness to see the night sky, and then the blaze of sun on snow through his eyelids. He opened his eyes, and peered down. Through the dullness of deafened ears came what sounded like the squealing of many pigs.

Then the scene came into focus.

Huge bearlike forms eight to ten feet high at the shoulder, with teeth like daggers, boiled across the clearing directly into the murderous fire, reached the skimmers, to rip and smash and crush, and then fall dead. Behind them, more poured from the burrows. There was, as Hunsacker's hearing started to return, the hideous rumbling snort of famished packbears rending their prey.

Hunsacker felt in his pocket, and got out earplugs made of a corklike bark. He twisted the plugs into his ears, and then methodically began to pick off any bears that ambled away from the shambles toward the tent nearest the ship.

The bears, bloodied and snorting, looked around, and suddenly realized they were being hit from somewhere out of reach. With grunts and snorts, they surged across the clearing, in their haste gathering momentum in the direction that would normally have got them clear in the shortest possible time, but that now took them straight to where the space yacht stood.

With a series of clangs and crashes, the bears caromed off the yacht. One apparently stepped on the double-bitted ax under the snow. It let out a bellow of rage, tore a chunk of the outer metal off the ship, and waded into the complications within.

Hunsacker studied the guns on the skimmers warily. One was twisted into a pretzel. The other had the detector smashed, and wasn't moving. He got up cautiously. Nothing happened. He glanced around. Fielding and Terrill were out of sight, but holding their fire. Hunsacker glanced down the sheer face of the bluff. It was possible to go down that sheer drop. He had done it when they were first here. Alertly, he noted the tough-rooted fern bushes growing out here and there from crevices, little ledges, and invisible places of attachment. He looked again at the clearing below, where nothing now moved, looked again at the fern bushes, put his gun in its wrappings, put the earplugs in his pocket, and swung over the edge.

His whole perspective changed abruptly. Heat seemed to billow past him in waves. The clearing seemed a thousand feet below. The ledge above was a comforting nest of safety. The bluff was suddenly peopled with additional hibernating packbears that had yet to awaken, and were rousing themselves as he slipped and scrambled by, seizing the bushes, and working awkwardly but rapidly lower, as with ripping popping sounds the tough rootlets tore loose, and he shot past to the next handhold.

All he had to do, he knew, was to gather too much momentum, and he would plummet to the bottom and smash on the rock rubble piled at the base of the bluff, behind which the packbears had excavated their caves in the soft layer some twelve feet thick that was slantingly exposed to the weather there, and toward which Hunsacker seemed now to have been dropping forever, and yet getting no closer.

And then suddenly it was only three more slips and grabs, two more, one more—and with a thud and a desperate dance over the rocks and through the fern brush that sprouted up through them, he stumbled out into the clearing, to plunge awkwardly through the snow.

A cold feminine voice said, "Stop right there."

He tripped, went down in the snow, head first, and lay still for a few moments thinking through what he had planned, and finding it still solid and sound as far as he could make it solid and sound. Then he sat up, but did not rise. He would look more helpless sitting in the snow.

The taller of the two girls, dressed in a skiing outfit that covered her from head to foot, sighted the rifle at him. The blond girl, also well covered, stood with her hand at her mouth beside the tall girl.

Dave said exasperatedly, "Why did you have to camp *here*? There are packbear dens at the base of that bluff, and for all you or I know, there are still a few hibernating bears in there just waking up." The

likelihood of this was small, but it wouldn't hurt to mention it. "On top of that, once they quench their thirst, those bears are likely to be back here."

Her grip on the gun didn't waver. In a cold, deadly voice, she said, "You turned them on us."

Dave wondered uneasily just how shrewd this girl might be. But he allowed his face to show only indignation and the beginnings of anger.

"I *what*? Were you in that tent when they were snorting and rumbling around out here, or weren't you?"

She didn't answer, and she didn't shift her aim. The blond girl glanced at her nervously. Dave glanced at the blond.

"Were you in the tent, or weren't you? Maybe I was wasting time picking the bears off when they got near the tent."

The blond girl swallowed, and glanced again at the tall girl with the gun.

Dave ignored the girl with the gun, and spoke to the blond girl, "Keep out of the line of fire. Don't get between your friend and me—but go take a look at some of those bears near the tent."

"I'm afraid."

"They won't hurt you. They never play dead. They either run, or fight to the finish. Go close enough to see their backs, and tell your friend if there isn't a hole blown through the fur at the base of each one of their necks."

The blond girl hesitated, glanced at the tall girl, glanced back at Dave, then turned, and waded through the snow toward the tent. The tall girl reluctantly lowered the gun, but continued to watch Dave with a look of cold alertness. Dave looked away at the base of the bluff, then searched the woods behind the battered yacht. The tall girl glanced up at the sky searchingly, and then sharply back at Dave.

The blond girl called, "He's telling the truth, Chloe. There's a lot of . . . of fur and flesh blown away at the back of their necks."

The tall girl looked directly at Dave, the gun lowered but still ready.

"You turned them loose on us, and then killed the ones that went near the tent, in order to get rid . . . of—"

She glanced at the remains of bodies around the two skimmers.

Dave again wondered how shrewd this girl might be.

"If I had done that, I think I could make a case that it was in self-defense; but will you kindly tell me how I, or anyone else, could control these man-eaters?"

"They didn't hurt *you*."

"I wasn't there to be hurt."

She half-raised the gun.

"I saw you come out of there right behind them."

For an instant, Dave was left groping. Then it dawned on him that it was *not* pure shrewdness on her part that had led her to the right answer, but partly ignorance. She thought he had been in the caves with the bears, because she had seen him come from the same direction. Still, she seemed alert and intelligent.

He glanced up at the face of the bluff.

"Look at that bush, halfway down the bluff. See how it hangs off-center? Now look up at the top, almost above it, but at the top of the bluff. See where the snow is broken. It's smooth to either side, but just there it's broken. What do you suppose made that? Now, look down between those two places, and do you see how there's a slightly zigzag line of bushes at different slants—nearly every one pulled slightly out of line. There, below, near the bottom, there's one with a limb broken. The underside is lighter than the upper side. See how it's broken off? What do you suppose did that? Now, at the base of the bluff, I don't know if you can recognize it, but— No, too many bears have been through there. See, the top of that bush below the line down the face of the bluff. It's been broken. But I doubt, with all that trampling—"

"I see it," she said. She looked at him curiously, and glanced again at the sky. She looked back at him quickly, with a wondering look.

"Are you saying you *didn't* turn them loose on us?"

"I'm saying I was at the top of that bluff when they came out, and nothing you could give me, or pay me, would have put me inside those dens with them. Do you know what it would be like in there? You seem to think they're some kind of domestic animal. They aren't. As far as they're concerned, a human being is food."

"But—what made them come out?"

"This is a warm day. They only hibernate during the cold weather. Any loud noise on a day like this will make them restless. There was a lot of loud noise down here."

"But . . . but . . . If you knew this, why didn't you *warn* us? To just *leave* us here, knowing that, was the same thing as turning them loose on us!"

Dave ignored the illogic in this, and noted her changing attitude. He said, letting his voice show hurt, "We *tried* to. And got shot at for our pains."

"We," she said. She looked alertly around.

Dave reminded himself that the girl *was* shrewd.

He said with a trace of sarcasm, "Were you under the impression that I'm all alone on this planet?"

"Why don't your friends show themselves?"

She half-raised the gun, and looked around searchingly.

The blond girl said nervously, "Chloe—"

Dave said shortly, "You fired at *him* yesterday." Cautiously, Dave stood up. If Fielding thought life with this girl would be pleasant, *he* could try it. But, at any rate she wasn't aiming the gun at him. Again she looked at him alertly, then glanced at the sky. He decided to waste no time putting the next part of his plan in action, and swayed slightly on his feet.

The blond girl gave a little cry, and started toward him.

"Keep back," he warned. "Don't . . . don't come near me. I've been sick." He took a wavering step, then fell in the snow.

An instant later, someone turned him on his back, and was cradling him gently, as another voice shouted—and this was a masculine voice, tense and authoritative.

"Leave *him* alone. We won't shoot him. Get everyone out of that ship!"

Dave let himself fall back, then someone planted a kiss on his forehead.

There, *that* was more like it. But this wasn't over yet. He kept his face blank, and lay slackly motionless. He could hear the tall girl explaining what had happened to someone, and then there were a series of short sharp authoritative questions. When she explained how Dave had come down the bluff, whoever was doing the questioning dismissed the possibility brusquely. The girl angrily restated it. Again, whoever was doing the questioning brushed the idea aside. Sarcastically, the girl pointed out each individual bent branch, twisted bush, and mark in the snow at the bluff top that Dave had pointed out. There was a silence at the end, then Dave could hear the sound of feminine voices, from the direction of the yacht.

Dave opened his eyes. Someone said sharply, "He's awake, Captain!"

Dave slowly sat up.

Poised in midair before him were two more dish-shaped grav-skimmers, these somewhat larger than the others, marked with a blue stripe around the rim, and bearing a yellow shield at intervals. In white letters on the blue were the words. SPACE POLICE. In the skimmers were heavily armed men in uniforms roughly similar to those of the Space Force, but with different insignia.

Dave could have done without this complication, but he had taken the possibility into account. Now he readied his defenses.

The second skimmer was already starting to lower itself as the girls looked up, some supporting others who were apparently faint from the grisly scene around them. To jar things into motion, Dave turned and started to walk unsteadily away.

"Halt!" came the shouted order. "Turn around! Where do you think *you're* going?"

Dave turned and held his hands at his mouth to make a megaphone.

"We've been sick! I didn't want you to get it."

"*Sick*?" The man with captain's insignia stared at him.

Dave glanced at the girls.

"I tried to warn them."

The captain glanced around. The blond girl was right in the middle of the others. The only one standing aside, looking at Dave with a very peculiar expression, was the tall girl with the gun.

The captain looked back.

"Sick with *what*?"

"Well, we've had the pox, but—"

"*Pox*," shouted the captain. He whirled. "Raise that—" He reached out and seized a power megaphone.

"LIFT THAT SKIMMER! LIFT SKIMMER, I SAY! *THIS PLANET HAS THE POX!*"

Dave shouted, "We're over it now! We've . . . We're over it!"

The captain made a signal, palm upward, sweeping his hand sharply up, and both skimmers rose fast. As if remembering something, he looked back down at Dave, and spoke through the megaphone, his voice already faint because of the speed with which the skimmers were rising.

"Take plenty of liquids—citrus fruit—avoid exposure—keep the patients warm—keep complete records. Good luck. Bury those rats there. Other visitors are permanently restricted to the planet. Ship salvage to the first claimer. Impound log and . . ."

His voice faded out, and Dave waved, slipped in the snow, let himself fall to one knee, then got up and looked up again, careful to keep his face free of any expression but a look of anxiousness. The skimmers were too small now to be seen except as dots, but it didn't follow that their scanners could not record his every motion and every line of his face. There, now they dwindled off to the south, and vanished entirely. He was over *that* hurdle. But there were still the possible recorders on the yacht itself.

He looked around to see the tall girl standing directly before him, studying him with a wondering look. He glanced around at the bluff and the forest, and then back at the girl.

"Those packbears may be back anytime. It might be a good idea to—"

From the top of the bluff came the warning crack of a rifle. Apparently the bears were already coming back.

"Get into that skimmer," he said, getting into the other—which had the workable gun. "Stay right behind me. You don't want to set down in the wrong place again. You take half of the girls, and I'll take the other half."

The tall girl glanced back at the forest, and motioned the girls into the skimmers. Dave briefly studied the simplified controls, experimented with them for a moment, then swung the skimmer swiftly up, the sheer face of the bluff dropping down and falling back fast as he streaked along the face toward the east. He glanced back, saw that the other skimmer was no longer following but was starting to swing away from the face of the bluff. He whipped his controls around, and shot for the trees between here and the more distant clearing. The second skimmer whirled to race him, as the girls looked urgently around, gaining altitude as forest and small clearings flashed past below, and then Dave began to gently lower the skimmer as a hole through the snow-laden trees appeared. The skimmer behind instantly followed his example. He glanced at the girls clinging to the handholds, then whipped his skimmer up and slashed through the treetops, sending a shower of snow flying out behind him.

Directly in front of him, another space yacht appeared, sitting upright on its base. From behind and below came shrieks, and a short burst of anger. Dave landed beside the space yacht, put his hand on its cold flank, and said, "By the interstellar laws of salvage, I claim this abandoned ship and its effects for my settlement, to be held in common, and disposed of in accord with the decision of the settlement's duly-appointed leader or his successor, or in whatever lawful way may be duly determined by the members of the settlement."

He glanced up, and saw the second skimmer, heaped with snow, settle slowly to the ground. He glanced at the still paralyzed girls in his own skimmer, stepped out, put his hand again on the yacht, and repeated what he had just said.

The tall girl looked at him with smoldering eyes.

"You don't miss a bet, do you?"

"Ma'am," said Dave politely, "I've done my best to keep the bears from killing you. As far as I know, I haven't hurt you, or threatened you. But if you want to be angry with me, there is nothing I can do about it, I guess."

"Very neat." She smiled, bit her lip, and said, "All right, take us to your settlement's duly-appointed leader." She turned away. "Phyl, for the love of *Pete*, will you shovel some of this snow out, but— Watch it! Just the *snow*! Here, I'll hover. You'd better reach out and get that."

As she turned, Dave had the leisure to observe that the girl *was* attractive, as Fielding had said.

He looked all around, saw nothing that should pose any threat, considered the location of this second clearing, then looked around the interior of the skimmer. It was bloody, with several holes torn through it, but by pure luck nothing important seemed to have been hit. As he looked searchingly around, he noted a thing like a little cylinder—something like a hand-held microphone. He picked it up, examined it curiously, and noted a small nearly round lens at the end, with a button at the side. He remembered the girl who had set down the ax awkwardly, and felt in her pocket for something small, that she had then held against the ship, after which the door had opened out. He glanced at the side of this ship, and spotted what looked like a small lens, about the size of the end of a man's thumb.

He glanced at the tall girl, and said, "Could you come here a minute?"

She hesitated. "You'd better take me to whoever's in charge of your settlement."

He nodded. "Just come over here, and in theory you'll be talking to him."

She waded through the snow. "What do you mean, 'in theory'?"

"Things are pretty informal unless there's trouble."

She glanced thoughtfully at the girls.

"If you're the settlement's leader, you've *got* trouble."

"I was thinking the same thing. Now, I take it you're pretty familiar with this ship, so maybe you can—"

Her eyes glinted.

"*They* followed *us*," she said. "There were fifteen yachts on this excursion, but after what happened the last time, we broke up. We didn't want anything to do with them."

"After the heroes smoked battlewagons, and proved how tough they were?"

She nodded. "It was all right up to that point. It was a pleasure trip. We have been trying to get back to the same viewpoint, but I'm afraid we would never have made it."

"You realize you're marooned here."

"You misrepresented what you'd had. I was watching you."

"*If* I misrepresented, you said nothing to correct me."

She reddened slightly, then said, "There's such a thing as watching a very cool operator, and wondering just what he has in mind. And then finding out too late."

"The point is, the Space Police have you down as exposed to pox. Try and leave here, and there's a good chance they'll pick you up on their screen and put you right back down."

"What do we lose by that?"

"Time and energy. And, it would be illegal for you to take this yacht."

She nodded. "Since you've claimed it. And, of course, it's all down in the automatic log. Well, what do you want to do? We *can't* take the other one. Your bears tore the aft section to pieces."

"Not ours. The bears are wild."

"The results are the same."

"That's what I'm trying to explain," he said. "You're marooned. Naturally, we'll try to help you—"

"Why can't you get in touch with these Space Police, using the communicator in this ship, and explain that we haven't been exposed to this pox, whatever it is."

"Because," he said seriously, "I'm not certain you haven't been."

"Is that what you just had?"



"No. I didn't say it *was* what we *just* had."

"But you knew that blockheaded captain would jump to conclusions."

"He may have been right. I hope not."

"No matter what I say or do, you keep right on going," she said exasperatedly. "And you're always one step ahead. All right, we're marooned here. Doesn't that create something of a problem for you?"

"I was about to suggest that we open up the settlement's new ship, here, so you can all go in and have shelter, at least. Then we can figure out what to do next."

"All right. Let's do it." She was watching him curiously.

Hunsacker cast a brief glance at the yacht, and nodded. He floated up in his skimmer, and she promptly followed in the other skimmer. He studied the key, held it against the lens-like depression in the side of the yacht, worked the small recessed button in the side of the key, and stepped back to give the girls a good view of whatever this nest might have to offer.

The door swung slowly back.

Around him, there was a gasp.

From the interior, there loomed through thick smoke a kind of huge brassy motionless toad with redly-glowing eyes. Chains with weird attachments dangled through the murk from some overhead hook. There was an overpowering stench of filth and incense.

The skimmers swayed as their passengers sat down.

Dave glanced around at the tall girl, and now his gaze caught a trace of motion from the distant block the colonists called Iceberg Mountain. From here could be seen what seemed to be specks traveling across the distant snowfields, the specks enlarging and shrinking one after the other.

He said, "If you'd rather stay with us, instead of here, we'd be glad to have you."

There was a murmur of eager agreement.

Dave shut the door of the yacht, studied the sky overhead, and turned to the girl, still watching him alertly from the other skimmer.

"Keep your eyes open. If you look around at that mountain, you can see what looks like specks. That's a flock of a kind of giant bird that winters in the south. They stick together when they're flying north, but they have scouts at a distance that watch for food. Any one of us would do."

She looked intently at the distant mountain, and nodded.

Dave said, "Stay right behind me, and be ready to go into the thickest part of the forest if you see one of them diving. And stay low. Don't go *above* any of those taller trees, back in the thick forest. There's a thing in some of them that will try to knock down anything that flies above it."

Dave took a careful look all around, then led the way low and fast across the open ground, dotted with clumps of small trees, that connected the two clearings.

As they emerged into the clearing below the bluff, where the smashed space yacht stood, there was a gruff warning bark.

Dave saw the bears, glanced up, and there, far overhead, was a speck, drifting in the blue sky.

"Hang on," he warned, and the bluff, with its tough shrubs clinging to cracks and crevices, dropped past as they climbed.

From below came a weird cough and whistle that the bears used as a signal. The purpose of this noise was a source of controversy amongst the colonists, but as the lip of the bluff dropped past, Dave lost no time getting the skimmer back into thick forest. He landed amongst the thick-boled trees with their dead lower limbs radiating like spokes, and looked around searchingly.

The second skimmer set down nearby, and he gestured to the tall girl to come closer yet.

"We'll have to switch the load around. If that thing comes in here, one of these skimmers has to be able to fight, and move fast. The only way to do that is for the two of us to be in one skimmer, and everyone else in the other."

She nodded, and a few moments later the change was made. A dazzling line that sprang out as he squeezed the trigger demonstrated that the gun still worked.

A quick check near the edge of the bluff showed no sign of danger, and Dave recovered his gun, apparently left there in its wrapping by Fielding and Terrill in case he should need it. Their tracks led back

down the trail toward the loose cluster of cabins that made up the settlement.

She watched alertly. "You were telling the truth. But there were *three* of you, not two."

He eased back into the forest.

"I didn't say there were only two of us."

"You tried to lead me to think it."

He glanced at her, noting again that she was pretty and well made, though dressed to conceal the fact. But while he noted this, he was conscious of something else, that had more impact in this part of the universe:

She used her head.

He tried to scan the sky, wondering where that speck had gone, but the trees blocked his view.

"All is fair," he said casually, "in love and war."

She started to speak, stopped, colored slightly, and looked exasperated.

"Do you ever stop thinking?"

From far downhill, the sound echoed through the forest.

FLACK!

There was a distant scream, an urgent shout. Belatedly, a shot ran out.

He eased the skimmer carefully through the trees.

She looked around. "What was that?"

"That's what happens here when you stop thinking."

"What—"

"The flit . . . the bird that was overhead." He glanced around. "The only time you dare stop thinking is inside the cabin with the window shuttered and the door barred, your gun cleaned, loaded, and ready at hand, and either a good fire or the chimney stone down to block the flue. There *are* places where not thinking is a way of life. It's a luxury here."

"What *happened*?"

"My friends were probably telling what had happened up here. The flit . . . the bird, that is . . . was dropping after us, saw it couldn't make it, saw the crowd, and changed its angle of descent. That 'flack' noise is what you hear when it opens its wings after a long plunge from practically out of sight overhead."

They were far back in the trees now, following the direction of the downhill trail, and the second skimmer swung carefully around a bristling tree trunk to follow them.

She looked all around, then said suddenly, "It must be that you need women in your settlement."

He smiled. "An accurate deduction. How did you know that?"

"When I see someone use bears to eliminate pirates, germs to frighten Space Police, and the pirates' bad housekeeping to move the women into his settlement, it's natural to think he *needs* them there. Otherwise, we'd be far away by now."

"We do need you. But what you just saw was ninety percent luck."

She glanced alertly around, then looked at him with a smile.

"You can tell a real operator by the fact that what he does creates a bigger effect than anyone would expect. He sneezes, and a bridge falls down."

Dave sneezed, and looked around. The forest looked back blandly. He glanced at her.

"Nothing happened."

She nodded. "A top-rank operator often *conceals* the fact."

"If you see it, it's not concealed."

She looked around at the forest. "The real proof is that you borrowed strength when you needed it. You smashed the pirates using the strength of the bears, and in effect you gave the Space Police orders by borrowing the authority of their blockheaded captain. And you didn't *tell* us to come here, and so make us resentful; you put us in a place where we were *glad* to come, due to the force of our own reactions."

"Ninety percent luck."

"It's the other ten percent that makes the difference. It takes a score of ninety-nine to get some things done."

He noted a slender sapling that climbed between two larger neighboring trees. The interlocked branches of the larger trees sagged under the weight of snow.

Carefully, he eased the skimmer into the confined space between the outthrust dead lower branches of the largest tree, and the sapling.

"As for borrowing strength," he said, "tell me some other way to get anything done. When a man fells a tree, does *he* drag that huge mass of wood, bark, and foliage to the earth? No. *Gravity* does the work. When he wants people to cooperate, can *he* compel them to be cooperative? Of course not. He appeals to some interest that will move them. The *interest* does the work. If he flies a spaceship, is it *his* muscle that moves the ship? Why, no, he had to find a way to get some atoms to cooperate, and it's *their* power that moves the ship. The strength that helps him, as you say, is borrowed strength. But what else can he use? He *has* to borrow strength. The fun starts when he forgets, and imagines it's his."

She thought a moment.

"But at least, you don't deny that you *are* an operator?"

He bumped the sapling lightly. A clump of snow plummeted down to the side, distracting her attention.

"Not me," he smiled, and brought the new colonist to the settlement.