

# PIONEER STOCK

*Dear Burt:*

*I deeply regret the necessity for what I must do, darling. You see, I am returning your ring by registered post. I need hardly tell you that this reluctant action represents no change of sentiment on my part. But after your last visit, and in view of the decision you have come to since, I have no other possible choice...*

TWO YEARS AGO, when both of them were just past being children, he had given her the ring. Deena had worn it proudly ever since, and it shone brighter in the world's sight than her own gleaming beauty. It shone brighter because she saw to it that no man could notice her without noticing as well the ring that committed her to one man alone.

Every night since then she had gone to sleep holding hands with herself: the fingers of one hand ardently stroking and caressing the slender band of metal which she wore on the other. And each time he was home from school, for a day or a week, or through the two long glorious vacations, she had struggled between the pounding needs of her own blood, and the restraining memory of the blood of her ancestors.

Each time she had won the fight until—his imperative accumulated urgency, more than her own, had overcome at last the shame and the fear.

*...alternative. My grandfather, as you know, was a pioneer here on Ganymede. My grandmother...*

And now the very memory of that urgency, and of the wonder and mystery of those two nights before his departure, and of the burning in her body ever since, had left her no other choice but this. She knew her heritage well enough, and always had.

But now she knew exactly how he felt too. They could have waited, and endured the last year still ahead. But another year after that, or three or five—the time which must of necessity elapse before she could join him on the far frontier they would send him to—no, it was unthinkable.

She sat at the table in her own room, the room in which she had grown up, and would almost surely live all the rest of her life, and stared at the last two words she had written: *My grandmother.*

She couldn't tell him after all. She would have to go back too far, explaining. He would read the words, and never even know what they meant.

*...My grandmother was not a happy woman, though she loved her husband dearly, and he her in return.*

That much was true, no matter which grandmother you were speaking of.

*Perhaps it is unfitting in the descendant of "pioneer heroes" to be so fearful but...* Burt didn't know. Nobody knew except the family, and perhaps a few old-timers who didn't talk. When the whole world knows part of the story, the part that's not fit to be known is buried deeper than usual.

*...but perhaps it is just exactly that background of growing up in a household where the stories of pioneer days and pioneer hardships were so much a part of my conditioning...*

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Thatcher and Leseur came out on the same ship, but they didn't team up right away. Life on Ganymede was not so tough that you had to have a partner to survive. If you could stand being alone almost all the time, it was smarter to keep your pickings to yourself. There was plenty of room then for everybody, and plenty of uranium scattered about, and the Dzairdee, the graceful, green-skinned peoples who were native to the satellite, were as timid as they were backward, and thus represented no menace to the roaming prospectors.

Phil Thatcher had always been a lonely man, even in the crowded cities of Earth. For him the rocky heights and wilderness valleys of Ganymede were a natural and suitable environment. If every now and

then he crossed the trail of a fellow fortune hunter, and spent a day or two in human company, he found it pleasant. But equally pleasant seemed the consolations of solitude.

Leseur was of a different breed entirely. He had been married a considerable time before he left Earth, and his eldest child was four, the youngest a babe in arms. By the time the next rocket came—almost eighteen months after the one that had brought both men—he was tired of living alone, and had found a pleasant valley rich enough in ore and soil to support his family, and house them in comfort.

He sent back an urgent message to his wife, asking her to join him, but he knew it would be a long and weary wait. In fact, the shiny-buttoned rocketeers he talked to in the spaceport all said the next rocket probably wouldn't come for another two years.

When the ship had gone off, carrying his lonely message, he had followed the crowd to the freshly-stocked bar at the spaceport, and bumped into his old friend Thatcher. They spent a wet weekend together, and at the end of it, on George's pleading, Phil came back to spend a few days in the valley where Leseur meant to build his home.

Thatcher didn't stay long, that time. But he did give the other man a hand with the foundations of the new building, and even got into the habit of dropping by from time to time to help out with the great house that was being erected.

As long as there was work to do, Leseur was fairly happy and good company. But stretch the construction job as he might, by adding a room here and a window there, it was completed in six months' time, and when Thatcher stopped by to see him after that, he found George so eager for company that when he left it seemed as if he were breathing easy for the first time in his life. The best part of a year elapsed before he thought of going back again.

What brought him back was partly the rumor that had sprung up about some girls coming out on the next ship, and partly George's reminder that it would be easy for him to build another house nearby. Thatcher was a man who liked to be alone. But he was also a man, and he was beginning to think that it was time he had a woman he could call his own.

A third reason, was that the peaceful, gentle Dzairdee had lately been showing a different, uglier side to their natures. They hadn't minded when humans came and took the useless uranium out of the rocks. There was plenty of wilderness and plenty of rockland, and the two races could get along.

But when other men than Thatcher began to feel the press of desire for women they'd left a world away, when slender supple daughters of the Dzairdee began to leave their homes and defy their fathers to answer the temptings of the humans...then the fathers and husbands-to-be of the peaceable primitive people gathered together, and summoned their savage gods to aid them, and out of their ancient lore manufactured weapons of great simplicity and great finality...

It was time for a man to build a house and settle into it, and be prepared to snare one of the women who might come. So Thatcher went back to Leseur's place, and the first thing he thought of when he hove in sight of it was that Leseur would be a good neighbor to have.

There was a high thick stockade built all around the house now, against possible Dzairdee raids. Thatcher's next thought, when he came closer, was a joyful one, for he saw that the stockade was twice as big around as Leseur's own house and yard. Then his joy diminished, for it occurred to him that perhaps some other man had built there. But when he came up to the gate and shouted, and George appeared to let him in, he saw that there was space aplenty for another dwelling.

"I've come to build that house, George," he said.

"High time," said George. But there was something wrong with the way he said it.

"I've been a long time away," said Phil. "Maybe you've changed your mind about wanting me as a neighbor."

"No," said George. "And it's good to see you, man. Come inside. I... well, you'll see for yourself, and then you may make up your own mind differently."

Thatcher followed his friend across the wide yard, and into the solid house of stone and wood. He was sure now that George welcomed his coming. But there seemed to be a serious doubt in George's mind as to whether he'd care for his welcome.

When they got to the inside, he understood right away, even before he saw her. The house of a man who lived alone, though ever so clean, could have had no such look of ease and comfort as this one boasted.

Thatcher's head was in a whirl for a while. George brought him a drink that was remarkably like real rift beer, and sat down with him in the big living room. He cleared his throat started to talk, and cleared his throat again. And all the while Phil was thinking about the stockade, which must have been built for reasons more urgent and immediate than to protect Leseur's family in the uncertain future.

"I think I had better..." George cleared his throat again. He couldn't seem to get it out.

"No need to tell me," Thatcher said slowly. "It's all around me. It was a foolhardy thing to do, Leseur."

George didn't take offense. He nodded bitterly in agreement, and by way of explaining did no more than go into the next room and return with the girl, Leahtillette.

It was almost enough. By human standards, all the Dzairdee had a sort of faerie beauty. But this girl had more than most. And in a week of staying in the house, Phil Thatcher found it was not just good looks and a sweet way she had. She kept the house and served the meals, and waited on George with a kind of worshipful willingness such as no man could have long resisted.

Then one evening when she had gone to her room and the two men sat talking late, George put the question straight.

"I don't suppose you'll be wanting to stay now that you know?"

"It's hard to say," Phil told him. "Isn't your wife coming?"

"She is," Leseur' admitted, and said no more simply because there was nothing to say.

"What will you do, man?"

"Until you came, I drove myself crazy with the question. Then, I thought perhaps...Thatcher, she can't go back to her own people. She just can't. She—Oh, I don't *know* what I'll do!" he cried out, seeing an answer in Thatcher's face that made words needless between them.

They went to their beds that night without further talk. During the night Phil Thatcher thought he heard—and he was almost sure he had heard it before—a low crying from somewhere in the house. The next morning he found George out in a shed in the back yard, building a new plow, and put it to him without evasion.

"It's not for her people I'm afraid. And it's not for any fault in the girl, as I see her. Any man would be lucky to get an Earth-girl to be such a wife to him. But she's yours, you see. When your wife comes a stranger, an outsider would only—" He left the sentence uncompleted.

George Leseur could only hang his head, for there was no answer he could make to justify himself even in his own eyes.

"As to building here," Phil went on, "you're my friend, George, and I'm no man to run when there may be a fight. But if her people come to take her back I'd say, let her go. You surely must know you can't keep her. I'd like to build my house beside your own, if you still want me here. But you'll have to make up your mind about the girl, and your own woman. I could live with any kind of hell, I think, except that one."

Later the same day, George came to him, and said simply: "If you still want to build, will you start now, and take my word I'll think of something to do about Leahtillette before my wife gets here."

So it was settled, and the two of them began on the foundation of the second house the next morning. But it was almost another month before Thatcher found out the reason why Leahtillette, whom they both called Leah, could not go back to her own people, and what the crying was he had heard in the night.

It happened on one day when she was less quick than usual, and he came across them both in the small side yard where she washed, and hung out her clothes, and where the men seldom went—Leah, and a fat, round, gold-skinned baby.

The first thought that entered his head he rejected as impossible. The next explained just as well why she couldn't go back. When she saw he'd discovered them, she gave a small, frightened cry, and then her features relaxed in a smile of relief: It must have been pure torment, he thought, trying to hide it all the time.

He smiled back and reached out to the baby. Still smiling, she picked it up and gave it to him to hold for a minute. The infant's golden skin was so lovely, it passed through his head first to regret and then to be glad that it would fade to pale green like its mother's in time. If Leah's skin were like that, or if the other women of her race were colored so, a man might find it hard...

Thatcher was shocked by the gross sensuality of the thought.

Two discoveries in one day, and the second much harder to face than the first. For now he knew *why* he'd decided to build in a place where there could be nothing but trouble in store for him, no matter how hard George might try to avert it. And he was just as certain as ever that the only man in the world for Leah was George Leseur.

If he'd thought about the trouble that was sure to come before he'd have told himself that it was George he meant to befriend. Now he knew better, in one sense, but he was hopelessly mixed up in another. As near as he could see there was going to be no way at all to help the lovely girl or the golden baby to happiness.

Now ever, he thought, it was time for him to get out. He went to find Leseur, but the other man was piling stones for the walls of Thatcher's new house, and Phil didn't have the heart to tell him. So he fell to work with an angry pleasure, and nothing at all was said between the two of them.

During the next few days, Thatcher tried desperately to speak to his friend with a candor and forthrightness that would take him out of the stockade forever. But he couldn't be angry at George Leseur for taking the girl and keeping her, to protect her from the anger of her people. Nor could he resent the girl's worship of the other man, nor propose in any way that she and her baby be put out now. He couldn't even feel an active jealousy. His envy was without hope, and therefore without anger. Phil Thatcher had never demanded much from others, and he never expected to.

So the second house went up, not quite as big, but every bit as strong as the first. As the time for the rocket's arrival drew closer Leah made no further attempt to hide the baby, but brought it out into the yard to watch the men work.

And not a word was said, in all that time, between them as to what could or should be done, for it was clear that whatever happened would not be the simple decision of one man—or even two.

They worked, they waited and they worried—but not together.

And trouble came steadily closer, but not from the direction anticipated. The high thick wall of the stockade had almost made them forget that there were others besides Dolly Leseur who might have a word to say about what was going on inside.

The attack must have been planned carefully for a very long time ahead. The preparations could hardly have gone unnoticed by the two men had they been less harassed and preoccupied with their problems inside the walls. Their only task for days had been the building of Thatcher's house, and the planting of a garden in the houseyard, and going out once a week, to inspect their claims, and discourage jumpers.

When it happened, they had not been outside the stockade for five days running.

It began at night with a dazzling light, and the windy roar of flames. Just as quick, frightening and simple as that, and there was nothing the men inside could do to fight the circle of fire. Nothing, except to stare at each other once in grim despair, and set about preparing for the battle they knew would follow.

Through the night, by the light of their vanishing defenses, they brought in goods and provisions from outside, drawing a store of water from the well to fill every container in the house, boarding up windows, and nailing up the doors. Privately, perhaps, they prayed.

When the morning came, the thick pilings of the wall were burning still. Here and there, gaps had occurred in the wall, but no enemy face showed anywhere.

By evening they might have begun to wonder if the fire had not accidentally started, had it not begun all at once in a great circle around them. But when darkness fell, there could be no further question, for now they could make out shadowy figures at the openings in the wall.

Later, one brave native came through in the light of the still-burning flames, and died on the spot, shot through the heart by Leseur. It happened again, and a dozen times. But the men inside knew they couldn't watch in all directions at once, and that sooner or later the Dzairdee outside would realize it as well.

They did all they could. They picked the best three spots inside to command a full-circle view, and where the outside wall was completely down, they stationed Leah with a gun.

Then Leseur took one of the other two critical places, and Thatcher the second, and they sat watching, and sometimes shooting, none of them knowing when the end would come, nor how long it could be held off.

So it went on through the night, the second night of the fire. By morning, the fire was mostly cold, with great holes in the wall, and the part that still stood loomed charred and black. With daylight to see by, they could still hold off the besiegers. But another night, without the fire to show them where to shoot, would surely be the end.

They both thought of things to do, and would have spoken. But each plan had a flaw that would come to mind before it could be discussed. So they sat at their posts for the most part, or went occasionally to get food, or to refill the bucket of water, or to check quickly on the woman and the baby.

The Dzairdee were not such fools as to expose themselves much during the day, being content to risk a man from time to time, or to set up a ruse to draw fire, just to make sure the men inside would get no rest before nightfall. And the men inside understood this well enough, and tried their best to get what rest they could while still remaining alert and watchful.

The moment of crisis came in the middle of the hot afternoon, and was quick, unexpected and terrible—a cry of anguish from the far side of the house, and a rustling sound, and the thin wail of the baby. Both men rushed from their posts to see what had happened, heedless of their own safety or the safety of the house.

They got there just in time to see Leah being carried, kicking and thrashing, beyond an aperture in the great wall. And while they were still staring in horror at the undamaged door that could only have been opened from *inside*, a stinging feathered thing whirled through to cut a long line across Phil Thatcher's cheek, looking in the red glare like the rake of a woman's fingernail. No more than that. But already spreading in Thatcher's wound was the ancient deadly poison that tipped the Dzairdee darts.

Neither man knew at that moment how irrevocable was their doom. But while Thatcher stood fingering his cheek, trying to bring to mind what he had heard about the darts, and their devilish properties, Leseur moved, suddenly and swiftly, and in quite an opposite direction from what anyone might have supposed.

First he grabbed up a heavy wooden bucket, and dashed the water out of it. Then he took the frantically crying baby, and placed it inside the pail. Then he clasped the open end of the pail to his own chest, and started through the door like a madman, out into the unprotected yard, and straight across to where the stockade smouldered, and where they could still hear the pleading screams of the woman.

"Cover me, Phil," he called out, uselessly, and trampled across the new young kitchen garden, running for all he was worth right into the hands of the enemy.

In that moment, without the need of words even to explain the impossible, Phil Thatcher understood much that had not been told him. For an instant bitterness was succeeded by admiration for the expiation his friend was making, and then both were forgotten, as the poison entered his blood stream and he fell to the floor with a stricken cry.

*There are no heroes among pioneers, she wrote. There are only desperate men and miserable women. I honor and respect the choice you have made, but my grandfather's blood does not run as strong in me as the blood of my grandmother's people.*

Phil Thatcher never regained sufficient consciousness of the world around him to understand that he had become a hero. He never found out how it had been possible for Leah and George together to produce Leah's gold-skinned baby, nor what were the results of Leseur's suicidal spurt to cleanse his conscience and make sure, at least, that one of his children would be safely cared for.

There is no way to know whether Thatcher was lucid enough at any time in the two weeks of torment he endured before he died, to understand that it was Leah who nursed him, and cared for him. It would have been a little easier on him, perhaps, to have known with certainty that the woman was no traitor and that when she opened the door wide it was only to show her kinsmen that her union with the alien from

the stars had borne fruit, and was not to be denied. She could hardly have predicted their first battle-nerved reaction to the infant's golden skin—a monster, assuredly, and the wages of the worst kind of sin.

No one, until then, had understood, or bothered to find out, the deeper implications of the morality that motivated the graceful green-skinned peoples.

It was a morality too different in nature from humanity's to be comprehended, in a sense, until such an act as George Leseur's made clear to the Dzairdee themselves that it was *less* different, than they had supposed.

The single men—and single women—who form the initial brigade of the forces of humanity are a strange and misleading advance guard to the alien people they meet. Among the Dzairdee, the hearing and raising of children is an endeavor that occupies that most serious thought and careful practices of which any people are capable.

No Dzairdee woman has ever conceived a new life except in circumstances of secure and settled love. No Dzairdee woman, before Leahtillette met George Leseur, ever found a human male to lavish the right kind of love on her, and with a true yearning for a child of his own.

If Leah did not understand that it was the children his wife had already given him on a far-away world that he longed for—her mistake was a blessing to two races, since it led to the act that established the basis for a lasting peace between green skins and pink skins, and the gold-skinned offspring of their unions.

*My grandmother was not a happy woman...*

Deena looked at the line again, and slipped the ring painfully down the length of her finger, gold against gold, with the small stone flashing under the light. She had called them both Grandmother: Leah and Dolly. She had called George Grandfather; though she knew that her own granddaddy was dead.

And when she heard the truth, at last, it was not from Leah nor from George, but from Dolly—from Dolly who was not supposed to know at all that the woman with whom she had shared her home for thirty-four years had been her husband's other wife.

Leah had used Thatcher's name, and her son, who was Deena's father, had been called Peacemaker Thatcher, and it was Phil to whom the history books assigned that act of mercy and attrition that had established the basis for peace forever between the Dzairdees and humanity. Poor old George could never claim the glory, for it would have meant also claiming his son, and that he *could not do*.

Leseur loved Leah, and he loved the baby, and he saw to it that they were both as well cared for as his first wife and his human son and daughters. But he loved Dolly, too, and...

Perhaps he regretted the decision sometimes, later on. But once it had been made, he could not alter it. Phil Thatcher, nor George, with a dart scratch already on his cheek, had made that heroic run into the arms of the enemy, to return a baby to its mother's arms. So the world believed, and so Deena left the story now.

Carefully, she wrapped the ring, and packaged it. Then she went back to the letter and read through what she had written. There was no way of explaining it all. How could she say, "I will never trust you enough, after such separation, to bear your child, and if my life must be barren, I had rather bear the grief and the anguish alone."

She took a fresh piece of paper, and copied the first part of her letter carefully.

*...I see no other possible alternative. I beg you to believe that there are factors in my early childhood that make this action the only one I can take, and further beg you not to try to see me, nor to make any effort to change my mind.*

*I honor and respect what you are doing. I am not prepared to do it with you, but you will agree, I think, that any life together would not be worth having if I were to keep you from it.*

She read it through again, and signed it, "Sincerely, Deena Thatcher," and sealed it, and went out to post the letter and the package both.

Then she came back to her room in the big house that George Leseur had built for his families, and cried.

