
The Queer Ones
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I ran down Buckhorn Mountain in the cloud and rain, carrying the boy in my arms. The green lightning flashed among the trees. Buckhorn is no stranger to lightning, but this was different. It did not come from the clouds, and there was no thunder with it. It ran low, searching the thickets, the brush-choked gullies, the wet hollows full of brambles and poison ivy. Thick green hungry snakes looking for something. Looking for me.

Looking for the boy who had started it all.

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

"Why mus' they kill us?"

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

It was Doc Callendar, the County Health Officer, who got me in on the whole thing. I am Hank Temple, owner, editor, feature writer, legman, and general roustabout of the *Newhale News*, serving Newhale and the rural and mountain areas around it. Doc Callendar, Sheriff Ed Betts and I are old friends, and we work together, helping out where we can. So one hot morning in July my phone rang and it was Doc, sounding kind of dazed.

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

"Who's hurt?"

"Nobody. Just thought something might interest you."

Doc was being cagey because anything you say over the phone in Newhale is public property. But even so the tone of his voice put prickles between my shoulder-blades. It didn't sound like Doc at all.

"Sure," I said. "Right away."

Newhale is the county seat, a small town, and a high town. It lies in an upland hollow of the Appalachians, a little clutter of old red brick buildings with porches on

thin wooden pillars, and frame houses ranging from new white to weathered silver-gray, centered around the dumpy courthouse. A very noisy stream bisects the town. The tannery and the feed-mill are its chief industries, with some mining nearby. The high-line comes down a neat cut on Tunkhannock Ridge to the east and goes away up a neat cut on Goat Hill to the west. Over all towers the rough impressive hump of Buckhorn Mountain, green on the ridges, shadowed blue in the folds, wrapped more often than not in a mist of cloud.

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

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

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

"Precocious," said Jim Bossert nervously. "Very precocious for his age. Physically, too. Coordination and musculature well developed. And his coloring—"

"What about it?" I asked.

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

Bossert picked up a couple of pictures from the desk and shoved them at me. His hands shook, making the stiff films rattle together.

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

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

"Some of the innards," said Doc, "we can't figure out at all. There are organs we've never seen nor heard of before."

"Yet the chad seems normal and perfectly healthy," said Bossert. "Remarkably so."

From the beating he'd taken he should have had serious injuries. He was just sore. His body must be as flexible and tough as spring steel."

I put the X-rays back on the desk. "Isn't there quite a large literature on medical anomalies?"

"Oh, yes," said Doc. "Double hearts, upside-down stomachs, extra arms, legs, heads — almost any distortion or variation you can think of. But not like this." He leaned over and tapped his finger emphatically on the films. "This isn't a distortion of anything. This is *different*. And that's not all."

He pushed a microscope slide toward me.

"That's the capper, Hank. Blood sample. Jim tried to type it. I tried to type it. We couldn't. There isn't any such type."

I stared at them. Their faces were flushed, their eyes were bright, they quivered with excitement, and suddenly it got to me too.

"Wait a minute," I said. "Are you trying to tell me —"

"We've got something here," said Doc Callendar. "Something —" He shook his head. I could see the dreams in it. I could see Callendar standing ten feet tall on a pedestal of medical journals. I could see him on podiums addressing audiences of breathless men, and the same dreams were in Bossert's eyes.

I had my own. The *Newhale News* suddenly a famous name on the wire-services, and one Henry Temple bowing with modest dignity as he accepted the Pulitzer Prize for journalism.

"Big," said Bossert softly. "The boy is more than a freak. He's something new. A mutation. Almost a new species. The blood-type alone —"

Something occurred to me and I cut him short. "Listen," I said. "Listen, are you sure you didn't make a mistake or something? How could the boy's blood be so different from his mother's?" I hunted for the word. "Incompatibility. He'd never have been born."

"Nevertheless," said Doc Callendar mildly, "he was born. And nevertheless, there is no such blood-type. We've run tests backward and forward, together and independently. Kindly allow us to know what we're talking about, Hank. The boy's blood obviously must have been compatible with his mother's. Possibly it's a more advanced Type O, universally compatible. This is only one of the many things we have to study and evaluate."

He picked up the X-ray films again and looked at them, with an expression of holy ecstasy in his eyes.

I lighted another cigarette. My hands were shaking now, like theirs. I leaned forward.

"Okay," I said. "What's the first thing we do?"

Doc's station wagon, with COUNTY HEALTH SERVICE painted on its side, slewed and snorted around the turns of the steep dirt road. Jim Bossert had had to stay at the hospital, but I was sitting beside Doc, hunched forward in a sweat of impatience. The road ran up around the shoulder of Tunkhannock Ridge. We had thick dark woods on our right going up, and thick dark woods on our left going down. Buckhorn hung in the north like a curtain across the sky.

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

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

"Do you know the Tate girls?"

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

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

We bucketed on through the hot green shadows, the great centers of civilization like Newhale forgotten in the distance behind us, and finally in a remote pocket just under Tunkhannock's crest we came upon a few lean spry cattle, and then the settlement of Possum Creek.

There were four ancient houses straggled out along the side of the stream. One of them said GENERAL STORE and had a gas pump in front of it. Two old men sat on the step.

Doc kept on going. "The Tates," he said, straight-faced, "live out a little from the center of town."

Two more turns of the road, which was now only a double-rutted track, brought us to a rural mailbox which said TATE. The house behind it was pretty well run down, but there was glass in most of the windows and only half the bricks were gone from the chimney. The clapboards were sort of a rusty brown, patched up with odds and ends of tarpaper. A woman was washing clothes in an old galvanized tub set on a stand in the side yard. There was a television aerial tied on cockeyed to the gable of the house. There was a sow with a litter in a pen right handy to the door, and a little way at the back was a barn with the ridge-pole swayed like an old horse. A tarpaper shack and a battered house-trailer were visible among the trees—probably the homes of the married daughters. An ancient man sat in an ancient rocking chair on the porch and peered at us, and an ancient dog beside him rose up heavily and barked.

I've known quite a lot of families like the Tates. They scratch out enough corn for their pigs and their still-houses, and enough garden for themselves. The young men make most of their money as guides during hunting season, and the old men make

theirs selling moonshine. They have electricity now, and they can afford radios and even television sets. City folks call them lazy and shiftless. Actually, they find the simple life so pleasant that they hate to let hard work spoil their enjoyment of it.

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

"There he is," Doc said to me, under cover of the whooping and woofing and the banging of screen doors.

"The skinny little chap with the red hair. There, just coming down the steps."

I looked over and saw the boy.

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

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

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

The little boy remained at the foot of the steps. His hand was now in the hand of a buxom girl. Judging by Bossert's description, this would be his mother. Not much over nineteen, handsome, big breasted, full hipped. She was dressed in tight jeans and a boy's shirt, her bare feet stuck into sandals, and a hank of yellow hair hung down her back.

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

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

Doc spoke to Sally, and she smiled. She had an honest, friendly smile. Her mouth was wide and full, frankly sensuous but without coquetry. She had big blue eyes, and her sunburned cheeks were flushed with health, and she looked as uncomplicated and

warmly attractive as a summer meadow. I wondered what strange freak of genetics had made her the fountainhead of a totally new race.

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

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

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

"Name's Billy," he answered, in a grave sweet treble that had a sound in it of bells being rung far off. "Billy Tate."

The woman who had come from the washtub said with unconcealed dislike, "He ain't no Tate, whatever he might be."

She had been introduced as Mrs. Tate, and was obviously the mother and grandmother of this numerous brood. She had lost most of her teeth and her gray-blond hair stood out around her head in an untidy brush. Doc ignored her.

"How do you do, Billy Tate," he said, "And where did you get that pretty red hair?"

"From his daddy," said Mrs. Tate sharply. "Same place he got his sneaky-footed ways and them yellow eyes like a bad hound. I tell you, Doctor, if you see a man looks just like that child, you tell him to come back and get what belongs to him!"

A corny but perfectly fitting counterpoint to her words, thunder crashed on Buckhorn's cloudy crest, like the ominous laughter of a god.

Sally reached down suddenly and caught up the boy into her arms...

The thunder quivered and died on the hot air. I stared at Doc and he stared at me, and Sally Tate screamed at her mother.

"You keep your dirty mouth off my baby!"

"That ain't no way to talk to Maw," said one of the older girls. "And anyway, she's right."

"Oh," said Sally. "You think so, do you?" She turned to Doc, her cheeks all white now and her eyes blazing. "They set their young ones on my baby, Doctor, and you know why? They're jealous. They're just sick to their stomachs with it, because they all got big hunkety kids that can't do nothin' but eat, and big hunkety men that treat them like they was no better'n brood sows."

She had reached her peak of fury so quickly that it was obvious this row had been going on for a long while, probably ever since the child was born.

Possibly even before, judging by what she said then.

"Jealous," she said to her sisters, showing her teeth. "Every last one of you was dancing up and down to catch his eye, but it was me he took to the hayloft. *Me*. And if he

ever comes back he can have me again, for as often and as long as he wants me. And I won't hear no ill of him nor the baby!"

I heard all this. I understood it. But not with all, or even most of my mind. That was busy with another thing, a thing it didn't want to grapple with at all and kept shying away from, only to be driven back shivering.

Doc put it into words.

"You mean," he said, to no one in particular, "the boy looks just like his father?"

"Spit an' image," said Sally fondly, kissing the red curls that had that queer glint of silver in them. "Sure would like to see that man again, I don't care what they say. Doctor, I tell you, he was beautiful."

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

"Why, Maw," said Mr. Tate, "he had you eating out of his hand, with them nicey ways of his." He turned to Doc Callendar, laughing. "She'd a' gone off to the hayloft with him herself if he'd asked her, and that's a fact. Ain't it, Harry?"

Harry said it was, and they all laughed.

Mrs. Tate said furiously, "It'd become you men better to do something about getting some support for that brat from its father, instead of making fool jokes in front of strangers."

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

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

And if that is so, I thought, how can he be a mutant? A mutant is something new, something different, alien from the parent stem. If he is the spit an' image outside, then build and coloring bred true. And if build and coloring bred true, probably blood-type and internal organs —

Thunder boomed again on Buckhorn Mountain. And I thought, *Well, and so his father is a mutant, too.*

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

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

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

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

"He come here," Mrs. Tate said, "driving a truck for some appliance store, Grover's I

think it was, in Newhale. Said the place was just new and was making a survey of TVs around here, and offering free service on them up to five dollars, just for goodwill. So I let him look at ours, and he fussed with it for almost an hour, and didn't charge me a cent. Worked real good afterward, too. That would 'a been the end of it, I guess, only Sally was under his feet all the time and he took a shine to her. Kept coming back, and coming back, and you see what happened."

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

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

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

Doc said eagerly, "Where?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

component was important somehow to Mr. Jones.

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

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

"...some further tests he wants to make," I heard him say. "I can take you and Billy back right now..."

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

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

"No," said Doc reluctantly. "Just something about the X-rays he wanted to check on. It could be important for the future. Tell you what, Sally. You talk to the boy, and I'll come back in a day or two."

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

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

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

Mrs. Tate didn't give her time to finish. "Yes, indeed," she said. "You speak to the sheriff. Time somebody did something about this, 'fore that brat's a man grown himself."

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

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

"What do you think?" I said finally.

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

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

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

"Is there any other?"

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

"What about the television set?" he asked.

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

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

The bolt of lightning came so quickly and hit so close that I wasn't conscious of anything but a great flare of livid green. Doc yelled. The station wagon slewed on the road that now had a thin film of mud over it, and I saw trees rushing at us, their tops bent by a sudden wind so that they seemed to be literally leaping forward. There was no thunder. I remembered that, I don't know why. The station wagon tipped over and hit the trees. There was a crash. The door flew open and I fell out through a wet whipping tangle of branches and on down to the steep-tilted ground below. I kept on falling, right down the slope, until a gully pocket caught and held me. I lay there dazed, staring up at the station wagon that now hung over my head. I saw Doc's legs come out of it, out the open door. He was all right. He was letting himself down to the ground. And then the lightning came again.

It swallowed the station wagon and the trees and Doc in a ball of green fire, and when it went away the trees were scorched and the paint was blistered on the wrecked car, and Doc was rolling over and over down the slope, very slowly, as if he was tired and did not want to hurry. He came to rest not three feet away from me. His hair and his clothes were smoldering, but he wasn't worrying about it. He wasn't worrying about anything, any more. And for the second time there had not been any thunder, close at hand where the lightning was.

The rain came down on Doc in heavy sheets, and put the smoldering fire out.

Jim Bossert had just come from posting Doc Callendar's body. For the first time I found myself almost liking him, he looked so sick and beat-out. I pushed the bottle toward him, and he drank out of it and then lighted a cigarette and just sat there shaking.

"It was lightning," he said. "No doubt at all."

Ed Berts, the sheriff, said, "Hank still insists there was something screwy about it."

Bossert shook his head at me. "Lightning."

"Or a heavy electric charge," I said. "That comes to the same thing, doesn't it?"

"But you saw it hit, Hank."

"Twice," I said. "Twice."

We were in Bossert's office at the hospital. It was late in the afternoon, getting on for supper time. I reached for the bottle again, and Ed said quietly,

"Lightning does do that, you know. In spite of the old saying."

"The first time, it missed," I said. "Just. Second time it didn't. If I hadn't been thrown clear I'd be dead too. And there wasn't any thunder."

"You were dazed," Bossert said. "The first shock stunned you."

"It was green," I said.

"Fireballs often are."

"But not lightning."

"Atmospheric freak." Ed turned to Jim Bossert. "Give him something and send him home."

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

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

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

I dreamed Doc Callendar called me on the phone and said, "I've found him but you'll have to hurry." And I said, "But you're dead. Don't call me, Doc, please don't." But the phone kept ringing and ringing, and after a while I woke part way up and it really was ringing. It was two-forty-nine A.M.

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

He hung up and I began to put clothes on the leaden dummy that was me. The south wing, I thought, and sirens went whooping up Goat Hill. The south wing. That's where X-ray is. That's where the pictures of the boy's insides are on file.

What a curious coincidence, I thought.

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

The south wing of the hospital burned brightly, a very pretty orange color against the night.

I pulled off the road and parked well below the center of activity and started to walk the rest of the way. Patients were being evacuated from the main building. People ran

with things in their hands. Firemen yelled and wrestled with hoses and streams of water arced over the flames. I didn't think they were going to save the south wing. I thought they would be doing well to save the hospital.

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

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

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

I caught her.

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

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

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

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

I shook her, feeling her small arms under my hands, wanting to break them, wanting to torture her because of Doc. "How was Doc killed?" I asked her. "Tell me. Who did it, and how?"

She stared at me. "Doc?" she repeated. "I do not understand." Now she began to struggle. "Let me go! You hurt me."

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

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

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

"Hush," she said. "Listen."

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

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

I dragged her back into the shadows underneath the trees. There was a huge old maple there with a gnarly trunk. We stood behind it, and now I had my arm around her waist and her head pressed back against my shoulder, and my right hand over her mouth.

"Where do you come from?" I asked her, with my mouth close to her ear. "Where is Hrylliannu?"

Her body stiffened. It was a nice body, very much like the boy's in some ways, delicately made but strong, and with superb coordination. In other ways it was not like the boy's at all. I was thinking of her as an enemy, but it was impossible not to think of her as a woman, too.

She said, her voice muffled under my hand, "Where did you hear that name?"

"Never mind," I said. "Just answer me."

She wouldn't.

"Where do you live now? Somewhere near here?"

She only strained to get away.

"All right," I said. "We'll go now. Back up to the hospital. The sheriff wants to see you."

I started to drag her away up the hill, and then two men came into the light of the clearing.

One was slender and curlyheaded in that particular way I was beginning to know. He looked pleasantly excited, pleasantly stimulated, as though by a game in which he found enjoyment. His eyes picked up the fitful glow of the fire and shone eerily, as the girl's had.

The other man was a perfectly ordinary type. He was dark and heavy-set and tall, and his khaki pants sagged under his belly. His face was neither excited nor pleasant. It was obvious that to him this was no game. He carried a heavy automatic, and I thought he was perfectly prepared to use it.

I was afraid of him.

"...to send a dame, anyway," he was saying.

"That's your prejudice speaking," said the curly-haired man. "She was the only one to send." He gestured toward the flames. "How can you doubt it?"

"She's been caught."

"Not Vadi." He began to call softly. "Vadi? Vadi!"

The girl's lips moved under my hand. I bent to hear, and she said in the faint ghost of a whisper:

"If you want to live, let me go to them."

The big dark man said grimly, "She's been caught. We'd better do something about it, and do it quick."

He started across the clearing.

The girl's lips shaped one word. "Please!"

The dark man came with his big gun, and the curly-headed one came a little behind him, walking as a stalking cat walks, soft and springy on its toes. If I dragged the girl away they would hear me. If I stayed where I was, they would walk right onto me. Either way, I thought, I would pretty surely go to join Doc on the cold marble.

I let the girl go.

She ran out toward them. I stood stark and frozen behind the maple tree, waiting for her to turn and say the word that would betray me.

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

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

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

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

"I'm sure," I said. I could still, if I shut my eyes and thought about it, *feel* the girl's body in my arms. "Her name was Vadi. Now I want to talk to Croft."

Croft was the Fire Marshal. I watched the boys pouring water on what was left of the south wing, which was nothing more than a pile of hot embers with some pieces of wall standing near it. Jim Bossert joined us, looking exhausted and grimy. He was too tired even to curse. He just wailed a little about the loss of all his fine X-ray equipment, and all his records.

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

"Girl?" said Bossert, staring.

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

"By the grace of God," said Bossert, "no."

"How did it start?"

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

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

Bossert said, "What kind of a girl? A lunatic?"

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

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

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

Ed Berts swore, his face twisted between unbelief and worry. Then Croft came up. Ed asked him, "What started the fire?"

Croft shook his head. "Too early to tell yet. Have to wait till things cool down. But I'll lay you any odds you like it was started by chemicals."

"Deliberately?"

"Could be," said Croft, and went away again.

I looked at the sky. It was almost dawn, that beautiful bleak time when the sky is neither dark nor light and the mountains are cut from black cardboard, without perspective. I said, "I'm going up to the Tates'. I'm worried about the boy."

"All right," said Ed quickly, "I'll go with you. In my car. We'll stop in town and pick up Jud. I want him to see that TV."

"The hell with Jud," I said. "I'm in a hurry." And suddenly I was. Suddenly I was terribly afraid for that grave-faced child who was obviously the unwitting key to some secret that was important enough to justify arson and murder to those who wanted to keep it.

Ed hung right behind me. He practically shoved me into his car. It had COUNTY SHERIFF painted on its door, and I thought of Doc's station wagon with its COUNTY HEALTH SERVICE, and it seemed like a poor omen but there was nothing I could do about it.

There was nothing I could do about stopping for Jud Spofford, either. Ed went in

and routed him out of bed, taking the car keys with him. I sat smoking and looking up at Tunkhannock Ridge, watching it brighten to gold at the crest as the sun came up. Finally Jud came out grumbling and climbed in the back seat, a tall lanky young fellow in a blue coverall with *Newhale Electric Appliance Co.* embroidered in red on the pocket. His little wife watched from the doorway, holding her pink wrapper together.

We went away up Tunkhannock Ridge. There was still a black smudge of smoke above the hospital on Goat Hill. The sky over Buckhorn Mountain was clear and bright.

Sally Tate and her boy were already gone.

Mrs. Tate told us about it, while we sat on the lumpy sofa in the living room and the fat old dog watched us through the screen door, growling. Sally's sisters, or some of them at least, were in the kitchen listening.

"Never was so surprised at anything in my life," said Mrs. Tate. "Pa had just gone out to the barn with Harry and J.P. — them's the two oldest girls' husbands, you know. I and the girls was washing up after breakfast, and I heard this car drive in. Sure enough it was him. I went out on the stoop —"

"What kind of a car?" asked Ed.

"Same panel truck he was driving before, only the name was painted out. Kind of a dirty blue all over. 'Well,' I says, 'I never expected to see *your* face around here again!', I says, and he says —"

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

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

She shook her head, smoothing her hair with knotted fingers. "I just don't know," she said. "I just don't know."

"What?" I asked her. "Was there something wrong?" I knew there was, but I wanted to hear what she had to say.

"Nothing you could lay your hand to," she said. "And Sally was so happy. She was just fit to burst. And he was real pleasant, real polite to me and Pa. We asked him about all them lies he told, and he said they wasn't lies at all. He said the man he was working for did plan to open a store in Newhale, but then he got sick and the plan fell through. He said his name was Bill Jones, and showed us some cards and things to prove it. And he said Sally just misunderstood the name of the place he come from because he give it

the old Spanish pronunciation."

"What did he say it was really?" Ed asked, and she looked surprised.

"Now I think of it, I guess he didn't say."

"Well, where's he going to live, with Sally?"

"He isn't settled yet. He's got two or three prospects, different places. She was so happy," said Mrs. Tate, "and I ought to be too, 'cause Lord knows I've wished often enough he would come back and get that peaky brat of his, and Sally too if she was minded. But I ain't. I ain't happy at all, and I don't know why."

"Natural reaction," said Ed Betts heartily. "You miss your daughter, and probably the boy too, more than you know."

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

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

Jud, who had been sitting stiff and uncomfortable during the talking, jumped up and practically ran to the set. Mrs. Tate started to protest, but Ed said firmly, "This may be important, Mrs. Tate. Jud's a good serviceman, he won't upset anything."

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

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

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

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

"Damnedest thing," said Jud. "Look at that wiring. He's loused up the circuits, all right—and there's a couple tubes in there like I never saw before." He was getting excited. "I'd have to tear the whole thing down to see what he's really done, but somehow he's boosted the power and the sensitivity way up. The guy must be a wizard."

Mrs. Tate said loudly, "You ain't tearing anything down, young man. You just leave it like it is."

I said, "What about that dingus on the side?"

"Frankly," said Jud, "that stops me. It's got a wire to it, but it don't seem to hitch up anywhere in the set."

He turned the set off and began to poke gently around. "See here, this little hairline wire that comes down and bypasses the whole chassis? It cuts in here on the live line, so it draws power whether the set's on or not. But I don't see how it can have anything to do with the set operating."

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

"Okay," said Jud, ignoring Mrs. Tate's cry of protest. He reached in and for the first time actually touched the enigmatic little unit, feeling for what held it to the side of the case.

There was a sharp pop and a small bright flare, and Jud leaped back with a howl. He put his scorched fingers in his mouth and his eyes watered. Mrs. Tate cried, "Now, you've done it, you've ruined my TV!" There was a smell of burning on the air. The girls came running out of the kitchen and the old dog barked and clawed the screen.

One of the girls said, "What happened?"

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

There was a drift of something gray – ash or dust – and that was all. Even the hairline wire was consumed.

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

Ed grunted. He looked puzzled and irresolute. "Hurt the set any?" he asked.

"Dunno," said Jud, and turned it on.

It ran as perfectly as before.

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

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

I said we might as well. We climbed back into Ed's car and started – the second time for me – back down Tunkhannock Ridge.

Jud was still sucking his fingers. He wondered out loud if the funny-looking tubes in the set would explode the same way if you touched them, and I said probably. Ed didn't say anything. He was frowning deeply. I asked him what he thought about it.

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

Jud offered the opinion that the man was a nut. "One of these crazy guys like in the movies, always inventing things that make trouble. But I sure would like to know what

he done to that set."

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

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

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

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

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

I had started with a map of the area on my desk. Not just Newhale, but the whole area, with Buckhorn Mountain roughly at the center and showing the hills and valleys around its northern periphery. By five o'clock the map showed a series of red pencil dots. If you connected them together with a line they formed a sprawling, irregular, but unbroken circle drawn around Buckhorn, never exceeding a certain number of miles in distance from the peak.

Every pencil dot represented a television set that had within the last three years been serviced by a red-haired man — for free.

I looked at the map for a long time, and then I went out in the yard and looked up at Buckhorn. It seemed to me to stand very high, higher than I remembered. From flank to crest the green unbroken forest covered it. In the winter-time men hunted there for bear and deer, and I knew there were a few hunting lodges, hardly more than shacks, on its lower slopes. These were not used in summer, and apart from the hunters no one ever bothered to climb those almost perpendicular sides, hanging onto the trees as onto a ladder, up to the fog and storm that plagued the summit.

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

broad daylight. I went to bed.

The alarm woke me at eleven-thirty. I did not turn on any lamps. I don't know why, except that I still had that naked feeling of being watched. Light enough came to me anyhow from the intermittent sulfurous flares in the sky. There was a low mutter of thunder in the west. I put the automatic in a shoulder holster under my shirt, not to hide it but because it was out of the way there. When I was dressed I went downstairs and out the back door, heading for the garage.

It was quiet, the way a little town can be quiet at night. I could hear the stream going over the stones, and the million little songs of the crickets, the peepers, and the frogs were almost stridently loud.

Then they began to stop. The frogs first, in the marshy places beside the creek. Then the crickets and the peepers. I stopped too, in the black dark beside a clump of rhododendrons my mother used to be almost tiresomely proud of. My skin turned cold and the hair bristled on the back of my neck and I heard soft padding footsteps and softer breathing on the heavy air.

Two people had waded the creek and come up into my yard.

There was a flare and a grumble in the sky and I saw them close by, standing on the grass, looking up at the unlighted house.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Here," I said. "Have my handkerchief."

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

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

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

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

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

"Who is he?"

"My brother's partner." She glanced toward Buck-horn and the light went out of her eyes. Her head became bowed.

"Your brother sent you to kill me?"

"He didn't say —"

"But you knew."

"When Marlin came with me I knew."

She had begun to tremble.

"Do you make a career of arson?"

"Arson? Oh. The setting of fires. No. I am a chemist. And I wish I —"

She caught herself fiercely and would not finish.

I said, "Those things are listening devices, then."

She had to ask me what I meant. Her mind was busy with some thorny darkness of its own.

"The little gadgets your brother put in the television sets," I said. "I figured that's what they were when I saw how they were placed. A string of sentry posts all around the

center of operations, little ears to catch every word of gossip, because if any of the local people get suspicious they're bound to talk about it and so give warning. He heard my calls this afternoon, didn't he? That's why he sent you. And he heard Doc and me at the 'Tates'. That's why — "

Moving with that uncanny swiftness of hers, she rose and ran away from me. It was like before. She ran fast, and I ran after her. She went splashing through the shallow stream and the water flew back against me, wetting my face, spattering my clothes. On the far bank I caught her, as I had before. But this time she fought me.

"Let me go," she said, and beat her hands against me. "Do you know what I've done for you? I've asked for the knife for myself. Let me go, you clumsy fool — "

I held her tighter. Her soft curls pressed against my cheek. Her body strove against me, and it was not soft but excitingly strong.

"— before I regret it," she said, and I kissed her.

It was strange, what happened then.

I've kissed girls who didn't want to be kissed, and I've kissed girls who didn't like me particularly. I've kissed a couple of the touch-me-not kind who shrink from any sort of physical contact. I've had my face slapped. But I never had a girl *withdraw* from me the way she did. It was like something closing, folding up, shutting every avenue of contact, and yet she never moved. In fact she had stopped moving entirely. She just stood with my arms around her and my lips on hers, and kind of a coldness came out of her, a rejection so total I couldn't even get mad. I was shocked, and very much puzzled, but you can't get mad at a thing that isn't personal. This was too deep for that. And suddenly I thought of the boy.

"A different breed," I said. "Worlds apart. Is that it?"

"Yes," she said quietly. "Worlds apart."

And the coldness spread through me. I stood on the bank of the stream in the warm night, the bank where I had stood ten thousand times before, boy and man, and saw the strange shining of her eyes, and I was more than cold, I was afraid. I stepped back away from her, still holding her but in a different way.

"It wasn't like this," I said, "between your brother and Sally Tate."

The girl-thing said, "My brother Arnek is a corrupt man."

"Vadi," I said. "Where is Hrylliannu?"

The girl-thing looked past my shoulder and said, "Marlin is running away."

I looked too, and it was so. The big man's head was harder than I had thought. He had got up, and I saw him blundering rapidly away along the side of my house, heading for the street.

"Well," I said, "he's gone now. You must have come in a car, didn't you?"

She nodded.

"Good," I said. "It won't be challenged as soon as mine. We'll take it."

"Where are you going?" she asked, catching her breath sharply.

"Where I was going when you stopped me. Up Buckhorn."

"Oh no," she said. "No, you can't, you mustn't." She was human again, and afraid. "I saved your life, isn't that enough for you? You'll never live to climb Buckhorn and neither will I if —"

"Did Sally and the boy live to climb it?" I asked her, and she hung her head and nodded. "Then you'll see to it that we do."

"But tonight!" she said in a panic. "Not tonight!"

"What's so special about tonight?" She didn't answer, and I shook her. "What's going on up there?"

She didn't answer that, either. She said with sudden fierceness, "All right, then, come on. Climb Buckhorn and see. And when you're dying, remember that I tried to stop you."

She didn't speak again. She led me without protest to the car parked on the dirt road. It was a panel truck. By day it would have been a dirty blue.

"He's going to kill them, isn't he?" I said. "He killed Doc. You admit he wants to kill me. What's going to save Sally and the child?"

"You torture me," she said. "This is a world of torture. Go on. Go on, and get it done."

I started the panel truck. Like the television set, it worked better than it had any business to. It fled with uncanny strength and swiftness over the dirt roads toward Buckhorn, soft-sprung as a cloud, silent as a dream.

"It's a pity," I said. "Your brother has considerable genius."

She laughed. A bitter laugh. "He couldn't pass his second year of technical training. That's why he's here."

She looked at Buckhorn as though she hated the mountain, and Buckhorn, invisible behind a curtain of storm, answered her look with a sullen curse, spoken in thunder.

I stopped at the last gas station on the road and honked the owner out of bed and told him to call Sheriff Betts and tell him where I'd gone. I didn't dare do it myself for fear Vadi would get away from me. The man was very resentful about being waked up. I hoped he would not take out his resentment by forgetting to call.

"You're pretty close to Buckhorn," I told him. "The neck you save may be your own."

I left him to ponder that, racing on toward the dark mountain in that damned queer

car that made me feel like a character in one of my own bad dreams, with the girl beside me – the damned queer girl who was not quite human.

The road dropped behind us. We began to climb the knees of the mountain. Vadi told me where to turn, and the road became a track, and the track ended in the thick woods beside a rickety little lodge the size of a piano-box, with a garage behind it. The garage only looked rickety. The headlights showed up new and sturdy timbers on the inside.

I cut the motor and the lights and reached for the handbrake. Vadi must have been set on a hair-trigger waiting for that moment. I heard her move and there was a snap as though she had pulled something from a clip underneath the dashboard. The door on her side banged open.

I shouted to her to stop and sprang out of the truck to catch her. But she was already out of the garage, and she was waiting for me. Just as I came through the door there was a bolt of lightning, bright green, small and close at hand. I saw it coming. I saw her dimly in the backflash and knew that in some way she had made the lightning with a thing she held in her hand. Then it hit me and that was all.

When I came to I was all alone and the rain was falling on me just the way it had on Doc...

But I wasn't dead.

I crawled around and finally managed to get up, feeling heavy and disjointed. My legs and arms flopped around as though the coordinating controls had been burned out. I stood inside the garage out of the rain, rubbing my numb joints and thinking.

All the steam had gone out of me. I didn't want to climb Buckhorn Mountain any more. It looked awfully black up there, and awfully lonesome, and God alone knew what was going on under the veil of cloud and storm that hid it. The lightning flashes – real sky-made lightning – showed me the dripping trees going right up into nothing, with the wind thrashing them, and then the following thunder cracked my eardrums. The rain hissed, and I thought, it's crazy for one man to go up there alone.

Then I thought about Sally Tate and the little redheaded kid, and I thought how Ed Betts might already be up there somewhere, plowing his way through the woods looking for me. I didn't know how long I'd been out.

I made sure I still had my gun, and I did have. I wished I had a drink, but that was hopeless. So I started out. I didn't go straight up the mountain. I figured the girl would have had time to find her brother and give him warning, and that he might be looking for me to come that way. I angled off to the east, where I remembered a ravine that might give me some cover. I'd been up Buckhorn before, but only by daylight, with snow on the ground and a couple of friends with me, and not looking for anything more sinister than a bear.

I climbed the steep flank of the mountain, leaning almost into it, worming and floundering and pulling my way between the trees. The rain fell and soaked me. The

thunder was a monstrous presence, and the lightning was a great torch that somebody kept tossing back and forth so that sometimes you could see every vein of every leaf on the tree you were fighting with, and sometimes it was so dark that you knew the sun and stars hadn't been invented yet. I lost the ravine. I only knew I was still going up. There wasn't any doubt about that. After a while the rain slacked off and almost stopped. In an interval between crashes of thunder I heard voices.

They were thin and far away. I tried to place them, and when I thought I had them pegged I started toward them. The steep pitch of the ground fell away into a dizzying downslope and I was almost running into a sort of long shallow trough, thickly wooded, its bottom hidden from any view at all except one directly overhead. And there were lights in it, or at least a light.

I slowed down and went more carefully, hoping the storm would cover any noise I made.

The voices went on, and now I could hear another sound, the scritch and screech of metal rubbing on metal.

I was on the clearing before I knew it. And it wasn't a clearing at all really, just one of those natural open places where the soil is too thin to support trees and runs to brush instead. It wasn't much more than ten feet across. Almost beside me were a couple of tents so cleverly hidden among the trees that you practically had to fall on them, as I did, to find them at all.

From one of them came the sleepy sobbing of a child. In the small clearing Vadi and Arnek were watching a jointed metal mast build itself up out of a pit in the ground. The top of it was already out of sight in the cloud but it was obviously taller than the trees. The lamp was on the ground beside the pit.

The faces of Vadi and her brother were both angry, both set and obstinate. Perhaps it was their mutual fury that made them seem less human, or more unhuman, than ever, the odd bone-structure of cheek and jaw accentuated, the whole head elongated, the silver-red hair fairly bristling, the copper-colored eyes glinting with that unpleasantly catlike brilliance in the light. They had been quarreling, and they still were, but not in English. Arnek had a look like a rattlesnake.

Vadi, I thought, was frightened. She kept glancing at the tents, and in a minute the big man, Marlin, came out of one of them. He was pressing a small bandage on the side of his head, over his ear. He looked tired and wet and foul-tempered, as though he had not had an easy time getting back to base.

He started right in on Vadi, cursing her because of what she had done.

Arnek said in English, "I didn't ask her to come here, and I'm sending her home tonight."

"That's great," Marlin said. "That's a big help. We'll have to move our base anyway now."

"Maybe not," said Arnek defiantly. He watched the slim mast stretching up and up

with a soft screeking of its joints.

"You're a fool," said Marlin, in a tone of cold and bitter contempt "You started this mess, Arnek. You had to play around with that girl and make a kid to give the show away. Then you pull that half-cocked trick with those guys in the station wagon and you can't even do that right. You kill the one but not the other. And then *she* louses up the only chance we got left. You know how much money we're going to lose? You know how long it'll take us to find a location half as good as this? You know what I ought to do?"

Arnek's voice was sharp, but a shade uncertain. "Oh, stop bitching and get onto those scanners. All we need is another hour and then they can whistle. And there are plenty of mountains."

"Are there," said Marlin, and looked again at Vadi. "And how long do you think she'll keep her mouth shut at *your* end?"

He turned and walked back into the tent. Arnek looked uncertainly at Vadi and then fixed his attention on the mast again. Vadi's face was the color of chalk. She started once toward the tent and Arnek caught her roughly and spoke to her in whatever language they used, and she stopped.

I slid around the back of the tents to the one Marlin was in. There was a humming and whining inside. I got down on my hands and knees and crawled carefully over the wet grass between the tents, toward the front. The mast apparently made its last joint because it stopped and Arnek said something to Vadi and they bent over what seemed to be a sunken control box in the ground. I took my chance and whipped in through the tent flap.

I didn't have long to look around. The space inside was crammed with what seemed to be electronic equipment. Marlin was sitting hunched up on a stool in front of a big panel with a dozen or so little screens on it like miniature television monitors. The screens, I just had time to see, showed an assortment of views of Buckhorn and the surrounding areas, and Marlin was apparently, by remote control, rotating one by one the distant receivers that sent the images to the screens. They must have been remarkably tight-beamed, because they were not much disturbed by static. I knew now how the eye of God had watched Doc and me on Tunkhannock Ridge.

I didn't know yet how the lightning-bolts were hurled, but I was pretty sure Ed Betts would get one if his car showed up on a scanner screen, and who would be the wiser? Poor Ed hit by lightning just like old Doc, and weren't the storms something fierce this summer?

Marlin turned around and saw it wasn't Arnek. He moved faster than I would have thought possible. He scooped up the light stool he was sitting on and threw it at me, leaping sideways himself in a continuation of the same movement. In the second in which I was getting my head out of the way of the stool he pulled a gun. He had had a spare, just as he must have had a car stashed somewhere in or near the town.

He did not quite have time to fire. I shot him twice through the body. He dropped

but I didn't know if he was dead. I kicked the gun out of his hand and jumped to stand flat against the canvas wall beside the front flap, not pressing against it. The canvas was light-proof, and the small lamps over the control panels did not throw shadows.

Arnek did not come in.

After a second or two I got nervous. I could hear him shouting "Marlin! Marlin!" I ran into the narrow space behind the banks of equipment, being extremely careful how I touched anything. I did not see any power leads. It dawned on me that all this stuff had come up out of a pit in the ground like the mast and that the generator must be down there below. The floor wasn't canvas at all, but some dark gray material to which the equipment was bolted.

I got my knife out and started to slit the canvas at the back. And suddenly the inside of the tent was full of green fire. It sparked off every metal thing and jarred the gun out of my hand. It nearly knocked me out again. But I was shielded by the equipment from the full force of the shock. It flicked off again almost at once. I got the canvas cut and squirmed through it and then I put three or four shots at random into the back of the equipment just for luck.

Then I raced around the front and caught Arnek just as he was deciding not to enter the tent after all.

He had a weapon in his hand like the one Vadi had used on me. I said, "Drop it," and he hesitated, looking evil and upset. "Drop it!" I told him again, and he dropped it. "Now stand away," I said. "Walk out toward your sister, real slow, one step at a time."

He walked, and I picked up the weapon.

"Good," I said, "Now we can all relax." And I called Sally Tate, telling her it was safe to come out now.

All this time since I was where I could see her Vadi had stood with one hand over her mouth, looking up into the mist.

Sally Tate came out of the other tent. She was carrying the boy, and both their faces were pale and puffy-eyed and streaked with tears.

"It's all right now," I said. "You can go —" I was going to say "home," and then there was a sound in the sky that was not wind or thunder, that was hardly a sound at all, but more of a great sigh. The air pressed down on me and the grass was flattened as by a down-driven wind and all the branches of the trees bowed. The mist rolled, boiled, was rent, torn apart, scattered.

Something had come to rest against the top of the mast.

Arnek turned and ran to Vadi and I did not stop him. I moved closer to Sally Tate, standing with her mouth open and her eyes big and staring.

The mast began to contract downward, bringing the thing with it.

I suppose I knew then what the thing was. I just didn't want to admit it. It was

cylindrical and slender, about fifty feet long, with neither wings nor jets. I watched it come slowly and gracefully down, attached by its needle-sharp nose to the magnetic grapple on top of the mast. The mast acted as automatic guide and stabilizer, dropping the ship into a slot between the trees as neatly as you would drop a slice of bread into the slot of a toaster.

And all the time the bitter breath of fear was blowing on me and little things were falling into place in my mind and I realized that I had known the answer for some time and had simply refused to see it.

A port opened in the side of the ship. And as though that was the final symbolic trigger I needed, I got the full impact of what I was seeing. Suddenly the friendly protecting sky seemed to have been torn open above me as the veiling cloud was torn, and through the rent the whole Outside poured in upon me, the black freezing spaces of the galaxy, the blaze and strangeness of a billion billion suns. I shrank beneath that vastness. I was nothing, nobody, an infinitesimal fleck in a cosmos too huge to be borne. The stars had come too close. I wanted to get down and howl and grovel like a dog.

No wonder Arnek and Vadi and the boy were queer. They were not mutants – they were not even that Earthly. They came from another world.

A little ladder had extended itself downward from the port. A man came briskly to the ground and spoke to Arnek. He resembled Arnek except that he was dressed in a single close-fitting garment of some dark stuff. Arnek pointed to me, speaking rapidly. The man turned and looked at me, his body expressing alarm. I felt childish and silly standing there with my little gun. Lone man of Earth at an incredible Thermopylae, saying, "You shall not land."

All the time Arnek and the stranger had been talking there had been other activities around the ship. A hatch in the stern had opened and now from both hatches people began to come out helter-skelter as though haste was the chief necessity. There were men and women both. They all looked human. Slightly odd, a little queer perhaps, but human. They were different types, different colors, sizes, and builds, but they all fitted in somewhere pretty close to Earthly types. They all looked a little excited, a little scared, considerably bewildered by the place in which they found themselves. Some of the women were crying. There were maybe twenty people in all.

I understood then exactly what Arnek and Marlin had been up to and it seemed so grotesquely familiar and prosaic that I began to laugh.

"Wetbacks," I said aloud. "That's what you're doing, smuggling aliens."

Aliens. Yes indeed.

It did not seem so funny when I thought about it.

The stranger turned around and shouted an order. The men and women stopped, some of them still on the ladders. More voices shouted. Then those on the ladders were shoved aside and eight men in uniform jumped out, with weapons in their hands.

Sally Tate let go one wild wavering shriek. The child fell out of her arms. He sat on

the wet ground with the wind knocked out of him so he couldn't cry, blinking in shocked dismay. Sally tottered. Her big strong healthy body was sunken and collapsed, every muscle slack. She turned and made a staggering lunge for the tent and fell partly in through the doorway, crawled the rest of the way like a hurt dog going under a porch, and lay there with the flap pulled over her head.

I didn't blame her. I don't even know what obscure force kept me from joining her.

Of the eight men, five were not human. Two of them not even remotely.

I can't describe them. I can't remember what they looked like, not clearly.

Let's be honest. I don't *want* to remember.

I suppose if you were used to things like that all your life it would be different. You wouldn't think anything about it.

I was not used to things like that. I knew that I never would be, not if we ourselves achieved space-flight tomorrow. I'm too old, too set in the familiar pattern of existence that has never been broken for man since the beginning. Perhaps others are more resilient. They're welcome to it.

I picked up the boy and ran.

It came on again to rain. I ran down Buckhorn Mountain, carrying the boy in my arms. And the green lightning came after us, hunting us along the precipitous slope.

The boy had got his breath back. He asked me why we had to die. I said never mind, and kept on running.

I fell with him and rolled to the bottom of a deep gully. We were shaken. We lay in the dripping brush looking up at the lightning lancing across the night above us. After a while it stopped. I picked him up again and crept silently along the gully and onto the slope below.

And nearly got shot by Ed Betts and a scratch posse, picking their cautious way up the mountainside.

One of the men took the child out of my arms. I hung onto Ed and said inanely, "They're landing a load of wetbacks."

"Up there?"

"They've got a ship," I told him. "They're aliens, Ed. Real aliens."

I began to laugh again. I didn't want to. It just seemed such a hellishly clever play on words that I couldn't help it.

Fire bloomed suddenly in the night above us. A second later the noise of the explosion reached us.

I stopped laughing. "They must be destroying their installations. Pulling out. Marlin

said they'd have to. Christ. And Sally is still up there."

I ran back up the mountain, clambering bearlike through the trees. The others followed.

There was one more explosion. Then I came back to the edge of the clearing. Ed was close behind me. I don't think any of the others were really close enough to see. There was a lot of smoke. The tents were gone. Smoking trees were slowly toppling in around the edges of a big raw crater in the ground. There was no trace of the instruments that had been in the tents.

The ship was still there. The crew, human and unhuman, were shoving the last of the passengers back into the ship. There was an altercation going on beside the forward port.

Vadi had her arm around Sally Tate. She was obviously trying to get her aboard. I thought I understood then why Sally and the boy were still alive. Probably Vadi had been insisting that her brother send them along where they wouldn't be any danger to him, and he hadn't quite had the nerve to cross her. He was looking uncertain now, and it was the officer who was making the refusal. Sally herself seemed to be in a stupor.

Vadi thrust past the officer and led Sally toward the ladder. And Sally went, willingly. I like to remember that, now, when she's gone.

I think—I hope—that Sally's all right out there. She was younger and simpler than I, she could adapt. I think she loved Bill Jones—Arnek—enough to leave her child, leave her family, leave her world, and still be happy near him.

Ed and I started to run across the clearing. Ed had not said a word. But his face was something to look at.

They saw us coming but they didn't bother to shoot at us. They seemed in a tremendous hurry. Vadi screamed something, and I was sure it was in English and a warning to me, but I couldn't understand it. Then she was gone inside the ship and so were Arnek and Sally and the officer and crewmen, and the ladders went up and the ports shut.

The mooring mast began to rise and so did the ship, and the trees were bent with the force of its rising.

I knew then what the warning was.

I grabbed Ed bodily and hauled him back. The ship didn't have to be very high. Only above the trees. I hauled him as far as blind instinct told me I could go and then I yelled, "Get down! Get down!" to everybody within earshot and made frantic motions. It all took possibly thirty seconds. Ed understood and we flopped and hugged the ground.

The mast blew.

Dirt, rocks, pieces of tree rained down around us. The shock wave pounded our

ears. A few moments later, derisive and powerful, a long thin whistling scream tore upward across the sky, and faded, and was gone.

We got up after a while and collected the muddy and startled posse and went to look at what was left of the clearing. There was nothing. Sally Tate was gone as though she had never existed. There was no shred of anything left to prove that what Ed and I had seen was real.

We made up a story, about a big helicopter and an alien racket. It wasn't too good a story, but it was better than the truth. Afterward, when we were calmer, Ed and I tried to figure it out for ourselves. How it was done, I mean, and why.

The "how" was easy enough, given the necessary technology. Pick a remote but not too inconveniently isolated spot, like the top of Buckhorn Mountain. Set up your secret installation—a simple one, so compact and carefully hidden that hunters could walk right over it and never guess it was there when it was not in use. On nights when conditions are right—that is to say, when the possibility of being observed is nearest to zero—run your cargo in and land it. We figured that the ship we saw wasn't big enough to transport that many people very far. We figured it was a landing-craft, ferrying the passengers down from a much bigger mothership way beyond the sky.

A star-ship. It sounded ridiculous when you said it. But we had seen the members of the crew. It is generally acknowledged by nearly everybody now that there is no intelligent life of any terrestrial sort on the other planets of our own system. So they had to come from farther out.

Why? That was a tougher one to solve. We could only guess at it.

"There must be a hell of a big civilization out there," said Ed. "to build the ships and travel in them. They obviously know we're here."

Uneasy thought.

"Why haven't they spoken to us?" he wondered. "Let us in on it too."

"I suppose," I said, "they're waiting for us to develop space-flight on our own. Maybe it's a kind of test you have to pass to get in on their civilization. Or maybe they figure we're so backward they don't want to have anything to do with us, all our wars and all. Or both. Pick your own reason."

"Okay," said Ed. "But why dump their people on us like that? And how come Marlin, one of our own people, was in on it?"

"There *are* Earthmen who'll do anything for money," I said. "Like Marlin. It'd not be too hard to contact men like him, use them as local agents."

"As for why they dump their people on us," I went on, "it probably isn't legal, where they came from. Remember what Marlin said about Vadi? *How long will she keep her mouth shut at your end?* My guess is her brother was a failure at home and got into a dirty racket, and she was trying to get him out of it. There must be other worlds like Earth, too, or the racket wouldn't be financially sound. Not enough volume."

"But the wetbacks," Ed said. "Were they failures, too? People who couldn't compete in the kind of a society they must have? And how the hell many do you suppose they've run in on us already?"

I've wondered about that myself. How many aliens have Marlin, and probably others like him, taken off the star-boats and dressed and instructed and furnished with false papers, in return doubtless for all the valuables the poor devils had? How many of the people you see around you every day, the anonymous people that just look a little odd somehow, the people about whom you think briefly that they don't even look human – the queer ones you notice and then forget – how many of them *aren't* human at all in the sense that we understand that word?

Like the boy.

Sally Tate's family obviously didn't want him back. So I had myself appointed his legal guardian, and we get on fine together. He's a bright kid. His father may have been a failure in his own world, but on ours the half-bred child has an I.Q. that would frighten you. He's also a good youngster. I think he takes after his aunt.

I've thought of getting married since then, just to make a better home for the boy, and to fill up a void in my own life I'm beginning to feel. But I haven't quite done it yet. I keep thinking maybe Vadi will come back some day, walking with swift grace down the side of Buckhorn Mountain. I do not think it is likely, but I can't quite put it out of my mind. I remember the cold revulsion that there was between us, and then I wonder if that feeling would go on, or whether you couldn't get used to that idea of differentness in time.

The trouble is, I guess, that Vadi kind of spoiled me for the general run of women.

I wonder what her life is like in Hrylliannu, and where it is. Sometimes on the bitter frosty nights when the sky is diamond-clear and the Milky Way glitters like the mouth of hell across it, I look up at the stars and wonder which one is hers. And old Buckhorn sits black and silent in the north, and the deep wounds on his shoulder are healing into grassy scars. He says nothing. Even the thunder now has a hollow sound. It is merely thunder.

But, as Arnek said, there are plenty of mountains.

MNQ

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