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By WILTON G. BEGGS

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*After 25 years the man-boy returned, god-like, with his goddess, to show the hags who were his daughters how well he had adjusted. But the hags knew all about . . .*

## ADJUSTMENT

NIGHT rain hammered the only inhabited building in the vast, ruined metropolis. Since the first massive slave hunts the cities of Earth had slept. Except for the glow of a fireplace a homemade candle lit the great room in which Lola and Nan sat. Howls lengthened, and Nan peered up from her needle.

"Soon. Soon, my dears."

Lola pressed a hand to her blackened teeth, and smiled. Nan dropped a ball of half-rottened thread, the needle, and a crocheted doily into a basket. She trembled impatiently, her wasted body shadowing a wall shaggy with paper. Knobby fingers wandered a ravaged face.

"When he led the Great Ones into the shelters, what was Mother to do?" Lola asked, expecting no answer. "Not our safety from

the germs, nor the chains, but adjustment was his bribe."

Lola stroked her ragged skirt tenderly, remembering how they had hidden long ago, living under debris until the prisoners departed for Zorahu. Nan prized at the logs with a poker. The sagging roof roared with rain. Howls filtered throughout the bare, ancient mansion.

"Love has its adjustments also," Nan jested. "Her love for him lives. We have our duty to that love."

They laughed wildly. At length, in pain and loneliness, they sang the songs composed during many sequestered nights. Rhythmically and by rote they chanted of continents sowed with plagues unspeakable. They crooned of survivors, and traitors, and the enslavement of a world.

WHEN the songs were finished they unfastened the knot of hair at the back of their necks. They shook their heads with sorrow. Greasy gray waves fell below their shoulders.

"Souls be bartered," Nan murmured in the fashion of long habit. "The remnant of his people he sold."

"The old to the sacrifice," Lola counted sadly. "To the celebrations and the triumphs and the abattoirs of Zorahu. But the pretty, the clean-limbed, the

young! Death is slow for such as they."

The howling faded like a phantom on the gale. A pounding began. Nan held the candle aloft with a quivering hand. The sound grew louder. They limped into a hall hung with crystal chandeliers. Faded dresses swept the dust marring a marble floor.

"I offer you adjustment," a voice called. "Rejoice! I shall take you to glorious Zorahu, under gracious suns."

Lola fumbled with a rusted latch. Rain flared into the hall, billowing tenuously about the wreck of a staircase. A handsome youth crossed the threshold. Slim and straight and tall, he wore streaming robes of elaborate richness. A golden girl followed him. She recoiled from Lola and Nan.

"Great One!" Lola wailed, as the boy sprang forward to embrace her. "Who are you? I am juiceless, unfit for harem or brothel!"

Candle tallow pattered the dust. "The webs are manifold," Nan gasped. "Our father returns a stripling."

"Know you not our science?" The golden girl's accents were harsh and arrogant. "Beasts, all portals are open, all things possible to citizens, be they Zorahuborn, or aliens adjusted to the empire."

Her bracelets jingling she would have struck Lola then for pleasure, but the boy stayed the slender arm. His flawless face was clouded. Tears fell from limpid eyes.

"Pity a man's misfortune, my daughters. On Zorahu I possess concubines beyond number, but my loins deny me a son to carry forth my rising name. The germ raids dried my fruitfulness beyond a restoration. So be it, you remain my flesh. The Council is kind: physicians shall make you beautiful. Husbands you shall have for my sake, and my loyal line will not perish from the Galaxy."

Lola and Nan bowed in reverence. Thrice their palsied foreheads knocked the floor.

"A messenger informed us of your coming, my father," Lola said humbly. "We did not think you knew we lived."

LOLA grimaced in fear at memory of the messenger. She and Nan had fallen on their faces when he approached down the tree-grown street. Though the nearest Zorahuite outpost was a thousand miles away, they knew much of the guardsmen stationed there. The Great Ones shunned the crumbling cities, preferring the open areas once farms and woodlands. Bored and restless, each spring confiscating flocks of comely boys and

girl from seed herds wandering Earth, the golden warriors dwelled in compounds with walls like gleaming glass. There they awaited the ships that bore the sex slaves away to Zorahu, heart of the galactic empire.

"Marvels he brought as gifts from you, my father," Nan said wonderingly. "Foodstuffs we had forgotten. Truly, services rendered the masters reap a bountiful harvest."

"I am wet and chilled," the Zorahuite girl said, sneering. "The ground car lent us to enter the city was old, as is everything on this sick ball of mud. The slave wrecked our vehicle many blocks away, and my darling rightfully beat him for his carelessness. That I regret, for the Earthian died while attempting to make repairs. Never have I walked so far, nor amid stranger noise."

Meekly Lola and Nan led the visitors into the baroque room of the fireplace, over fine carpets browned by age. Lola poked the logs, and a burst of sparks showered the marble hearth. The man cast revolted eyes about him. He fluttered a cloth fragrant with perfume.

"Blame your mother, my children." He sighed and sniffed fastidiously. "A poor wife, but I loved the fool. I would have saved her, even after she condemned my surrender of the tun-

nels. No Earth female has intelligence. Zorahu does not buy them for their brains."

His friend tittered. "Man or woman, anyone or anything that cannot adjust to the empire does not survive."

"Exactly," said the former mayor gravely.

The girl wheeled to the blaze and sprayed the fire with her feathery hair. Her robes caressed a lithe body, shaping a figure more rounded and graceful than Nan or Lola had seen since the days of freedom before the first germ raid.

"This lady is Noata," their father said with much pride. "Daughter of Goshi of the Council, and niece to Sher, Lord of Agonu. On her birthdays five hundred males alone are sacrificed to her family's glory. Never, till now, has one of such pure blood loved an Adjusted from Earth."

Noata's perfect teeth gleamed. "My devotion is proved forever by this journey. Adventure I wished, and adventures I have found! Neither the jungles of Agonu, nor the deserts of Megga, are so desolate as this foul planet."

"Fetch food and drink," the man-boy commanded lordly, and his rings glittered in the fire-light. "The best given you, my daughters. Such gifts are nothing, with what you shall have.

At dawn we walk to the edge of the city, there to summon aid from the nearest patrol. But now Noata is weary. She must eat and sleep, for the patriciate of Zorahu is unused to hardship."

WHILE the Great Ones yawned and stretched and spread bright clothing toward the flames, Nan and Lola tapped their foreheads against the floor again. Three times they touched the carpet, then retreated, bowing as they went. When the door was closed they crept down the mirrored hall, but halted, and Lola tiptoed back. She sank timidly toward a keyhole of tarnished brass.

"Animals!" her father spat, fondling his mistress against his naked chest. "Not since I toured the abattoirs have I witnessed such hags, Noata. If they cannot be rejuvenated and adjusted, and bear me male descendants, I must destroy them. This ugliness is not to be endured."

"Beauties you expected?" laughed the lady, as she kissed his silken lips. "I cease to wonder that our warriors believe Earth's cities haunted. The night noise is but the cry of ghosts catching sight of the corpses who remain alive."

Lola went silently down the hall into a cobwebbed kitchen lined with electrical appliances. Weeping, she walked to a board-

ed window, and opened it upon the wind and the darkness and the unseen, empty, endless ruins.

Nan was warming food and boiling liquid upon a wood-burning stove. A candle sputtered beside her. She took powder from a mildewed container high on a shelf, where it had waited many years. She sprinkled two discolored cups.

\* \* \*

Lola and Nan slipped out a back door of the huge house. Protected by a hood of tin a torch fumed in Lola's hand. A knife, tied to a wire, dangled upon Nan's sunken bosom. Rain fell in waves.

They carried something between them. They stumbled with the weight. They moved slowly over rubble, as if through a pleasant dream. Scuffing across a fallen metal gate they went out into a park rank with weeds and scaling statuary. In the middle of the park a mound reared from viscid soil.

They laid the burden down. Lola swung the torch along a side of the protuberance until it rested on a door. An iron rod held it fastened. She slid the bar out, and with Nan's aid pulled the complaining cover open. Howls, and a stench incredible, ascended.

Nan drove the knife into the drugged Noata. They dragged her forward. The lady of Zorahu

tumbled down, down into unfathomable folds of a velvet blackness.

NAN and Lola rose early, moving softly from their bed of rags on the kitchen floor. The rain continued. Low clashes of thunder rolled ponderously along the broken back of the city. They were preparing a meager breakfast when they heard sounds of their father from the hall.

"It is nigh," Lola whispered. "Give him that which he seeks."

Nan donned a coat of blighted mink. Lighting the torch at the stove she limped outside. Her coughing faded into a fanfare of rain.

Gliding with athletic vigor the man entered the kitchen haughtily. Sleep had kneaded his boyish face into that of a godling. His rich robes drifted about him, glowing with a life of their own in the dismal room. When Lola had bowed he seated himself at a splintered mahogany table.

"The child of Gospo is fearless," he boasted, twisting his rings. "Already she explores, despite the superstitions of the guardsmen. She slipped from my arms before I waked." His fair smile faded, and he gave a start as a noise very like a shriek floated somewhere in the rain. "My daughter, what signifies

the sounds among the ruins of Earth? The Council ponders several theories."

Lola did not seem to hear his question. She went slowly to the battered stove and removed a pot from the yellow flame.

"Your gifts are infinite, my father. I had forgotten the taste of coffee."

"Last night," the man said, musing, "I dreamed. The soldiers delight in tales. On lesser looms are nightmares spun."

Lola's thin back was to him as powders fluttered into a cup. She came, and kneeling, put the cup into his supple hands. She watched him thoughtfully while he sipped the liquid. When half was gone she rose, and did not touch her forehead to the floor.

"Now let the veils be sun-dered," she hissed, dull eyes unblinking. "I speak of my mother now, when you were gone in the ship of slaves: she found herself with child. That winter famine roved, and in her search for food she begged of a patrol beyond the city. The warriors of Zorahu value beauty in heinous ways, my father. Later she crawled and babbled, and stuffed her mouth with grass and roots."

The Adjusted shook his elegant head. He listened to another, closer howl. His fingers flashed along a blanching brow.

"Downward she escaped to madness," Lola said softly. "Into

the forsaken tunnels once again. Into the shelters of the days of plague and terror. The betrayed caverns remain, my father, and the germs with which Zorahu conquered have sifted there, and lie hidden, and fester and breed. And work most dreadful miracles."

In the dimness Lola drew herself to her full height. She leaped upward by inches. Passion shone upon her withered face.

The Great One clapped his hands to jeweled ears, and the howling mounted hideously. The cup toppled. Liquid blotted the table in a muddy streak. He swayed, his robes flowing. Making rasping bleats he clawed the air. His chair crashed backwards. He fell to the roughened floor.

"The pits yeast," Lola said shrilly. "The herd women steal to us by night, and are delivered there. Our armies grow, for they who bear among the germs, my father, bring forth vengeance. In time we go against the Zorahuites, and free beloved Earth."

The torch held high in a knobby fist Nan strode triumphantly into the room. Water stained her coat and raveled at the shredded hem. Something bawled behind her, shuddering the very walls with fright.

"Come!" cried Nan and Lola. "Come, O General of the Earth!"

It filled the door from side to side. It stooped to enter, and the smell it brought the house was ghastly to the human mind, but not half so horrible as the Thing itself. It advanced relentlessly, hawkishly. A gruesome nightmare come to life. And there was

no recourse from its all encompassing horror.

"Rejoice, my father," Lola commanded the whimpering wretch upon the floor. "Earth provides for her own survival. This is your adjusted son."

**THE END**

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