

# fantastic

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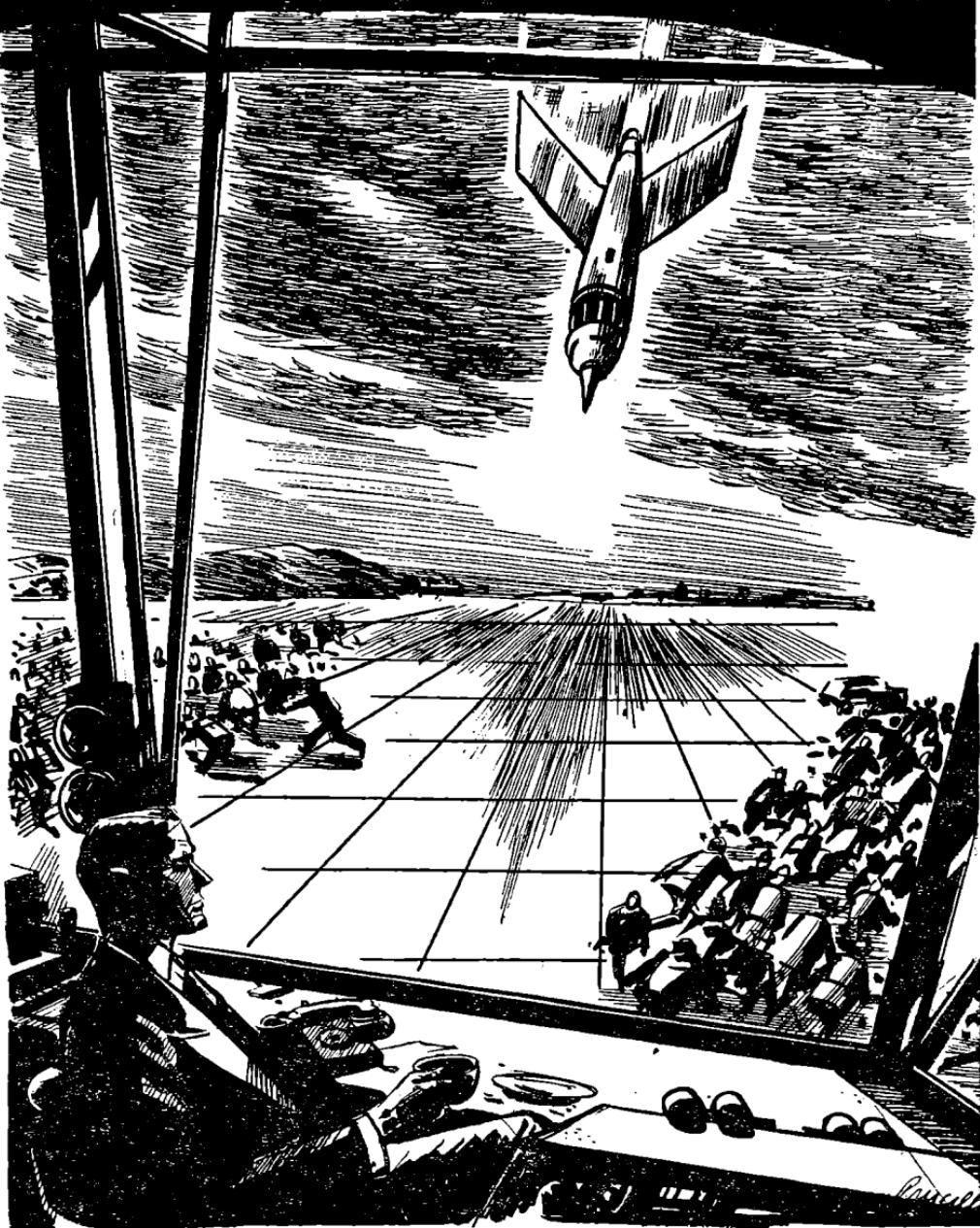
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# BEWARE THE FURY

BY THEODORE STURGEON

*Meet Wolf Reger—traitor. Compared to him Benedict Arnold was a national hero and Judas Iscariot a paragon of virtue. At least that's the way it showed in the Major's notes. . . .*

*But traitors aren't born that way. Something has to happen to them long before they turn against society. That's why, when you dig deep enough, you may find that the word traitor can be one hell of a misnomer. . . .*

**R**EAD it for yourself," said the Major.

She took the sheaf of flimsies from him and for a moment gave him that strange dry gaze. *The woman's in shock*, he thought, and did what he could to put down the

other two memories he had of eyes like that: an injured starling which had died in his hand; his four-year-old niece, the time he struck her, and the long unbearable moment between the impact and her tears.



Mrs. Reger read carefully and slowly.

Department of Defense  
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TOP SECRET

She said, at last, "That is the foulest thing a human being has ever done." Then her mouth slept again.

"I'm glad you agree," he said gratefully. "I was afraid that —"

"I don't think I understand you," she said tonelessly.

"That's what I was afraid of," he said miserably. "You meant the report. I thought you meant Wolf Reger."

She glanced down at the report. "That isn't Wolf. Wolf might be a lot of things . . . things that are . . . hard to understand. But he isn't a traitor." The Major saw her face lifting and turned his head to avoid those hurt eyes. "I think," she said quietly, "that you'd better go, Major, and take those lies with you."

He made no move toward the report. "Mrs. Reger," he suddenly shouted, "do you think I'm enjoying this? Do you think I volunteered for this job?"

"I hadn't thought about you at all."

"Try it," he said bitterly. Then, "Sorry. I'm sorry. This whole thing . . ." He pulled himself together. "I wish I could believe you. But you've got to re-

alize that a man died to make that report and get it back to us. We have no choice but to take it for the truth and act accordingly. What else can we do?"

"Do what you like. But don't ask me to believe things about my husband that just aren't so."

*God, he thought, where did a rat like Reger ever find such a woman?* As gently as he could, he said, "Very well, Mrs. Reger. You needn't believe it. . . . May I tell you exactly what my assignment is?"

She did not answer.

He said, "I was detailed to get from you everything which might have any bearing on — on this report." He pointed. "Whether I believe it or not is immaterial. Perhaps if you can tell me enough about the man, I won't believe it. Perhaps," he said, knowing his voice lacked conviction, "we can clear him. Wouldn't you help clear him?"

"He doesn't need clearing," she said impatiently. Then, when he made a tiny, exasperated sound, she said, "I'll help you. What do you want to know?"

All the relief, all the gratitude, and all the continuing distaste for this kind of work were in his voice. "Everything. Why he might do a thing like that." And, quickly, "Or why he wouldn't."

She told him about Wolf Reger, the most hated man on earth.

*Beware the fury of a patient man.*

Wolf Reger had so many talents that they were past enumerating. With them he had two characteristics which were extreme. One was defenselessness. The other was an explosive anger which struck without warning, even to Reger himself.

His defenselessness sprang from his excess of ability. When blocked, it was all too easy for him to excel in some other field. It was hard to make him care much for anything. Rob him, turn him, use him — it didn't matter. In a day, a week, he could find something better. For this he was robbed, and turned, and used.

His anger was his only terror. Perhaps this was innate; more likely it was the result of his guardian's cold theory of discipline, and a conviction that anger is a destructive habit and must be crushed the instant it shows itself. When he was two, when he was three, and twice when he was five, Wolf Reger was knocked unconscious by single, instant blows when he showed anger. Direct punishment was never necessary again.

When he was eight he was chasing another boy — it was fun; they ran and laughed and dodged through the boy's large old house. And at the very peak of hilarity, the other boy ran outside and slammed the french doors in Wolf's face and stood

grinning through the glass. Wolf instantly hit the face with his fist. The double-thick glass shattered. Wolf severed two tendons and an artery in his wrist, and the other boy fell gasping, blood from his carotid spurting between his futile fingers. The boy was saved, but the effect on Wolf was worse than if he had died.

He never ran and shouted again. He lived every moment of the next four years under the pressure of his own will, holding down what he felt was an internal devil, analyzing every situation he met for the most remote possibility of its coming to life again.

When he was twelve he met a situation he could not avoid. He was in his second year of high-school then, and every day for three weeks a bulky sophomore twice his size would catch him on his way from English to Geometry II, wrap a thick arm around his neck, and grind a set of knuckles into his scalp. Wolf took it and took it, and one day he tore himself free and struck. He was small and thin, and the chances are that the surprise of the attack was more effective than its power. Their legs were entangled and the bigger boy was off balance. He hit the tile floor with his head and lay quite still with his lips white and blood trickling from his ear. For six weeks they did not know if he would live or not. Wolf was ex-

elled from school the day it happened, and never went to another. From that point on he never dared be angry.

It was easy to hate Wolf Reger. He surpassed anyone he worked with and was disliked for it. He retreated from anyone who wanted what he had, and was despised for it.

He had two great successes — one a chemical process and one an airfoil design. They taught him enough about fame to frighten him away from it. Fame meant people, meetings, associates. After that he let others take the credit for the work he did, and if he hated them, he dared not show it.

At thirty he was married.

"Why?"

The question hung offensively in the air between them for an appreciable time before the Major realized that he had spoken it aloud and incredulously.

She said, carefully, "Major, what have you in your notebook so far?"

He looked down at the neat rows of symbols. "A few facts. A few conjectures."

With an accuracy that shook him in his chair, she said coldly, "You have him down as a warped little genius with every reason to hate humanity. If I weren't sure of that, I wouldn't go on with this. Major," she said suddenly in a different voice, "suppose I

told you that I was walking down the street and a man I had never seen before suddenly roared at me, leapt on my back, knocked me down, beat me and rolled me in the gutter. Suppose you had fifty eye-witnesses who would swear it happened. What would you think of the man?"

He looked at her sleek hair, her strong, obedient features. Despite himself he felt a quixotic anger toward her attacker, even in hypothesis. "Isn't it obvious? The man would have to be a drunk, a psychopath. At the very least he would have to be deluded, think you were someone else. Even if he did, only a real skunk would do a thing like that to a woman." He suddenly realized how easily she had pulled him away from his subject, and was annoyed. "What has this to do —"

"I hope you'll soon see," she said thoughtfully. Then, "You wanted to know why he married me."

*The army wants to know that, he corrected silently. I'd like to know why you married him.*

She committed suicide.

Relentlessly she told the Major why, and he put his pencil down until she had finished with that part of the story. This was a report on Reger, not on his wife. Her reasons were good, at the time, and they constituted a tale of disillusion and defeat which

has been, and will be, told again and again.

She stumbled out into the desert and walked until she dropped; until she was sure there could be no rescue; until she had barely strength to lift the phial and drink its contents. She regained consciousness eight months later, in civilian married quarters at Space Base Two. She had been dead twice.

It was a long time before she found out what had happened. Reger, who would not permit himself to move about among people, took his exercise at night, and found her.

How he saved her, no one but Reger could know. He knew she was drugged or poisoned, and exhausted. He found the right medication to keep her from slipping further away, but for weeks he could not bring her back.

Her autonomic nervous system was damaged. When she began to convalesce, he started drug therapy.

And still he kept his job, and no one knew.

And then one day there was a knock on his door. One room and bath; to open the door was to open the whole room to an outsider. He ignored the knock and it came again, and then again, timidly but insistently. He extrapolated, as always, and disliked his conclusion. A woman in his bachelor quarters created a situa-

tion which could only mean people and people, talk and talk — and the repeated, attenuated annoyance which, of all things, he feared most.

He picked her up and carried her into the bathroom and shut the door. Then he answered the knock. It was nothing important — a chirping little bird of a woman who was taking up a collection for a Thanksgiving party for the orphans in town. He wrote her a check and got rid of her, snarling suddenly that she must never bother him again — and pass the word. That, and the size of the check, took care of her and anyone like her.

He nearly collapsed from reaction after she had gone. He knew he could not possibly outguess the exigencies which might arise to bring other people on errands.



"Could you direct me to the Vampire State Building?"

She had been with him for four months now. How could he explain her? Doctors would know she had been under treatment for some time; the Air Force people at the Base, and their cackling wives, would make God only know what sort of racket about it.

So he married her.

It took another six weeks to build her up sufficiently to be moved. He drove her to a town a hundred and fifty miles away and married her in a hotel room. She was under a skilfully applied hypnotic, and carefully instructed. She knew nothing about it at the time and remembered nothing afterward. Reger then applied for married quarters, moved her back to the Base and continued her therapy. Let them pry.

"There's your androphobe," said Mrs. Reger. "He could have let me die. He could have turned me over to the doctors."

"You're a very attractive woman," he pointed out. "You were that, plus a challenge . . . two kinds of challenge. Could he keep you alive? Could he do it while doing his job? A man who won't compete with people generally finds something else to pit himself against."

"You're quite impartial while you wait for all the facts," she said bitterly.

"No I'm not," he said, and

quite astonished himself by adding, "It's just that I can't lie to you." There was a slight emphasis on the last word which he wished he could go back and erase.

She let it pass and went on with her story.

She must have had consciousness of a sort long before he was aware of it. She was born again, slowly, aware of comfort and safety, an alternation of light and dark, a dim appreciation of the ways in which her needs were met, a half-conscious anticipation of his return when she found herself alone.

He told her, with terror in his eyes, of their marriage, and he begged her pardon for it. It was as if a harsh word from her would destroy him. And she smiled and thanked him.

She convalesced very quickly after that. She tried her very best to understand him. She succeeded in making him talk about himself, and was careful not to help him, ever, nor to work with him at anything.

At the time the *Starscout* was in the ways, and they were running final tests on it. Reger was forced to spend more and more time out at the gantry area.

His extrapolations never ceased, and he was aware before she was that, not being a Wolf Reger, her needs were different from his. He suggested that she walk in the

sun when he was away. He told her where the commissary was, and left money for shopping. She did as he expected her to do.

Then he didn't come back from the gantry area any more, and when the fifty or sixty hours got to be seventy and eighty, she made up her mind to find him. She knew quite a few people at the Base by that time. She walked in, stopping at the post office on the way. The divorce papers were waiting for her there.

The Major dropped his pencil.

"You didn't know about that."

"Not yet. We'd have found out anyway." He stooped blindly for the pencil and cracked his head noisily on the coffee table. He demanded, "Why? Why did he divorce you?"

"He didn't. He filed suit. It has to be put on the court calendar and then heard, and then adjudicated, and then there's a ninety-day wait . . . you know. I went to a dance."

"A — oh." He understood that this was in answer to his question. "He divorced you because you went to a dance?"

"No! . . . well, yes." She closed her eyes. "I used to go to the Base movie once in a while when Wolf was working. I went down there and there was a dance going on instead. I sat with one of the women from the commissary and watched, and after a while her husband asked me to dance. I did.

I knew Wolf would have let me if he'd been there — not that he ever would.

"And I happened to glance through the door as we danced past, and Wolf was standing just outside. His face . . ."

She rose and went to the mantel. She put out her hand very slowly, watching it move, and trailed the tips of her fingers along the polished wood. "All twisted. All . . .

"As soon as the music stopped," she whispered, "I ran out to him. He was still there."

The Major thought, *Don't break, for God's sake don't. Not while I'm here.*

"Extrapolation," she said. "Everything he saw, he computed and projected. I was dancing. I suppose I was smiling. Wolf never learned to dance, Major. Can you imagine how important that can be to a man who can do anything?"

"When I got outside he was just the same as always, quiet and controlled. What he was going through inside, I hate to think. We walked home and the only thing that was said was when I told him I was sorry. He looked at me with such astonishment that I didn't dare say anything else. Two days later he left."

"On the *Starscout*. Didn't you know he was a crew-member?"

"No. I found out later. Wolf had so many skills that he was nine-tenths of a crew all by himself. They'd wanted him for the

longest time, but he'd always refused. I guess because he couldn't bear sharing quarters with someone."

"He did, with you."

"Did he?"

The Major did not answer. She said, "That was going to end. He was sure of that. It could end any time. But space flight's something else again."

"Why did he divorce you?"

She seemed to shake herself awake. "Have I been talking out loud?" she asked.

"What? Yes!"

"Then I've told you."

"Perhaps you have," he conceded. He poised his pencil.

"What are you going to write?" When he would not answer, she said, "Not telling the truth any more, Major?"

"Not now," he said firmly.

For the second time she gave him that searching inspection, really seeing him. "I wonder what you're thinking," she murmured.

He wrote, closed the book and rose. "Thank you very much for coöperating like this," he said stiffly.

She nodded. He picked up his hat and went to the door. He opened it, hesitated, closed it again. "Mrs. Reger —"

She waited, unbelievably still — her body, her mouth.

"In your own words — why did he file suit?"

She almost smiled. "You think my words are better than what you wrote?" Then, soberly, "He saw me dancing and it hurt him. He was shocked to the core. He hadn't known it would hurt. He hadn't realized until then that he loved me. He couldn't face that — he was afraid we might be close. And one day he'd lose his temper, and I'd be dead. So he went out into space."

"Because he loved you."

"Because he loved me enough," she said quietly.

He looked away from her because he must, and saw the report still lying on the coffee table. "I'd better take this along."

"Oh yes, do." She picked it up, handed it to him. "It's the same thing as that story I told you — about the man knocking me down."

"Man — oh. Yes, that one. What was that about?"

"It really happened," she said. "He knocked me down and beat me, right in broad daylight, in front of witnesses, and everything I said about it is true."

"Bastard," growled the Major, and then blushed like a girl. "I'm sorry."

She did smile, this time. "There was a loading-dock there, in front of a warehouse. A piece of machinery in a crate got loose and slid down a chute toward the street. It hit a drum of gasoline and struck a spark. The first thing I knew, I was all over flames.

That man knocked me down and beat them out with his bare hands. He saved my life."

Slowly, his jaw dropped. She said, "It makes a difference, when you know all the facts, doesn't it? Even when the first facts you got are all true?" She rapped the TOP SECRET stamp with her fingernails. "I said this was all a lie. Well, maybe it's all true. But if it is, it's like the first part of that little story. You need the rest of it. I don't. You don't know Wolf Reger. I do. Good bye, Major."

He sat in his office at Headquarters and slowly pounded the fresh copy of his transcribed notes. *I have to send them the way they are*, he thought, and *but I can't. I can't.*

He swore violently and got up. He went to the water-cooler, punched out a paper cup, filled it, and hurled it into the wastebasket. *All I have is facts. She has faith.*

He cursed again and snatched up his briefcase, unlocked it, and took out the secret report. He slammed it down on top of his transcript. *One more look. One more look at the facts.*

He read:

*This is the fourth time I've erased this tape and now I got no time for officialese if I'm going to get it all on here. A tape designed for hull-inspection reports in space wasn't designed for a description of a planetary invasion. But that's what*

*it's got to be. So, for the record, this is Jerry Wain, Starscout navigator, captive on one of the cruisers that's going to invade Earth. First contact with extraterrestrials. Supposed to be a great moment in human history. Likely to be one of the last moments too.*

*The Starscout's gone and Minelli, Joe Cook, and the Captain are dead. That leaves me and that bastard Reger. The aliens had us bracketed before we knew it, out past Jupiter. They cut up the 'scout with some sort of field or something that powdered the hull in lines as broad as your hand. No heat, no impact. Just fine powder, and she fell apart. Joe never got to a suit. The Captain went forward to stay with the ship, I guess, and couldn't have lived long after they sliced the dome off the control room. The three of us got clear and they took us in. They cut Minelli up to see what his guts looked like. I haven't seen Reger but he's alive, all right. Reger, he can take care of himself.*

*I've only seen two of the aliens, or maybe I saw one of 'em twice. If you can imagine a horse-shoe crab made out of blue airfoam, with a wide skirt all the way around it, the whole works about four and a half meters across, that's close. I'm not a biologist, so I guess I can't be much help on the details. That skirt sort of undulates front to back when it moves. I'd say it swims through the air — hop and glide, hop and glide. It can crawl too.*

First I thought it slid along like a snail but once I saw a whole mess of little legs, some with pincers on them. I don't know how many. Too many, anyhow. No eyes that I could spot, although it must have 'em; it's light in here, grayish, like on a snowfield on an overcast day. It comes from the bulkhead. Floor, too — everywhere.

Gravity, on a guess, is about one-sixth Earth. The atmosphere's hot, and seems to be light gases. I cracked my oxy relief valve and struck a spark on it with the back of my glove, and that was pretty spectacular. Hydrogen for sure. Something else that gives an orange cast to the flame. You figure it.

The compartment I'm in is altogether bare. There's a transparent oval port on one bulkhead. They can take off like a bullet and stop as if they'd hit a wall. They have some way of cancelling inertia. Or most of it. Riding inside is pretty rough, but coming to a dead stop in two seconds from a thousand k.p.h. or better should butter you all over the walls instead of just slamming you into the bulkhead like it does. They can't operate this inertia field close to a planet — they use -wings, and they don't have the right wings. Not for Earth. Not yet.

I counted twenty-six ships — sixteen big ones, cruisers I guess you'd call them; two-fifty to three hundred meters long, perfect cyl-

inders. And ten small ones, oblate spheres, thirty meters in diameter.

When they brought us in first they slung me in here and nothing happened that I knew about, for sixteen hours. Then that first bug came in through a sort of pucker in the wall that got transparent and spread out and let him through and then bing! the wall was solid again.

I guess I went a little crazy. I had my antenna-wrench off the belt-rack and was throwing it almost before I knew what I was doing. I missed. Didn't allow for the gravity, I guess. It went high. The bug sort of humped itself and next thing I knew I couldn't move. I could, inside the space-suit, but the suit was like a single iron casting. It toppled slowly and lay there.

The bug slid over to me and hitched up a little — that's when I saw all those little legs — and got everything off my belt — torch, still-son, antenna-reel, everything that would move. It didn't touch my tanks — I guess it knew already about the tanks. From Reger, busy-boy Reger. It took the whole bundle over to the outer bulkhead and all of a sudden there was a square hole there. It dropped my stuff in and the hole went away, and out through the port I could see my stuff flash away from the ship, going like hell. So that's how I found out about the disposal chute.

The bug slid away to the other wall and I was going to give it a

shot from my heel-jets, but somehow I had sense enough not to. I didn't know what damage they'd do, and I might be able to use 'em later. If anyone's reading this, I did.

They don't feed me, and my converters are pretty low. I've rationed my air and water all I could, but it's past conversion now, without a complete recharge, and I'm not likely to get that.

This whole time, the ships have been busy. We're in the Belt, I'd guess, without instruments, around 270-20-95. Check those coordinates and hunt a spiral from that center — I'm pretty sure we're near that position. Put infra-red on it; even if they've gone by then, there should be residual heat in these rocks out here. They've leeched onto a big one and it's practically gone now. They make long fast passes back and forth like a metal-planer. I can't see a ray or beam or anything, but the surface flows molten as the ships pass. Mining. I guess they filter the slag some way and distill the metals out. I wouldn't know. I'm a navigator. All I can think of is those ships making passes like that over the Golden Gate and Budapest and LaCrosse, Wisconsin.

I found out how to work the disposal chute. Just lean against it. It was a lock with some sort of heavy coils around it, inside, I guess to project refuse away from the ship so it wouldn't orbit.

Well, six hours ago a sort of dark spot began to show on the inboard bulkhead. It swelled up until it was a knob about the size of your two fists, shiny black, with some kind of distortion field around it so it was muzzy around the edges. For a while I couldn't figure it at all. I touched it and then took hold of it, and I realized it was vibrating around five hundred cycles, filling my suit with the note. I got my helmet onto it right away.

The note went on and then changed pitch some and finally spread out into a noise like a forty-cycle carrier, and something started modulating it, and next thing it was saying my name, flat and raspy, no inflection. An artificial voice, for sure. "Wain," it said, clearing itself up as it went along. "Wain, Wain."

So I kept my head tight against it and yelled, "Wain here."

It was quiet for a while, just the carrier, and then the voice came in again. I won't bother you with exactly what it sounded like. The language was rugged but clear, like "Wain we no have planet you have planet we take you help."

There was a lot of yelling back and forth until I got the picture. And what I want to tell you most is this: once in a while when I listened real carefully I heard another voice, murmuring away. Reger — that I'll swear. It was if this voder, or voice machine, was being run by one of the bugs and Reger

was telling it what to say but they wouldn't trust him to talk directly to me.

So damn cold-blooded . . . it wasn't us they were after. You clear a patch of wood, you're not trying especially to dispossess the squirrels and the termites. That just happens while you work.

For a while I hoped we could maybe do something, but item by item they knocked that out of my head. Reger'd told 'em everything.

We're done, that's all.

So I asked what's the proposition, and they said they could use me. They didn't really need me, but they could use me. They said I could have anything I wanted on Earth, and all the slaves I could put to work. Slaves.

Maybe I shouldn't even try to warn you. Maybe it'll be better if you never know what hit you . . .

Reger, he . . . he's . . . ah stick to facts, Wain. Something makes him hate Earth enough to . . . I don't see even a coward doing a thing like this just to save his skin. He has to have some other reason.

The bump on the wall said, Reger work with him, you can trust.

Yeah, I can trust. I told them what to do with their proposition and shoved Reger along after it.

Now this is what I am going to do. Try, anyhow. My suit's the only one with a tape recorder, and it's internal. Could be Reger doesn't even know about it. What I'm going

to do is wait until this ship starts paring away at the asteroid. It gets up quite a hell of a speed at each pass, more than you'd think, because of the inertialess field. At the sunward end of one pass, I'll go out the chute. I'll have the ship's speed plus the throw-out coils in the chute.

I'll gyro around to head for the sun. I've wired the heel-jet starter to my oxy supply. When the oxy stops flowing the jets'll cut in.

And I've wired the jets to my distress squealer. When the fuel's all gone the squealer'll cut in.

We're positioning over the rock.

Don't anybody call me a hero for doing this. I'm not doing it for you. I'm doing it to Reger. That bastard Reger . . .

Jimmy Wain here, over and out.

The Major lifted the flimsies to uncover his own transcript. Coldly it listed the pertinent facts of his interview with the traitor's wife. He read them through again slowly, right through the last paragraph, which said:

SUMMATION: *It is indicated that the subject is a brilliant but twisted individual, and that early influences as noted, plus his mode of life, have induced a morbid fear of himself and a deep distrust of every human being, including his wife. His extrapolative ability plus his vivid imagination seem to have created a certainty in him that he had been betrayed, or that he certainly would*

be. His actions as reported by Signalman Wain are apparently motivated by a conviction that all his life humanity has tried to anger him so that he will be punished for his anger. This is his opportunity for vengeance without punishment.

The talker hissed, and a voice said, "Major, the Colonel would like your report on the Reger interview."

"Roger." He caught it up, held it, then slid it into his auto-writer and rapidly tapped out:

*The undersigned wishes to stress the partial nature of the above report, based as it is on the statement of a man under serious strain. Further evidence might conceivably alter the conclusions as stated.*

He signed it and added his rank and section, rolled it, canned it and slapped it into the pneumatic tube.

"Now what the hell did I do that for?" he asked himself. He knew what the answer was. He rose and went to the mirror in the corner by the water-cooler, and peered into it. He shook his head in disgust.

When the ships were sighted, Wain's recording came out of the files and went straight to the wire services. One of the columnists said later that the ensuing roar from earth all but moved the moon out of its orbit.

Without Wain's recording, the alien might have slipped close,

or even landed, before the world was alerted.

The ships came single file, faster than any man-made object had ever travelled. They were exactly what Wain had described.

They bore straight in for Earth, their single file presenting the smallest possible profile to Earth radar. (Reger knew radar.) When every known law of spatial ballistics dictated that with that course, at that velocity, they must plunge straight into the planet, they decelerated and swung to take up an orbit — rather, a powered course — around the planet, just out of rocket interceptor range (which Reger knew).

And now their wings could be seen. Telefax and television, newspapers and government agencies researched their contours in minutes. They were familiar enough — a gull-wing design which one aeronautical engineer described as having "every characteristic that could be built into a wing." Each wing, from root to tip, had its own reverse dihedral. Each was sharply tapered, and sharply swept back. Even the little spherical destroyer had them, along with a boom to support the butterfly tail. There was one Earth design almost exactly like it — an extremely stable large-plane airfoil for subsonic use. The designer: Wolf Reger.

The space scouts roared up to challenge them, heavy with armament and anger. They sent a cloud

of missiles ahead of them. There was H.E. and atomics, solid-shot and a whole spectrum of random-frequency radio, just in case.

The radio waves affected the aliens precisely as much — as little as the fusion warheads. Telescopic lenses watched the missiles race to their targets and simply stop there, to slide around the shining hulls and hang there until, one by one, they were brought aboard.

And then the little scouts tried to ram, and were deflected like angling guppies from the sides of an aquarium, to go screaming off into space and a laborious turn.

For three days the enemy circled outside the atmosphere, holding their formation, absorbing or ignoring everything Earth could throw at them.

The Major telephoned Reger's wife to ask if she had removed the name from her mailbox and doorbell. She said indignantly that she had not, would not, and need not. The Major sighed and sent a squad down late that night to arrest her. She was furious. Yet she conceded his point fairly the next morning when she saw the newspaper photographs of her apartment. Even the window-frames were gone. The mob had chopped right through the floor in places, had even heaved the bathtub twelve floors down to the street. "You should know as much about people as you think you

know about Wolf Reger," he said.

"You should know as much about Wolf as you do about people," she countered. There was, with her composure, a light he had not seen before.

He kept her in his office. She seemed not to mind. He let her read all the invasion reports as they came in, and he watched every flicker of expression in her face. "When are you going to admit that enough facts are in to show that there's no hero in this story, no one beating out flames?"

"Never. Have you ever been married, Major?"

Sourly, he thought, *Have you?* "No," he said.

"You've loved someone, though?"

He wondered how she kept her features so controlled under stress. He would like to learn that trick.

He said, "Yes."

"Well, then. You only need a few facts about the one you love. Just enough to point the way."

"Three points on a graph to give you a curve, so you can know its characteristics and extend it. Is that what you mean?"

"That's one of the things I mean."

"They call that extrapolation. Your boy's specialty."

"I like that," she said softly. "I like that very much." She detached her eyes from him, from the room, and smiled at what she

saw. "God!" he exploded.

"Major!"

"You're going to get clobbered," he said hoarsely. "You're going to get such a kick in the teeth . . . and there isn't a thing in the world I can do about it."

"Poor Major," she said, looking at him as if he were a memory.

There was a click, and electronic noise filled the room. The talker barked, "Enemy spiralling in. Stand by for trajectory."

"Now you'll see." They realized that they had spoken in unison, but it was the wrong time to exchange a smile.

"Arizona!" said the speaker, and "Stand by."

"Stand by hell," growled the Major. "We'll get the fine points by radio. Come on."

"You'll take me?"

"Wouldn't let you out of my sight."

They ran to the elevators, shot to the roof. A helicopter whisked them to the field, and a jet took them in and tore up and out to the lowering sun.

An unbroken cordon can be thrown about a hundred square miles in less than an hour and a half. This is true, because it was done immediately after the alien fleet touched Earth. Once the landing site was determined, the roads writhed with traffic, the desert crawled with men and machines, the air shook with

transports, blossomed with parachutes. The ring had not quite closed when the enemy formation came down almost exactly in the predicted center. No longer a single file, the formation was nearly spherical. It arrived on earth with two thunders — one, the terrible crack as the cloven air smashed back to heal itself, and rebounded and smashed again; the other, a shaking of the earth itself.

And the cordon stopped, flattened, lay still as a stain while the furious globe built itself in the desert, flung its coat of many colors about itself, mounted the sky and donned its roiling plumes.

And there were no ships, no aliens, no devils there in the desert, but hell itself.

They saw it from the jet, because they were keeping close radio contact with the landing, and straining their eyes into the sunset for a glimpse of the fleet. Their pilot said he saw them, coming in at an impossible speed. The Major missed them as they blinked by, but he did see their wings, like a flurry of paper over a windy corner, drifting brokenly down. And then the fireball fought the sun and, for a while, defeated it, until it became a leaning ghost in a broad, torn hat.

It seemed a long, long time after that when the Major, his palms tight to his eyes, whispered, "You knew that would happen."

"No I didn't," she whispered back, cathedral-awed. "I only knew *something* would happen."

"Reger did this?"

"Of course." She stirred, glanced at the tower of smoke, and shuddered.

"How?" he murmured. "How?"

He closed his eyes against the lingering glitter of the atom blast, and in his memory saw again those broken, fluttering pieces of wing.

"The wings tore off." To the pilot he said, "Isn't that what happened, Captain?"

"It sure is," said the young man. "And no wonder, sir, the way they flashed in. I've seen that happen before. You can fly under the speed of sound or over it, but you better not stay just at it. Looked to me as if they hung on the barrier all the way in."

"All flown from one set of controls . . . probably an automatic pilot, with the course and speed all set up." He looked at the woman. "Reger set it up." Suddenly he shook his head impatiently. "Oh no! They wouldn't let him get away with it. Why would they let him deploy their ships?"

"I guess," said the pilot reflectively, "because he made the wings for them, they thought he would know best how to use them."

Mrs. Reger said, "Everything

else he told them was true."

"But they'd have known about the barrier. Captain, just what is the speed of sound up in the stratosphere?"

"Depends, sir. At sea level it's around 340 meters per second. Up at 30 kilometers or so it's around 300, depending on the temperature."

"The density?"

"No sir. Most people think that, but it isn't so. The higher the temperature, the higher the speed of sound. Anyway, the sound barrier they talk about is just a convenient term. It happens that shock waves form around a ship anywhere from 85% to 115% of the speed of sound, because some airflow around it is supersonic and some still subsonic and you get real weird flow patterns."

"I see. Captain, could you set up a flight-plan which would keep an aircraft at the buffeting stage from the top of the atmosphere down to the bottom?"

"Imagine I could, sir. Though you wouldn't get much buffeting above 35 kilometers or so. No matter what the sonic speed, the air's too thin for shock wave formation."

"Tell you what. You work out a plan like that. Then radio Radar at Prescott and get the dope on Reger's approach."

"Yes sir." The young man went to work at his chart table.

"It's so *hard* for you," Mrs. Reger said.

"What is?"

"You won't believe it until you little graph's all plotted, with every fact and figure in place. Me, I *know*. I've known all along. It's so easy."

"Hating is easy too," said the Major. "You've probably never done much of that. But *unhating*'s a pretty involved process. There's no way of doing it but to learn the facts. The truth."

They were five minutes away from the mushroom when the Captain finished his calculations. "That's it, sir, that's what happened. It couldn't have been an accident. All the way down, under power, those ships stayed within four percent of sonic speed, and tore themselves to pieces. You really think Reger planned that approach, that way, sir?"

"Looks like it. From thirty kilometers to the ground, at that speed . . . it was all over in fifteen seconds."

"Reger," muttered the pilot. He went back to the controls and switched off the automatics. "One of the radar pix showed Reger's space-suit, Major," he said. "Looks like he bailed out same as Wain did — through a disposal chute."

"He's alive!"

"Depends." The young man looked up at the Major. "You think that mob down there is

going to wait while we compute velocities for 'em?"

"That's a military setup, Captain. They'll do what they're told."

"About Reger, sir?"

He turned his attention to the controls, and the Major went thoughtfully back to his seat. As they whistled down to the airstrip behind the cordon, he suddenly thumped his knee. "Light gases, high temperature —of course those bugs never heard of a shock-wave at what we call sonic speed! You see? You see?"

"No," she said. He understood that she did not need to see. She knew.

No ships, no aliens, no invasion. That, apparently, changed nothing. Reger's space-suit had been found — empty. Reger was holed up in the brush, or mingling with the service men and refugees inside the cordon. They were closing the cordon and they would get him. A matter of time, they told him at the command post.

The Major pounded the calculations he had brought. "Damn it, he's innocent, can't you see that?"

The young non-com from Psych Warfare — all the brass was inside the cordon, joining the search — said gently, "Yes, sir, I see it. But you don't know what's going on in there. Too many people have hated that man for too long.

You can't stop 'em with a 'now-hear-this' on the speakers. Even if the soldiers held off, the place is full of civilians and they're foaming at the mouth."

"Nonsense! Orders are orders! By God I'll—"

"Please," said the non-com, "will you go inside and see for yourself?"

The Major glanced back toward the airstrip and the dark jet, where the young pilot stood guard over the woman. "I will," he said. He handed over the tablet. "Take these and do what you can to spread the word."

"Yes sir." He walked briskly out into the darkness until the Major was out of sight. "Me say anything good about Reger—in *there?*" he murmured. "Not this boy. Some other time." He shoved the papers into his tunic and returned to the CP.

The Major walked quietly through the mob, listening. There were soldiers and Air Force men, security officers and civilians. Behind him, the cordon, tightening, reducing the strip between themselves and the radioactive area. In the cordon, a human gateway: FBI, CIA, G-2, screening. The Major listened.

"He got to be inside somewhere."

"Don't worry, we'll get the —."

"Hey George, tell you what. We get our hands on him, let's

keep our mouth shut. Army gets him, it's a trial and all kind of foofaraw. This bunch gets him, they'll tear him to pieces right now."

"So?"

"Too quick. You and me, one or two other guys from around here—"

"I hear you."

From somewhere back of the cordon, a tremendous huffing and puffing, and a casual, enormous voice, "Mike hot, Lieutenant," and then the Psycho Warfare officer: "All right, Reger. We know you didn't mean it. No one here will hurt you. You'll get fair treatment all down the line. We understand why you did it. You'll be safe. We'll take care of you. Just step right up."

The space-suit hung grotesquely by its neck against a shattered barn wall. A scraggly man in filthy coveralls stood by a pile of rocks and chunks of four-by-four. "Just three for a dime, gents, and the ladies free. Step right up and clobber the son. Limber up for the real thing. I thank you sir: Hit him hard." A corporal hefted a round stone and let fly. It hit the space-suit in the groin and the crowd roared. The scraggly man chittered, "One on the house, one on the house!" and handed over another stone.

The Major touched a smooth-faced lieutenant on the arm. "What goes on?"

"Huh? The suit, sir? Oh, it's all right. G-2's been and gone. His, all right. He's got to be around some place. Well, it's us or the hot stuff—he can take his choice. The cordon's getting radiation armor."

"There'll be hell to pay over this caper."

A soft voice said, "One look around here, I wish Reger'd gotten away with it."

The Major said warmly, "You're a regular freak around here, mister," and was completely misunderstood. The man ran away, and the Major could have bitten his tongue in two.

*I want to be in a place,* the Major thought suddenly, passionately, *where the truth makes a difference.* And: *If I were a genius at extrapolation, where would I hide?*

"Mr. Reger, you're a reasonable man," bellowed the speaker.

"Three for a dime. For a quarter you can throw a second lieutenant."

"He should hold out. He should go back into the bald-spot and fry slowly."

The cordon moved in a foot. *I just thought of the funniest gag,* thought the Major. *You pour vinegar on this sponge, see, and hold it up on this stick . . .*

Slowly he walked back toward the cordon, and then like a warm, growing light, it came to him

what he would do if he were a genius at extrapolation, trapped between the advancing wolves and the leaping flames. He'd be a flame, or a wolf. But he couldn't be this kind of a flame. He couldn't be an advancing wolf. He'd have to be a wolf which stayed in one spot and let the advance pass him.

He went and stood by the man. This wasn't the notorious Reger face, hollowed, slender, with the arched nose.

He realized abruptly that the man's nose was broken and not bruised. A man could do that with his own hands if he had to. And a man would have to wear coveralls for weeks to get them that filthy. Say, in a space-suit.

"I'll take three," he said, and handed the man a dime.

"Atta boy, Maje." He handed over two rocks and a billet. The Major aimed carefully, and said from the side of his mouth, "Okay, Reger. We've got to get you out of here."

*And I could be wrong, too,* thought the Major. *Even if he isn't Reger, this mob would tear him to pieces if I so much as pointed my finger.* He hurled his rock at the space-suit. From the side of his mouth, hardly moving his lips, he said, "High temperature, light gases, no barrier. I know what you did. Let me get you out of here."

"One on the house!" bellowed

the barker. "You sure can throw it, Major."

The Major said, softly, "One thing you never extrapolated, genius. Your wife never lost faith. Two billion people hated your guts, but she wouldn't break."

"I can't hear a word you say," said the barker, and yelled, "Each man kills the thing he loves, an' we all love Reger! Come on, lovers!"

*He wants to live, thought the Major, but not with her; he thinks he might kill her with that temper. That's why he shipped out in the first place.*

That temper . . .

He hefted the billet of wood. Aiming apparently at the space-suit, but speaking into and over his shoulder, he said, "Fine hunk o' flesh, that woman. I'll have 'er one way or another, but it'll be easier with you out of the way. Come on, damn you, make a break." He started to swing as he spoke.

As long as he lived, he would not forget his microsecond of terror. For the barker sprang at him so fast that he seemed to disappear from where he stood and reappear in midair, teeth bared, claws out. The billet landed heavily on the man's temple, and the Major knew it was a solid blow, knew that consciousness was gone. And the terror existed in that instant before the man's body struck him, for even through

unconsciousness the hate went on, twisting the corpse-like features and finishing the animal attack even while the eyeballs were rolling up, the mind darkening.

He let the flailing claws strike him and fall limp, concentrating only on bracing himself so he would not fall, so there would be no scuffle to draw attention. He threw a thick arm around the man's chest and held him upright, walked with him so quickly to the gate in the cordon that the crowd around the space-suit barely had time to turn their heads.

To the FBI man he said, "If it's all the same to you, I'm curtailing this enterprise."

A G-2 lieutenant opened his mouth to protest, glanced at the Major's leaves, and shut his mouth. The FBI man said, "Good idea, Major. That sideshow was pretty stickering. Who is he?"

Recalling the running feud between the Army and his own branch of the Service, the Major glanced at and away from the G-2 man. "One of my own men acting above and beyond the call of duty," he said disgustedly, and shouldered through the opening. The G-2 shavetail ineptly covered up a snicker, and then they were through.

The Major commandeered a jeep and dismissed the driver. They hummed off through the darkness toward the airstrip.

*(Continued on page 129)*

# Beware the Fury

(Continued from page 94)

Halfway there, the Major pulled off the road into the thick shadows of a yucca forest. He fumbled in the catch-all and found a length of tow-chain. He drew it around the unconscious man's biceps and knotted it behind him. Then he began to roll the head and slap the hot cheeks. The man moaned.

"You're safe, Reger," the Major said. "Safe now, Reger, you're safe." He felt, rather than saw, the sudden tension which came with consciousness.

"I'm taking you back to your wife. You're safe now."

"I'll kill her. Some day I'll kill her," he mumbled. "Let me go. Why not let them get me?"

Why? Instead, he said, "You'll never kill her, Reger. And if you did, it would be all right. She'd rather die that way than live without you. . . . But we're going to fix that. We're going to make it so you can get mad at anyone, any time, and no one will get hurt. No matter what it takes. We owe you a lot."

Reger sat up dizzily and looked back toward the pool of light, the growls of hate at the cordon. "Everybody owes me. Why *that*?"

"Wain got a report through. Everyone on earth thought you had turned Earth over to the aliens."

"Wain's all right?"

"Dead."

"Poor Wain," Reger said gently. "He got mad. Man doesn't think right, when he gets mad."

"That's what they thought about you."

He snorted, bitterly. "I didn't *dare* get mad! That's how I could think. Didn't anyone figure that out?" He hung his head and said, "All my life I've been protecting human beings — why should I stop?" He tugged at his bonds. "You can turn me loose. I never *stay* mad."

The Major freed him, started the jeep and pulled back to the road. Reger was quite quiet until they were on the strip, when he said hoarsely, "You didn't love her enough to turn me over to that mob. You'll never have a better chance."

"Did I say I loved her?"

"One way or another."

They approached the dark jet-plane. "So I didn't love her enough," growled the Major. He reached up and slapped the side of the plane. *I just loved her enough to do this.* "I brought him back," he called.

The door opened, and from the shadows she said, "I knew you would." They helped Reger in. The Major climbed in beside the pilot. "Fly," he said.

The Major thought, *She knew I would. She had faith in me, too.*

A long time later he thought, *That's something, anyway.*