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FRONTIER PLANET

by CALVIN M. KNOX

illustrated by BOWMAN

It was so wonderful to live in the free and wide-open spaces after being cooped up on the overcrowded Earth. Yes, it was wonderful — until the naked aliens came!

IT was a deceptively peaceful day. The hot Sol-type sun had burned away the morning clouds, leaving clear blue sky for the afternoon. A gentle but sturdy wind was blowing in from the sea, carrying with it the faintly iodized smell of the ocean, bearing the tang of the water to the small Earth settlement.

Brian Elson turned to his wife and said, "There. Have you ever seen a lovelier sight in your life than that field—our field—with our crops growing in it? And the sun coming down, and the sea-wind blowing. Could you ever find anything like that on Earth, Mae?"

Mae Elson shook her yellow-haired head in reluctant

disagreement. She was ten years younger than her husband, at twenty-three. She had been hardly more than a girl when she married him, and not much past twenty-one when they left Earth to become settlers on the frontier planet of Hannebrink IV.

"I've never said it wasn't lovely, Brian. It is. It's the loveliest sight in the universe. But—"

"But what, Mae?"

She turned to him, looking up at his tanned face with its work-coarsened features. "Out there," she said, pointing to the jagged range of hills that served as the wall between the settlement and the wilderness beyond. "Back of the hills. The aliens—plotting, schem-



ing, getting ready to sweep down and kill us."

"Mae—"

"No!" It was an old argument between them, one that had never died since the discovery that Hannebrink IV was inhabited by intelligent humanoids in a pre-technological culture pattern. Humanoids who ran naked through the virgin forests to the west, and who threatened constantly to drive the Earthmen from their planet. "You keep telling me the aliens are afraid of us, that they won't ever attack. What about Mark Brannon, though?"

"He went too far from the settlement. The idiot was prospecting for uranium, I guess, and some wild beast must have killed him."

"And some wild beast carefully cut off his hands and feet and smashed his equipment?" Mae asked. "No, Brian. He was murdered by the aliens. The same way they're going to murder us, some day. In our sleep, maybe."

Elson sighed deeply, turned, let his hands rest lightly on his wife's shoulders. "We've been through this a million

times, Mae. Let's not discuss it any more."

"Don't I ever count?"

He frowned. "We discussed this step very carefully before we left Earth. We agreed there might be dangers—but we decided it would be worth whatever dangers there were, if only to get away from the muck and filth of Earth. Remember? It cost us five thousand credits to get here—and if we went back to Earth we'd be in debt to the spacelines for the next ten years."

"I want to have children, Brian. I don't want to have to live in constant fear of what might come down on us from behind those hills."

"Would you rather have your children grow up on Earth?" he wanted to know. "On a planet of twelve billion people, where there isn't room for a man to turn around without apologizing? And you know we'd be in debt if we went back. Your children would grow up in poverty. At least here they'll be free—tall strapping boys and girls who know what it's like to be a human being, instead of a sardine crammed into a can."

Mae stared at his broad, ruggedly unhandsome face a long moment. They had had this discussion so many times before, and always Brian had won. Inwardly she had to admit that he was right, that their children would be happier here on Hannebrink IV.

Except for the aliens. They cast a menacing cloud over every aspect of settlement life.

"All right," she said, defeated. "We won't talk about it any more." She glanced out toward the field. "I guess lunch hour's over. You'd better get out there and finish up. I'll get busy round the house again."

IT was a regular routine of chores. Most of the time she was so busy she had no time to think, worry, brood. She just worked, and she was happy.

Life on Hannebrink IV was incredibly different from life on Earth. She had been born on the west coast of North America, in the population area known as the Pacifica—a sprawling, brawling, jam-packed area that spread

from Washington southward to the tip of California, and held seventy-five million people. Somehow she had been singled out of all that mass by Brian, and he had married her, three years back, in 2762.

They had lived for a time in the allotted compartment for newly-married couples in the Eleventh Income Stratum—that is, in a one-room cubicle with adjoining semi-private toilet facilities and community kitchen, on the eighty-seventh floor of a hundred-fifty story housing development in what had once been the City of Los Angeles before the unification of Pacifica.

They had lived there two months. Then, one night, Brian had come home from his job with Central Transport bearing a sheaf of glossy folders and booklets. It was data on the colony-worlds.

There were over five hundred of them, new, unspoiled worlds out in the stars, pleading for colonists. Life was clean and fresh out there, but hard—and the worlds of Zyma and Vannevar VII and Leswick and Carbley and Hannebrink IV needed colonists,

brave men and women willing to give up their jobs and homes and forsake the overcrowded mother world forever.

It was a hard decision to make. Life on Earth was scarcely pleasant, but it was secure; there were few dangers, no uncertainties. Brian had a good job, and the labor regulations made it certain that he would hold that job so long as he was qualified for it. In a year's time they would be eligible to move on to a room with private bath; perhaps by 2770 or so they might even have a two or three-room flat someplace overlooking the Pacific. These were the things they could look forward to, on Earth.

The planets were less certain. The colony worlds had all been thoroughly surveyed—as thoroughly as a five-man survey scout team could manage, in a few months' time. How thoroughly could five men survey an entire world, even in a lifetime? It was *relatively* probable that any world passed by the survey teams was fairly suitable for human habitation. The planets were there; the invitation was

out. And Brian wanted to go.

Mae pored over the travel folders endlessly, and before long the bright natural-color photos had their effect. She had never seen a tree or a blade of grass, in her twenty years. The photos showed luxuriant green carpets broken by towering brown-boled trees heavy with fruit. Sweeping vistas of sky, broad waterways, open fields yearning for the hand of the cultivator.

She saw alien animals, grotesque, strangely colored, some terribly fiercelooking, others lovable, cuddly. She saw thick forests of red and violet trees shot through with blazes of yellow. She could almost smell the clear sweet air of the colony worlds. There was no need for a room filter out there, she thought. Once a week she changed the filters on the room-vent, and saw the pounds of soot that had been combed from the city's atmosphere.

After that, the path was clear. "We'll go," she agreed. "But where?"

"Let's look at the folders some more," Brian suggested amiably.

Three nights later, they had made their choice. Hannebrink IV, a world in the Alpha r a z sector— Earthtype, with a diameter of 9000 miles and a gravitational constant of 1.003 Earth-norm; a world of blue skies and open fields, and three bright shimmering moons that cast strange intertwining beams of light which distorted the night-time shadows.

They drew their savings from the bank and applied for entry, and were admitted. They bought their ticket—one-way only, for two. It cost them all they had plus a little more, but the spaceline agreed to let them make up the deficit later, when they were settled.

The journey across space took several weeks. Mae was beside herself with impatience. Finally came the landing on Hannebrink IV.

The first few weeks of toil; the aches, the pains, all gladly contributed for the sake of breathing fresh air and seeing cloud-specked blue skies—

And then the discovery that the survey team had not quite

done a comprehensive job. That in the wooded hills in the heart of the continent there roamed nomadic aliens, barely civilized, full of hatred for the intruders from the skies.

But by that time; of course, it was too late to go back.

THAT night, as on all the other nights of the year, Mae and Brian Elson saddled their riding-beasts and rode down to the big frame structure in the center of the settlement that served as the community center and town hall for the young colony.

There were eleven hundred settlers, spread in a huge loose semi-circle over the fertile flatlands at the extreme eastern edge of the continent. On one side of them lay a sea 8000 miles across; on the other, a range of steep hills, and beyond them an untamed continent.

Communications between the farmhouses were poor. There was a phone hookup, but it was unpredictable and often out of order. The customary method of communication

was the nightly meeting in the town hall.

When the Elsons arrived, they saw most of the settlers were already there. The long hitching-post outside the big building was almost completely filled by the beasts the colonists used for transportation. Mechanical vehicles were impossibly expensive to import from Earth, and difficult for the colonists to build at their present level of mechanization; it was easier to use the sleepy-eyed horse-like creatures for getting around. They were angular things with coarse green hides and tiny horns behind their ears; they had a sort of hump amidships that made a useful natural saddle.

Brian dismounted, helped Mae from her animal, and deftly hitched the two beasts to a vacant place along the rail. They went inside.

Friends greeted them as they took their usual seats. Mae saw Liza Brannon, Mark's widow, talking to the Jespersons. Ever since her husband had been killed while scouting the area just on the far side of the bordering hills, Liza had lived alone, farming

her land as best she could and being helped out by any of the menfolk who had a spare hour. Mae pitied her. All the colony consisted of married couples; it was a strict requirement. Liza was the only single woman in the colony now. If any man's wife died in the next few years, he would marry her—but until then, she could only continue to wait.

AFTER about an hour of informal exchange of news, the meeting itself got under way. Claude Merriam, the tall, distinguished-looking man who served as Colony Chief this year, came to the front of the hall and called the meeting to order.

"I want to get down to business right away," Merriam said. His voice was deep and rich, a dark resonant baritone that had no need of artificial amplification. "We have a serious problem on our hands. I don't want to scare you, friends, but I don't want any of you to start getting overconfident either."

He looked around the room. "Three days ago I sent Paul Chasen and Harvey Roberts

on a scouting mission to the west. I didn't see any need for stirring up alarm by making any public announcement of this. They got back here this afternoon, and I want you to listen to them now. Paul? Harvey? Take over."

Two men that Mae knew only vaguely came striding through the aisleway and leaped lightly up to the stage. Paul Chasen was a farmer from the waterside area, tall and sun-darkened, with a mop of blonde hair; Roberts was older, about Brian's age, a short balding man with thick muscular arms and a barrel-chest.

He was the one who spoke first. "I guess I don't need to mention the death of Mark Brannon much to you. It's ten days since we found Mark's body at the edge of the cliff region. There was some talk that he might have been killed by the natives, and so Mr. Merriam came around and asked for a couple of volunteers to explore the area round about here and see if anything suspicious might be going on. Paul and I decided to take a look around. Paul,

you want to tell them what we saw?"

Chasen cleared his throat. "We took a pretty near westward route through the forest, following the river a way, then branching north at the first ford. We came across a band of natives about thirty miles from here, camping out. They didn't see us. But we saw them. They were holding some sort of execution, it seemed. One of their own kind was being put to death." He moistened his lips and gulped. "We found the body later. It—it looked just like Mark Brannon's body when it was found."

"That pretty much proves that it was the aliens who killed Mark," Roberts said. "But then we went a little further and came on a whole bunch of the aliens camping together. Three or four different tribes, it seems. Looking like they were getting ready to make war."

Mae Elson's hands felt chilled. She slipped one into her husband's hand and squeezed tightly. He squeezed back, but it was not reassuring, somehow.

Claude Merriam took the floor again. He looked gravely worried.

"Difficult times are ahead for us, friends. We're going to have to take emergency steps."

From the audience someone yelled, "What kind of steps you mean, Claude?"

"We'll have to be on our guard constantly," Merriam said. "Suppose you hear me out, and then I'll call for a vote on all my proposals.

"One: we'll have to establish a regular day-and-night warning system. I want men to fan out over the hill area on eight-hour shifts and keep watch. I've drawn up a rotation system for the shifts.

"Two: we'll have to be ready at home. That means periodic inspection of your weapons. The women will have to learn how to use a blaster, those of you that don't. I'm not saying there'll be an attack, but when the attack comes—if it comes—we can't afford to have anybody not taking part in the defense. There aren't enough of us to spare anybody.

"Three: we'll need a stock-

ade to protect the center of the settlement. I propose that each man in the community donate one hour and a half of his time a day to working on this stockade. I've drawn up a schedule for that too, by the way.

"Four: this part's unofficial, and not really to be voted on. There are almost six hundred couples in this colony, and even though we've been on Hannebrink IV almost three years, some of us, only a hundred thirty babies have been born. Maybe you're thinking that it isn't safe to have children on a frontier world until things are more stable here. Well, that sort of thinking has its truth in it, but you'll have to think about the other side now.

"We need population. The bigger and stronger we get, the less chance there is that the aliens ever will try to attack us."

Merriam paused a moment and glanced around the silent hall. "Okay. You've heard what I've had to say. You know the danger that exists. If anybody's against any of my

proposals, let him speak up now."

The silence became intense.

Merriam waited more than a minute; finally he said, "I'll consider that a vote of confidence. All right. We start organizing for defence tonight."

THE next few days were tense, frightening ones for Mae Elson. It seemed to her that the aliens were likely to sweep down in fury at any moment. As she moved around the farm, doing her chores in loneliness while Brian worked in the fields, she could not resist stealing an occasional look across the broad fertile plains at the dark rim of violet-hued hills that separated them from the territory of the aliens. Even now, she thought, they might be moving in single file over the hills, heading towards us—

She managed to look as if she were unafraid. As she milked the cow-beast (which was nothing like a cow at all, being striped laterally red and green, and with a long thin tube of a neck, something like a swan's, which made grazing a simple matter) she whistled

cheerfully to herself, and as she gathered the speckled blue eggs of the native hens or scrubbed the spotless prefabricated farmhouse or took goods to market, she pretended that life on Hannebrink IV was as safe as possible.

There were ugly reminders, though. Brian taught her how to use the blaster, and she practiced on a dead tree behind the house, lopping off limbs at Brian's commands. And for ninety minutes every day Brian left the farm to work on the palisade that was growing round the settlement, and one day in every eight he served a spell in the network of watchmen that roamed the hills.

Life went on. But the vision of alien marauders burned deeply in her mind's eye. She lay awake sleepless sometimes, thinking of the menacing creatures on the far side of the mountains.

At times such as those Brian would hold her tightly in his arms.

"Why aren't you sleeping?"

"I—can't fall asleep, Brian. I—keep thinking of—you know—"

"They can't hurt us, darling. Why don't you sleep, now?"

She closed her eyes, but it was no use. After a while she said, "I wish we had never come here. I wish we were back on Earth."

"We picked this place," he reminded her. "No matter what, we're better off here than back in that swarming beehive. You know that."

"Yes," she admitted finally. "I suppose so. But at least there we were safe. There's no security here."

"There's freedom, though."

He rolled over as if indicating he did not intend to carry on the discussion any further. Mae lay awake, staring upward at the beams of the ceiling of the house they had built together, and listened to the far-off cry of birds over the water and the closer rhythmic chirping of the giant crickets that nested just outside.

Something screamed, far away, a high wordless yell that hung a moment on the night darkness and melted away. Mae stiffened.

"Did you hear that?"

"Hunting hawk over the hills," Brian murmured sleepily. "I'm tired, Mae. Can't you stop worrying for a while?"

No, she answered silently. She turned away and tried to sleep, but no sleep came—only morning, finally, and with morning another day's work.

IT was Brian's day for serving in the hills, that day; he would be gone for eight hours, scouting the dangerous area flanking the wild wooded foothills. He readied himself for departure.

"Be careful," Mae said.

He chuckled. "I always am. But I don't think we need to be afraid of anything. Those natives might pick on one man if they found him wandering around their land, but I'll bet they never attack the settlement."

She looked at him a long moment and said, "Brian, will you promise me something?"

"Maybe. What?"

She hesitated. "If—if there is an alien attack, and we live through it—"

"Yes?"

"Will you agree to go back to Earth, then? Before any more trouble can hit us?"

He was silent a moment. Finally he said, "Okay. It's a deal. If the aliens attack and we survive, we'll go back to Earth. That's how sure I am that there won't be any attack."

He kissed her. "I hope you're right," she said, as he shouldered his alpha-rifle and left.

She turned away and entered the farmhouse again. *He'll be out there eight hours, she thought. Then if we're lucky he'll come home, and next week he'll have to go through the same thing again.*

Is it worth it? The constant fear, the uncertainty, the doubt?

For a moment she found herself wildly wishing that the suspense would end, that the aliens would finally get it over with and stage an attack. A *small* attack, so they could survive and go back to Earth when it was all over, back to Earth where life was cramped and unpleasant but at least safe.

She shook her head. It was crazy to think that way. She busied herself with routine chores, knowing she would have to get through them twice as fast today so she could make up for Brian's absence in the fields later in the afternoon.

The hours ticked away slowly. She ate alone at lunch-time, hating it as she always did when Brian was gone for the day. She waited for him to return.

At 1500 that afternoon she was in the fields when the house-phone chimed loudly. *It's Brian*, she thought, as she ran through the furrows toward the house. *He's calling to tell me he's on his way home. Oh, it'll be good to hear him again!*

She snatched the receiver from the cradle almost joyfully and said, "Hello, Brian? I've been waiting all day for you to call, and—"

"This isn't Brian," a man's voice said. "It's Leslie Chambers, Mrs. Elson."

The Chambers farm adjoined theirs on the east. What did he want, Mae wondered?

"Yes? What is it?"

"There's—been word from the hills, Mrs. Elson. Your husband and a couple of other scouts phoned in and said there was a mounted party of aliens riding toward them. Merriam's sounding a general alarm. The aliens will be here in less than half an hour. You'd better close up the house, stay inside, and keep your guns handy. Ah—too bad Brian's out there, Mrs. Elson. I don't quite know what to say to you. I—"

"That's quite all right," Mae said in a voice she hardly recognized as her own. *Brian*, she thought. *Brian!*

"You'd better call the people on your chain-list, Mrs. Elson. Good by e—and good luck."

"Thanks," she said. She hung up.

Merriam had drawn up a list of numbers: in case of attack, he would notify five settlers, each of whom would notify five more, each of whom would notify five more. That way, the alarm could be spread through the colony in a matter of a few minutes. With numb

hands Mae took down the list; it was a grimy slip of paper she had pinned to the wall above the phone.

She called the first name on the list and in a flat, toneless voice said, "There's an alien raiding party on the way. They'll be here in less than half an hour. Pass the word on down the chain."

It took only two or three minutes to notify the five names on her list. Then, hanging up the phone, she realized she would have to get busy.

The animals were outside the barn. She whistled for the dog and together they drove the protesting beasts to safety; it took nearly ten minutes. The sky was brilliantly blue; it was a surpassingly lovely day. Time seemed frozen in an eternal summer. And, thought Mae, right now the aliens are galloping toward the colony, and Brian lies dead out in the hills. It had to happen today, she thought. She was quiet, calm, bitterly resigned. This was no time for hysterics.

The hysterics could come later, she thought. If there was any later.

SHE sealed the back entrance, locked the window-shields, and closed off the cellar. There wasn't much else she could do. She opened the weapons case and took out a hand-blaster and a rifle-size alpha gun. Carrying the cold weapons as if they were vegetables, she made her way upstairs to the second story. There she pushed open a section of the casement window, big enough to get the alpha-rifle through, and experimentally, pointed it in various directions. From the window she commanded the approach to the house. The rifle had a range of—what was it, she wondered?—five hundred feet, or perhaps it was five hundred meters. Brian had told her, but she had forgotten.

There was nothing else to do. She sat by the window, holding the gun in unshaking hands, and waited nervelessly for the alien onslaught.

She tried not to think. She tried, but the thoughts came anyway:

We could have stayed on Earth. We could have lived in that little box of a room, and

sweated and cursed, and maybe by now we'd have children, and everything would be all right.

But instead we came out here and worked ourselves half to death. And now I have muscles I never dreamed I had, and here I sit in a window waiting for my husband's killers to come here and try to kill me.

She raised the gun quite calmly to her shoulder and tentatively squinted along the sight, making sure everything was in working order. She knew quite clearly and unemotionally what she was going to do.

This is my farm, now. And I'm going to defend it until I'm dead. That's what Brian would have wanted.

She waited, eyes narrowed, peering at the horizon. Minutes passed—and then they started to come, the gray-clad horde, sweeping down out of the hills. They rode bareback on the riding-beasts, and even at this distance their savage war-cries could be heard. They rode in single file, coming down now out of the hills and across the plain. Hundreds of them. Thousands. Coming,

now, to exterminate the sky-men who had taken part of their land.

Five minutes went by, and Mae saw them riding across the flat farmlands. They carried hatchets of some kind, she saw, and spears; scout reports had been right when they said that the aliens did not have the use of firearms. Mae watched them swarm around the distant Jespersion farm that lay nearest the hills. They had swept through the unfinished stockade as if it had never been built. She saw a cluster of them around the Jespersion house, saw angry blue bursts of flame darting from the upper windows. Aliens fell; more swept into the breach, while others continued the eastward ride across the plain.

They were close enough for her to see within ten more minutes. A party of eleven came riding toward the isolated Elson farmhouse. She counted them with care. Eleven, with a beribboned war-chief leading them, riding in a wedge-shaped formation. With great care she extended the rifle and started to aim.

She stared at them. *Maybe one of these killed Brian*, she thought.

They were squat ugly gray creatures, practically neckless, with leathery jointed hides that gleamed dully in the late-afternoon sunlight. They rode clinging to their mounts, legs wrapped desperately around the beast's underbelly. They were naked except for paint and ribbons. Guttural cries filled the air.

I've never killed before, Mae thought. When butchering had to be done, it had always been Brian who did it; she had never been able even to look. But this was no time for squeamishness now.

Slowly she squeezed the trigger. A bright burst of fiery blue sprang from the muzzle of the blaster, leaped across the air, buried itself in the dirt a hundred feet before the advancing group of aliens. Mae was angry; she had misjudged the range. And the aliens were scattering.

They rode toward her now in eleven different paths. She took aim again and loosed a bolt; it caught one of the

aliens square in the belly and— for an instant the savage creature stood upright on his steed, gray body outlined in a glaring nimbus of blue flame. Then he toppled backward, and was charred ash before hitting the ground.

One down, Mae thought. And ten left.

They were outside the house now, only a hundred feet away. Mae heard the dog yowling. She fired again and killed a mount; a second shot killed the rider before he knew what was happening. Mae felt perspiration coursing down her body. She began to tremble, but rigidly forced herself back under control.

She fired again, missing, and sending a shower of sparks over the ground. Her next shot was better; it ripped an alien in half. Three dead now.

She heard the sound of stocky bodies pounding against the bolted door.

No! They mustn't come in!

Pulling the window wide, she leaned out and looked down. Three of them had dismounted and were methodically dashing themselves against the main

door; it creaked and groaned on its hinges. She aimed the gun downward and fired. A blue splash of radiance rewarded her; two of the aliens dropped, the third leaped back. And in the same moment a hatchet came spiralling through the air from another alien off to the left. It cracked into the side of the building inches above the window, embedding itself.

There are only six of them now, Mae told herself. The sound of cracking timber came to her ears. The back door! They had split into two groups, now, and were assaulting the building at its most vulnerable places.

Brian, she thought for the thousandth time. Brian! She leaned out and drew a bead on one of the survivors. He looked up at her, snarled, glared with blazingly bright yellow eyes. His hatchet went back, his arm cocked, and she fired. Man and hatchet melted away. Five left.

She fired again, missing, and followed it immediately with a successful shot. Four left. Three, on the next burst. The back door yielded suddenly

with a tortured shriek of splintering wood.

They can come in, now, she thought quietly. She closed the window and turned to face the door of the room, drawing the hand-blaster. She waited.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs. A lump grew in her throat. Heavy footsteps, bestial-sounding footsteps. The door crashed open.

She caught a glimpse of gray, hulking bodies hurtling through the door, and squeezed the trigger twice without aiming. Energy-flares blinded her; she heard animal-like grunts of agony. When she could see again she saw a charred body lying almost at her feet, and a second alien staggering sightlessly toward her across the room.

Her hand was quivering so hard she could barely aim. She fired once. The alien fell.

There was one more of them somewhere in the house, she knew. Somehow in the excitement she had kept a rigid count of the corpses, and there was an eleventh yet at large. She tensed; footsteps in the hall again. Grunts. Taking a

deep breath, she fired through the open door.

That was the last of them, then. They were all dead. Numbly, she walked to the window. She had killed eleven intelligent beings; outside, all was calm. In the distance she saw the men of the village banded together now, putting the surviving aliens to rout. The war-party had been a fiasco.

She waited for the hysteric reaction to set in, but oddly none came. She remained calm. *Maybe I'm the pioneer type after all*, she thought strangely.

She forced herself to smile. She had talked of going back to Earth—but that was impossible now. She was bound to this planet by ties of blood. There was a world to conquer here, savages to drive back, a wilderness to open. And despite herself, she had shown she could stand the place.

As she stared out the window, she frowned suddenly, thinking she had heard a sound.

Yes. Footsteps.

Another one, she thought. She cocked the gun.

"Mae!" a voice called.
"Mae, are you all right? God, I must be too late—"

Dumbstruck, she ran to the door, skirting round the dead aliens, and out onto the landing.

"Brian!"

He was coming wearily up the stairs, a ragged figure with bloodstains reddening one arm, with sweat darkening his clothes. But he was smiling.

"I saw the bodies," he said. "I thought—"

"And you were in the hills," she said. "I thought—"

"They came sweeping right past me," he said. "I must have killed fifty of them. I was in a tree, picking them off. They got tired of trying to hit me with their hatchets after a while."

Tears of relief forced themselves to the edges of her eyes. "I—killed all these," she said. She stared levelly at him.

"I made a promise," he said. "If there was an attack, and we survived—"

"No," she said suddenly. "I don't want to go back to Earth any more."

"You—what?"

She smiled feebly. "Let's go wash those scratches of yours off. There's time to talk later."

Yes, she thought. There was time to explain everything, later—about the child, and about the world waiting to be won, and the work that needed to be done. Of how she had matured suddenly in those few moments of bloodshed when she thought herself a widow.

There was time to explain all that later, she thought. Right now Brian needed bandaging, and the house had to be tidied, the corpses removed. The back door repaired, the cows milked, the dog fed. And after that came fifty more chores before nightfall. It was a busy life. It was a good life.

The phone rang. Mae sped downstairs, lifted it off the hook. "Yes?"

"Claude Merriam speaking, Mae. The alarm's over for the time being. Just checking to see how things are down at your end of the settlement."

She smiled warmly. "Just fine," she said. "Just fine!"

THE END