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# Night-Thing

By WILFORD ALLEN

A SURGE of revulsion came hard on the realization of what those strange space-cars meant—a wild, indescribable feeling that swept shudderingly over me. Such an emotion—utterly unreasonable it had then seemed to me—I had seen in the hearts of men at sights which caused my own soul to leap with exultation.

Back when I had the form of a man for a brief period, with power commensurate with my desires, I had caused such shrinkings to tear at the hearts of my followers even, that time I had massacred an entire population. The sight of death with its visible evidences had been wine to my soul; yet then, uncomprehending, I had seen the hardiest of my men shudder at death upon such a scale—men who had joyously dealt death to many a lesser group with a will that matched my own. But their emotion that once, evident enough, was inexplicable to the soul of me, which burned with a cold fire that fed on death and gloated over its remains! That day I despised the tribe of men.

Later, free from the limitations of the body, I have seen that shuddering in the hearts of multitudes at sights which caused me, all unseen by them, to cavort madly with a frantic glee. Scuttling astride the winds of the north under the cold dead moon, I have come upon the unburied who could lie for months in the snow, exposed yet retaining their forms to throw long gray shadows pointedly over the white surface. Again, when the moon rode high and the shadows had drawn back into the motionless

things, I have returned to such rendezvous with joy, at times to find the dead encircled by ravening lupine forms which fled howling at the presence which they knew full well. Sometimes I have met a party which has located the body. And then, always, I have seen that unexplainable emotion in the hearts of those fearful gatherers of the dead—that shrinking horror of what for the soul and being of me and mine was feast.

The cold of space—when I had the form of a man, men knew nothing of space. Since then I have seen some knowledge of it growing among men, and again in their hearts it has bred that feeling, as much at variance with mine as the measure of the space between the worlds of flame and death. Men shudder when they contemplate it, as they shudder in the presence of death, while I at times must swirl out to seek it eagerly, after a time upon the warmer earth, as man, poor ignorant know-it-all, rushes into the coolness of the night to escape from the stuffy warmth of a closed space, or the burning rush of his puny emotions. The cool of space—the perfection it is, of death, which only I and mine appreciate. The death of all—which is the absence of emotion—rest. For all death brings cold and rest. Out There, all is cold—and the delight of perfect rest and exultation.

So I was There, exulting in the chill which instruments can not measure, but only the soul, when I saw the first of the great space craft.

“Aha!” I chuckled and rubbed my hands with heatless mirth. “Some of

those inventors have slipped one over on me! I knew some fools were working on plans to penetrate space while yet they held to their corporeal forms—poor fools! But I didn't know they had succeeded. *Arko!* I must see! There's death in the making, and a cold death!" And I chortled.

But too soon I knew the incredibly disagreeable truth. Not from Earth were those ships. No mortals, predestined to a cold death by their boldness. Those who guided the great cars had no dealings with death. They had lived for a trillion times a trillion years. Far older than I, they were. Small sustenance for my needs in such folk, and I would have darted off with a crackling curse, but a chance thought adrift in space crossed my brain, and I stayed.

Then, before I was even sure of the thought, the ship in which I had stationed myself dissolved in a puff of green-blue light. It was there—then it was no more! Untouched myself, I could not realize the truth for a time, although the hint of it had come to me in that surge of terror which I had caught from those people before they had *poufed* from the world. But then I looked, and saw! And knew!

Far off was another car, larger than that which had vanished. It darted swiftly away—was gone with a speed which I have not often surpassed, and in the same flash of vanishment went the companion craft of the annihilated ship, avengers eager on the trail. A great flare out in space where they had disappeared; and I knew even before I reached the spot in the next light-mile of time, that the destroyer had been destroyed.

War! And the end of people! But such an end! No bodies here for the gripping cold to encompass and stiffen! No corpses to spring again to life of humbler, crawling sort under warmer influences! Life which had outlasted the earth itself—then

nothing! No death—for death leaves its dead. No comfort in that for my soul, but only a crawling shrinking like that incomprehensible emotion I had so often wondered at in the souls of men faced with death.

It was just beginning. Repressing the urge to flee from the scene, because some sense told me it would be futile, I forced myself to enter another of the victorious craft. It was hard—never have I done a thing so hard before, and I felt such creepings in my heart as I knew were counterparts of those then inexplicable vibrations which had racked the brains of men at sights which had been joy-drink to my soul. And as I learned the full truth, a shivering set in within my own brain which, uncontrollable for a time, seemed destined certainly to wreck it. It was war. Between two sets of the creatures. This would have been well enough. The first disappointment of my expectations over, I would be content for them to exterminate one another, so long as I still had my Earth and its men. But one group, and that the aggressor, was determined to wipe the human race from its home! No bodies would be there any more for the feeding of my soul! Nothing! Nor ever again! Robbed of the nourishment that was horror to men, what was there for me?

Then I began in dread fact to understand those emotions which I had so often seen in men, but only to stare at in amazement before. Held fascinated by the hovering fate, I attached myself to those creatures while they battled. Two groups there were, as I said. The original group, the Lirans, and another, Mordans, beings from some distant star who had stolen the secrets of the Lirans and set out to annihilate from the universe all life but theirs. And the Mordans were in a fair way to achieve their purpose.

For the first time I felt in my soul an intense desire for the earth to

survive. Each time a party of Lirans met and annihilated a squadron of Mordans I chortled gleefully, forgetful of the fact that the catastrophe was productive of no bodies for the slaking of the feverish thirst which was rising within me and which even space was unable to cool. Each time a Liran fleet suffered I ground my teeth until their points chipped gratingly, sending shivers of pain to my brain.

I soon found I had only met the flank guards of the retreating Lirans. Beaten backward for a thousand years they had been, and after them the destroying Mordans had pressed always. To them all, time was nothing.

Fascinated by what impended when they should sweep by the Earth, which the Mordans would wipe free of all vestiges of what had been life before darting on in pursuit of the beaten Lirans, I took my post with the central body of the latter. Back we were swept. Back until the rings of Saturn hung luridly above us. Then, perhaps inspired by the cold glory of the sight, the Liran defense stiffened. Crescent-shaped their formation was, and into it plowed the wedge of the pursuers, millions strong in ships and billions in lives. Flare after flare colored that space where other matter was not, as the advance guards met, to fuse into one great flash of green-tinged crimson as the main body of the enemy struck and tore through. Its outer layers had vanished as they encountered the matter-destroying rays of the Lirans, but it was only the peeling of the outer skin from an onion. The body remained, as strong as ever and more dangerous. Then it developed that the Lirans were the fleeter of the two forces. Like a flash the crescent closed in, peeled one more layer from the onion, and was off to form again a half billion miles beyond. Thus it had been for ages. Fight and retreat.

Winning sometimes, in minor engagements, but not daring to stand long in the major fights. Stalling for time.

Earth became visible, a faint star not many degrees from the crimson streamers of the sun. A wave of despair engulfed me. Another such stand and flight, and the rout would stream past the Earth. A few of the pursuing fleet—a few would be more than sufficient for the task—would drop out to swoop upon that unsuspecting world. For the first time I cursed the invisibility of my form which rendered me helpless to waru or to battle live beings of flesh. Life would vanish from the globe in a series of flashes which would be so rapid that not even the word of the first would ever be told to those about to die next. A few light-miles and Earth would be bare of life—and, more horribly, of death! On it would be nothing but water and ray-pocked rock. And I, left, unable even to die by the rays which could bring death to beings built of the matter of flesh! I laughed crazily at the grisly joke of it so my jaws ached with the spasm. I—who exist so intensely though coldly! But not for long would I exist, with death annihilated along with life. I would shrivel and die. The agony of that death commenced in my soul with the thought, as the fever mounted.

The next stand of the Lirans came quickly. They were nearing the end of their power of resistance, yet did not flee more than the distance requisite for reforming, just within the orbit of Jupiter. In the short fury of that conflict I exulted doubly, as it seemed for a brief instant that the Liran force would triumph at last and the earth be saved—for death and me and such as I. But it was not so. The battle—and then the Liran fleet was speeding back for a chance to form again. A million deaths in that brief instant! But no! Not deaths—extinctions. No forms of

the dead for the delectation of my soul. I ground my teeth in rage at Mordan and Liran together, for by then I knew that it was the Lirans who had discovered ways to cheat death, prolonging life until extinction intervened.

When the Lirans formed for a third stand—mad with the certainty of the end they must have been—it was so near the Earth that the lights from annihilated cars and men must have been seen from the northern hemisphere, had it been night on the side turned toward the fight.

Knowing in advance the inevitable defeat of the defending fleet in this, the last stand possible before the Mordan cars would overrun the unsuspecting Earth, I tore and slobbered with rage.

Then I sensed a strange stirring which came over the crew of the ear in which I was. A message had arrived, and in a moment the fleet was in full flight. It was the end for me! In a long line the Lirans were streaming past the pole of the Earth, deserting it to its fate. Deserting me!

The Mordan host paused, as bewildered as I at the unexpected yielding, then gave chase. Suddenly, far to the south, above the Earth, a spot of blackness appeared. Like an opaque veil it seemed to pounce from space, shutting in between the fleeing Lirans and their pursuers. I had stayed behind, for what avail was there in going on, or for the matter of that, in staying, except that the space about the Earth was my home? Home? I cackled hysterically. Home! Abode of nothing, in a moment! Home of nothing, not even of the something that was nothing which was I!

**T**HE veil of darkness advanced swiftly, hid from view the sun and earth. All in that direction was shut off as though by an impenetrable blanket. A small thing at first, the

screening blackness loomed rapidly until it assumed the appearance of a great dark wall of solid matter, on-rushing at terrific speed. As star after star vanished it was as though that wall had annihilated them as completely as the strange rays of the battling hosts annihilated each other.

Desperately, the Mordan fleet crowded on speed to escape, recognizing a threat in the oncoming dark. Up they darted, down, and sideward. The leading elements, seeing early that they had no time to turn, dashed into that wall of black seeming-emptiness. Head on, savagely, with the despair that breeds frantic effort, they tore ahead, the rays which, streaming to the front like giant headlights had never failed to blast a path through opposing matter, stabbing out angrily. But those rays had met their match. Not even a flicker of light marked the points where individual beams struck the on-rushing blackness.

With a yelp of fright as I realized my position, I flashed swiftly from the path of the oncoming destruction, which might have wiped out even me. I forgot in the sudden surge of terror that a moment before I had feared that I could not find such a swift, clean death. Behind, I saw the leading ships of the Mordan fleet already flashing into nothingness. By the sight, I knew that their destroying rays, reflected back upon them from that wall at which they dashed as it advanced remorselessly, were consuming the things which had generated them. On they dashed, to vanish in evanescent flame. Only those who had been able to essay flight remained, and they were diminishing into the far distance. But not swiftly enough.

As though that blackness were sentient, it seemed to see the escaping Mordans and leaped after them with the snap of a tiger's bound. So I had leaped upon the very first to fall beneath my weapons—a play-

mate of mine all unsuspecting the bloodlust which flared within my soul. I had been young when I first knew my destiny. Now, watching that leaping death-engine which had no form, I knew my master. I stared entranced, then shrieked soundlessly with glee. The edges of the darkness were up with the fleeing ships. They passed. The black mass closed in like the two jaws of a huge inky maw. No eyes saw those ships again.

As suddenly as it had appeared, there was no black curtain in the heavens. The stars shone again with undiminished brilliancy out there in the cold, and among them were the bunched lights of innumerable hosts of space-cars—the lights of the Canopians, a branch of the Liran race who had colonized the region of Canopus. With their invention, the wall of force, they had arrived to turn the tide, to wipe it out.

The Liran fleet reassembled, swung to join the Canopians. Together, a vast armada, they streamed off into that outer space where they have abolished death. Rage swelled in my brain at the thought, to be transformed into relief as the next thought came. The space of the Sun was ours again. Mine!

**A**FTER the tension lifted, a cold sweat came out on me. Every particle sagged and shook, and I must have gone out of my head, as I did once on Earth, back in those days before history when I had human form. At least, the next that I knew I was on the nightward side of the Earth. There on a frozen plain was a body. About it circled a wolf-pack, snarling, while lesser scavengers skulked in the background. After

my arrival the wolves, too, their hackles risen, slunk back, while I, beside the corpse, laughed with wild triumph at the cool, familiar scene. The moon sailed blue and cold; the wind was vibrant with nameless thrills, and shrill. Here was Earth again, as of old, all unsuspecting the fate that had swung above it, or that there could be, out there in space, a race which had conquered death. If Earth beings but guessed that it had been done, they would somehow find the way to emulate those others. The Lirans, too, had once been subject to death and decay, before they discovered the secret which cheats my kind. But by now the Lirans, with the Canopians, are far out, beyond the brighter stars—perhaps beyond the Milky Way, speeding toward worlds in other nebulae. Only *I* know the truth.

Only *I* know the truth!• And why should I give up my secret and rob myself of my own? Ha! Ha! Ha! The joke of it is that I could not tell if I would. No man may hear me, for I have no voice for men. And as if I would! And who would believe if I could? At the sight of me men would lose their minds. That horrible feeling which I now know so well, though once it puzzled me, would course through their brains and drive out the power to think or know. Ho! Ha!

Up! Gloat! And follow the moon to another appointment with death! Adrift of the air comes a message from bare crags in the west. Out there another wolf-pack circles a dark spot which still lives. But soon it will be cold. The kill will be made by the wolves, my old tools, but it is I who will enjoy it to the full!

