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RUN, LITTLE MONSTER!

by Chester S. Geier

Fran had heard about the monsters men hunted down and killed. But she had never seen one—until the night that Sammy looked at her and screamed . . .

THE girl ran like the hunted thing she was, her bare feet flashing over the lush spring grass. She sobbed with the effort of breathing, and her slight, immature body trembled with exhaustion beneath her ragged dress. Fear was a wild glitter in her eyes as she stared about her in search of refuge.

The two boys came racing in pursuit, yelling threats between labored snatches of breath.

"Stop, Fran!" Davey Becker panted. "You can't get away! We'll get you!" A thread of saliva stretched from his pendulous lower

lip, soaking into the front of his tattered shirt. He was a hulking figure with dull eyes set deep under a low forehead.

Sammy Becker was two years older than his brother, smaller and slimmer yet making up in cunning and a shrewish driving force what he lacked in bulk. At eighteen he was the acknowledged leader of the pair, an oddly young-old figure with wizened features and pale eyes that gleamed with sadistic urges.

"Stop!" he screeched. "You better stop, you crazy orphan! You'll be sorry!"



She knew better than to stop. Frequent torment at the hands of Sammy and Davey told her she could expect no mercy after having led them on this long chase. In despair she realized it had been a serious mistake to wander away from the house. Little enough protection was to be expected of Big Luke Becker, but for the most part he didn't allow his sons to bedevil her while the endless daily round of household chores remained to be done.

Briefly and poignantly she wished she had a father of her own—a real father to comfort her and keep her from harm. She had never known what her father was like. Vaguely she remembered having heard that he had died in the war. Her mother had told her that once, a long time ago—but even her mother was only a dim memory. A lot of people seemed to have died in the war—millions of them. She could not understand how there could ever have been that many people, for there did not seem to be many at all in the world she knew.

Darting a glance behind her, she saw Sammy and Davey were gaining. Frantically she searched the grassy field again, bright and still under the afternoon sun.

THERE seemed no place at all where she could hide. And she had to hide. A stabbing pain in her chest warned her she couldn't keep up her flight.

She didn't want Davey and Sammy to reach her. Not out here, with no one else around. She knew Sammy would beat her until her resistance was gone. Then he would run his sweaty hands over her, laughing shrilly and breathing hard. Sammy always managed it so that Davey was the one who held her. She shuddered. She didn't like the things Sammy did with his hands.

A short distance ahead she saw that the field rose in a ridge, and suddenly she recognized the spot. There was a ravine below the ridge, choked with brush. She would be able to hide here, at least until she had caught her breath and could run again.

She drew upon her last dregs of strength and urged her legs into a burst of speed. The ridge rose before her as she drew ahead of the two boys. She struggled up the slope, and the brush along the crest whipped at her legs and caught at her dress as she beat her way through it. She went down the opposite slope in staggering leaps. Near the bottom of the ravine she fell and rolled the last few yards until a wall of brush brought her up short.

She scrambled back to her feet. Bent low, she began darting through gaps in the brush, ignoring the branches that raked and lashed at her.

She heard a shout and caught a glimpse of Davey and Sammy on the ridge crest. Evidently they had seen her from above, but once down in

the ravine the brush would cut off their view and make their search difficult. She hoped to be well hidden by then.

Threshing, crackling sounds rose behind her as the boys scrambled down into the ravine. It was all somehow distant and unreal. A roaring filled her ears, and her head felt strangely light. The pattern of branches and leaves blurred smokily before her eyes.

At last she reached a shallow crevice on the opposite side of the ravine, screened by a clump of brush. It was hardly large enough to squeeze her body into, but it was the best hiding place she could find in what little time remained.

SHE pressed tightly into the crevice, trembling, her eyes shut. Davey and Sammy mustn't find her! She repeated the thought over and over, straining with a frantic intensity, as if she could avoid being discovered by force of will alone.

The dizzy sensation swept over her again. She had felt it before, though not as strongly as now. And she had realized it was produced by a serious change in her—a change announcing her emergence into womanhood. It had given her a new sense of being, an exultant awareness of power. But it was her weakness now.

The noise of hurrying footsteps and rustling branches came from a point frighteningly close. She heard Davey speak in a complaining tone.

"Aw, let's go home, Sammy. Fran's gone, and I'm tired of chasing her."

"She's around here somewhere," Sammy insisted in his nasal voice. "We'd of seen her if she tried to climb out."

He pushed at the bigger boy. "Come on, you addlebrained ox! Help me look. I'm not letting her get away, no sirree! When I get hold of her—"

Davey's usually vacuous face twisted in a scowl. "You're always making me do something, Sammy. I'm not going to run after Fran all day long. Why're you always after her? Why'n't you leave her alone?"

"She's a girl," Sammy returned. "Don't you know what girls are for, you bonehead?" His voice grew taunting. "Hey, you sweet on Fran? Golly, that's a tickler! Wait'll I tell the fellows in town. Davey's sweet on Fran! Davey's mooning over the orphan!"

"You . . . you stop that, Sammy!" Davey blurted. "You stop it or I'll hurt you."

"You hurt me and I'll tell the old man. I'll tell the fellows in town about Fran, too." Sammy became slyly truculent. "You better help me look. I'll tell on you."

"Aw, why'n't you leave me alone?" Davey muttered. His big shoulders slumped in defeat and listlessly he turned away to resume his part of the search.

BRANCHES crackled near Fran, and she grew rigid within her

meager hiding place. They mustn't find her, she thought again. They mustn't find her!

The crackling came nearer. She saw Sammy's head and shoulders as he made an opening in the brush curtain with his hands. For an instant he seemed to look directly at her. The breath seemed to catch in her throat and her heart gave a sickening lurch. Sammy looked mad, not laughingly devilish as he usually did when bent upon persecuting her. She was afraid to think of what Sammy would do when he was mad.

But incredibly he drew back and walked away. It seemed a miracle to her that she had escaped being seen. Her dress was of a nondescript shade, but her hair and the pale gleam of her skin should have given her away.

A little wonderingly she glanced at one of the slender arms that were pressed tightly against her sides. She stared, puzzled. The color of the skin was a dull brownish-gray, blending almost indistinguishably with the hue of the rock that touched it. A trick of the light she thought. It had to be that, for it had tricked Sammy.

The voices and the sounds made by the two boys grew fainter, dying away with distance. She peered cautiously from her place of concealment. Sammy and Davey had walked out of sight down the far end of the ravine. She waited until certain that Sammy had not set a trap of some sort, then slid out of the crevice

and hurried toward the ravine's opposite end.

Her legs ached protestingly, but she forced herself to run. She realized she had been away from the house much too long. Big Luke would be angry—and his anger manifested itself in heavy blows of his big, bony hands.

THE Becker house was a large frame building, weather-beaten and fallen into disrepair. Fran hated the sight of it, but it was the only home she could recall having had. Once, during a summer evening in town, Fran had heard a group of men talking about Luke Becker. She had kept in the shadows at the side of the general store, and they hadn't seen her. The Becker house, it seemed, had once been owned by a prosperous farmer, a lonely widower whose sons had died in the war. Big Luke, a refugee from the city after the first atom bomb raids, had taken shelter at the house with his two small sons.

Fran's mother had taken shelter there also, and stayed on. There had been no place else to go. None of the refugees ever went back to the city, or to any of the other cities that had been bombed. There was a sort of light in the cities, a light you couldn't see. It burned you, and you died. The light had filled the ruined cities for a long time, and would continue to fill them for a long time to come. Men—the men who were left after the bombing raids—lived in small

towns now, and on farms. Farming was one of the few ways to make a living that were left.

The farmer who had taken Big Luke in had died. An accident, the man on the porch of the general store had said in his carefully low-pitched voice. And he had laughed without humor. One of the farmer's machines had killed him, and Big Luke had stayed on at the farm. It had been an unsettled time, men were law unto themselves, and Big Luke, with his powerful body, had gone unchallenged.

There was a hint of something evil in the story Fran had heard, suggested to her by the soft, meaningful tone of the man on the porch of the general store. She wasn't quite certain what it was, but she knew Big Luke was capable of anything sinister and cruel. And Sammy was very much like his father. Davey . . . well, Davey was not quite right in the head. She guessed Davey would be friendly enough in his own way, if Sammy didn't keep leading him on.

SILENCE lay over the house, extending to the couple of smaller buildings behind it and the big barn and the silos off to one side. Fran could see nothing of Davey and Sammy. She had been careful to avoid being discovered by them again, and evidently they had taken more time about returning.

She slipped into the kitchen. Big Luke was not there, but after a moment she heard the creak of

springs in the parlor, followed by shuffling footsteps. Big Luke appeared in the hall doorway, swaying unsteadily on his feet as he scowled at her. A sickly reek, familiar to Fran, announced that he had been drinking again. He always seemed to be drinking.

Big Luke had once been a heavy-fleshed man, but constant drunkenness had left him gaunt and shrunk-en. Dark hollows lay under his cheekbones, and loose skin sagged around his mouth. He looked at Fran with blood-shot eyes, his dark, unkempt hair streaked with gray and the sallowness of his face emphasized by a heavy growth of beard.

"You," he said, his voice rasping. "Where you been, girl? Why weren't you tending to your chores?"

"I . . . I was outside," Fran said. She moved slowly to put the kitchen table between the man and herself.

"Outside, eh?" He staggered forward, his gaze baleful. "Just where outside? I been yelling my head off for you. Where's Sammy and Davey?"

"They chased me!" Fran flared. "I walked a piece, and they started chasing me! They're always chasing me!" -

"And I bet you like 'em to chase you," Big Luke growled. "Don't try to fool me, you little snip. Don't try to tell me you ain't practicing your woman's tricks on my boys."

Fran felt a hotness leap into her

face. "I never do a thing to them!" she protested. "I hate them—Sammy especially. Why don't you tell him to leave me alone?"

"Uppity, just like your ma was, you little—" Big Luke abruptly leaned across the table, and his calloused palm shot out, making a sharp clap of sound as it struck Fran's cheek.

She felt her head jerk around from the force of the blow. The side of her face felt numb and large.

"Don't get sassy with me, girl!" Big Luke snarled. "And next time you go running off when there's work to be done, I'm going to fix you good and proper. You're big enough to take a whip to. I'll have the skin off you, by God!"

HE glared at her a moment longer, then turned and staggered back toward the parlor. Fran rubbed at her cheek, tears brimming in her eyes. She had a sense of rebellion—and hopelessness. She had often thought of running away, but no one in town would risk Luke Becker's wrath by taking her in. And the thought of fleeing to one of the other towns held possible dangers greater than those of her present life.

Her shoulders bowed in defeat and leaden resignation, she turned to the wood-burning stove. The fire had gone out, and the wood-box was almost empty. She sighed and started for the woodshed out in the yard.

Big Luke yelled after her, ob-

viously alerted by the creak of the kitchen door. "Where you running off to now, blast it?"

"To get some wood."

"Well, no more monkey-shines, if you know what's good for you!"

The shed was large and shadowy. The single window had been boarded up after the glass was broken. As Fran began heaping one arm with rough, chopped lengths of wood, she heard a quick shuffle of footsteps and saw Sammy crossing the yard toward the doorway. He still looked mad—even madder than he had been back in the ravine.

Her heart drumming, she drew back into the deeper shadows between the side wall and the stacked wood. She knew she was caught. Sammy evidently had seen her enter the shed. And Big Luke, angry with her too, could not be depended upon for help.

Yet oddly, a part of her, unfamiliar and mysterious, remained cool. That part of her waited for Sammy Becker, while the rest of her quailed his coming.

Sammy glided through the doorway, a vengeful twist to his mouth, his fingers curved talon-like to clutch. He stood for a moment, blinking his pale eyes after the brightness of the yard.

Then the rigidity went out of his fingers. His too-wise features wrinkled puzzledly.

"Hiding again, huh?" he half whispered, as though to reassure himself. "Well, I'll get you this time!

"I'll fix you good!"

He started forward, his hands outstretched.

FRAN watched him, a bewilderment growing in her. The shed was not too dark. It seemed incredible that Sammy could not see her crouching in the shadows at the end of the wood stack. But he groped at air with his hands, his movements always hesitant and uncertain.

It was inevitable that he should sooner or later stumble across Fran. She was ready. The piece of wood felt solid in her hand. She struck at Sammy's head, and he stiffened startledly at the very first movement, as though it had flashed out of nothingness itself, then lurched with a yelp against the wood stack. A small avalanche rained down on him, and Fran darted past and ran toward the house.

Davey was on the back porch with a dipper of water raised to his mouth. He stared at her with wide and somehow shocked eyes and remained frozen until she had entered the kitchen.

She realized that she had, despite everything, managed to keep a grip on the load of wood. She emptied it into the box at the side of the stove, and in doing so noticed a strangeness about the color of her arms. She peered at them, feeling as shocked and staring as Davey had looked, and her mind went back to the ravine and she remembered Sammy not seeing her even while he

looked directly into her hiding place. And he hadn't seen her in the shed. Why?

During supper Sammy was unusually quiet. He looked at Fran out of the corners of his eyes, and in his wizened face was a groping wonder—a vague fear.

Davey seemed to have forgotten his own experience. He forgot things quickly.

FRAN lay in her straw-padded bed with her eyes fixed on the rectangle of the window, glowing luminously with moonlight. She thought back over the events of the day, and a feeling of awe touched her. There was a significance to what had happened, a kind of tingling importance that she sensed but could not quite understand.

She felt that she had somehow . . . changed. She had entered into womanhood—but there was more to it than that. She felt stronger, more assured. Her very awareness seemed to have sharpened, to be reaching out and bringing her new impressions she could not identify.

She closed her eyes and sent her flowering perceptions out and away. For a moment she seemed to float in nothingness, disembodied . . . spreading. And then she had the sensation of touching something. She drew back, startled, yet fascinated and curious, like a child discovering some new wonder.

And a voice spoke to her, bell-like and ringingly clear—a voice which

in some incredible way she heard with her mind.

"Why, hello! Who is this?"

"I . . . my name is Fran."

"Oh, I understand. This is the first time for you, isn't it?"

"Yes," she said. "I mean, whatever this is, it never happened before."

In some odd way, the voice seemed to smile. "Don't let it frighten you, Fran. You'll get used to your new ability."

"But . . . but what does it mean? And who are you? Where are you?"

"You can call me Tom. I can't tell exactly where I am, because distances and locations have no meaning when a mind can reach anywhere. I don't think I'm very far away, though. As for what this means . . . well, that's a little difficult to explain, Fran."

THE voice — she knew now that it was more than just a voice — seemed to look out over an awesome vista, as if in search of some point of interest, some particular feature she could understand.

"You know about the war, Fran, and what happened to the big cities?"

"Yes. I've heard about that."

"Well, the war was fought with a new type of atom bomb, Fran. It was designed to keep people out of cities, because cities were centers of resistance. The bombs contaminated the cities with a deadly radiation that's still there. People had to

leave — but many of them were affected by the radiation, and gave birth to children that were . . . different. Some were monsters, Fran. And some . . . well, they didn't *look* changed, but they were — in strange and wonderful ways. It all depended on the intensity of the radiations that produced them, you see.

"You're one of those changed children, Fran — and so am I. Our ability to receive each other's thoughts proves that. But what you really should know is that there's serious danger in letting ordinary people find out you're different. Because, Fran, when the monsters started appearing they were done away with—killed. People were afraid of them. And they're more afraid now than ever."

The voice she had come to identify as Tom seemed saddened. "You see, Fran, the war was the product of a machine age. But men have gone back to the soil. They had to. There aren't many machines left any more, and there's no way to build them or keep them going. So they've been wearing out, breaking down. People used machines to communicate with each other and spread ideas and knowledge. Without the machines, their world has grown smaller. They're afraid of things that aren't part of it. And we aren't of their little world, Fran. We're . . . different. And for that reason they'll try to destroy us if they learn what we are.

"That mustn't happen, Fran. They've had their chance — and

they've failed. We have a right to ours, but it's a right we must fight for. We must stay hidden and keep from being found out until we're ready . . . So be careful, Fran. Don't let those around you discover your new abilities. They'll keep growing, I think. In some of us there's no way of knowing what heights will be reached."

"But isn't there something we can do?" she asked in silent, voiceless protest. "Isn't there some place we can go? Isn't there any hope for us at all?"

TOM'S answer was slow and grave. "There is hope, yes. But we must be patient. Mentally we're far beyond ordinary people, but physically most of us are still children. We need time to grow, time to attain our full powers. And we need time to find each other and plan for the future. We can afford to wait, Fran. But above all we must be careful.

"Right now, though, you'd better rest. You don't want to put too much of a strain on yourself the very first time."

Her mind leaped in dismay. "But, Tom—will I be able to reach you again?"

"You can reach me any time you send out your thoughts to me, Fran. Don't worry about that."

"All right, Tom." Sudden shyness made her falter. "I'm glad . . . glad I'm not alone."

"I understand . . . Good night,

Fran."

"Good night, Tom."

She lay still for a long while. She found she *was* tired, as though she had been under some exhausting nervous tension. But her pulse raced with excitement.

Carefully she went back over what Tom had told her, sifting the contents of his message for implications she might have missed. His warning became vivid in her mind, and abruptly, chillingly, she remembered the barking of dogs in the distance and men on horseback racing far-off across a field. She remembered a faint, triumphant baying and the ruted thunder of guns. She remembered clutching in fright at her mother's hand and seeing Big Luke ride back to them across the yard.

An echo of his voice reached her over the years.

"Got another monster, by God!"

She remembered that had happened several times. She had thought monsters were horrible animals of some sort, but now she knew they were people, new and different people—like herself . . .

LATE summer sunshine lay over the porch in a flood of radiance as rich as melted butter. Fran stood very quietly for a moment, letting the warmth bathe her. She drew the fragrant morning air deep into her lungs and felt the breeze caress her face and arms. Her brown hair changed subtly in the light, became a gold-glinting auburn, and

a faint golden flush spread through her skin.

She was dimly aware of the pigmentation adjustment, but she did not try to control it just then. The chameleon effect, Tom called it, one of several protective devices that nature had furnished her kind for survival against the members of a hostile race. She let the impressions drift like smoke through her mind, releasing herself wholly to the beauty of the morning.

She arched forward on the tips of her bare toes, her slender body straining against the threadbare fabric of her dress to outline the firm, gently rounded curves of growing maturity. She had a feeling of vibrant, singing strength, as though she could launch herself with the effortlessness of a bird into the gold-hazed, green distance and soar tirelessly to the very end of the world. She had a depth and clarity of perception that seemed to her capable of embracing green earth and blue sky in one vast, magnificent sweep.

She had a delighted sense of freedom, as though released from the cocoon of hiding and caution in which she had kept herself during the past months. For a superb instant she felt free and gloriously happy — and she wanted to tell Tom, to share her emotions with him. Her thoughts turned to him with increasing frequency. She felt a growing need for his invisible presence and the comfort it gave.

She had only to spread the gossa-

mer fabric of her mind like vast butterfly wings, shimmering and iridescent with her exalted sensations, and Tom would be there, as he so often was in the moon-bathed stillness of the night. Tom, so patient, so earnest and kind, his quiet strength the foundation upon which the structure of her own being had come to rest.

But she did not reach out to him. She slumped, and the surging loveliness in her faded. Her small face turned wistful. Tom would be there — but reserved as always, somehow withdrawn from her. It was as though he kept a barrier between them, a sort of immaterial wall that made the intimacy of their mental contact an almost purely one-sided thing. It hurt and puzzled her, and the hurt had grown as Tom's importance to her had grown.

She wondered if the wall would always be there. Didn't Tom sense her disappointment and the reluctance of her own restraint?

HER eyes caught a flicker of movement across the yard, and she looked up to see Sammy and Davey walking toward her from the direction of the barn. She retreated back into her shell of caution.

Sammy had bothered her very little of late. He seemed to sense the change in her, to be aware of a greater strength and resistance. She had often noticed him watching her with a kind of wondering calculation, and it was almost entirely for his

benefit that she maintained her secrecy and watchfulness.

Only once in the past weeks had he attempted to annoy her. They had been momentarily alone in the kitchen, and Sammy had caught at her arms from behind. She had whirled and broken free with the swiftness of a wildcat, to face him with a knife snatched from the table. Sammy had gaped at her for a second or two, and then had left the kitchen without a word.

She regarded Sammy as the greatest danger, but even Davey's dim mind appeared to have grasped the change in relationships. And he had somehow seized on it to widen his break from Sammy's control. As if in defiance of his brother, Davey favored Fran with small, clumsy kindnesses, but she knew Davey could not be depended upon. His moods were mercurial, ranging from swift, hysterical excitement to long intervals of sullen gloom.

Sammy came to a stop several feet away, his pale eyes fixed on Fran and a somehow startled expression on his wizened face. The intentness of his gaze held her for an instant as she turned away to avoid him.

He blurted, "Golly, Fran, you're pretty!"

She felt a shocked dismay. Looking at herself in the stained mirror in her bedroom, she had unselfconsciously noticed a ripening and softening, and it was unpleasant to discover that Sammy had noticed it too. She caught the blurred, cloudy move-

ment of his thoughts and shuddered as she sensed the impulses from which his admiration sprang. She was only dimly sensitive to ordinary minds; there was too great a difference — a lack of harmony. For the most part she avoided the murky, alien contact. But in that instant she understood Sammy and saw his motivations in a new light.

"You tend to your chores and leave me alone!" she told him sharply, breathless and upset. She hurried away from the porch, toward the chickens in the yard, clutching the plate of scraps and crumbs she had brought with her from the kitchen.

"Aw, Fran, don't be mad," Sammy called after her, his voice cajoling and his eyes sly. "Let's be friends."

SHE indicated her contempt by remaining coldly silent. Davey giggled suddenly, and Sammy spat a curse at him and whirled to stalk into the house.

The air grew warmer and lost its dewy freshness. Big Luke returned from a horseback trip to town with an earthenware jug, his eyes bleary and lidded and his sagging face with the shine of drunkenness. He tramped heavily into the house, and a short time later Fran heard him snoring.

She busied herself with the small tasks that remained to be done before the noonday meal. She drew water from the well, and then, a

basket in one hand, set out for the barn.

The interior was shadowed and still cool, filled with the vague sounds made by the chickens. As she searched in the hay for eggs, she saw a shaft of sunlight blocked off by a movement behind her and heard a rustle of sound. She whirled startledly to discover Sammy standing a short distance away. She had been certain he was nowhere about when she started for the barn.

He made a placating gesture. "I wish you'd stop being mad at me, Fran. I don't want you to be mad at me no more." He was breathing fast. "You . . . you're nice, Fran. You're pretty . . .so pretty."

She drew back, alarm a sudden frantic drumming in her. "Keep away from me!" she spat. "Keep away from me with your lies and nasty tricks!"

"Aw, Fran" He was sidling closer.

"Keep away, Sammy! Don't you touch me!" She moved backward over a deep, uneven carpet of hay.

He followed her for a few steps, his pale eyes glittering at her and his hands splayed and tense. And then he lunged. He caught at her shoulder as she darted aside. She heard the wash-worn fabric of her dress rip and felt Sammy's arm circle her throat. Then his full weight thrust against her and she was borne down into the hay.

For a nightmare instant Sammy's breath panting against her cheek.

And then, like a wild thing, she heaved, twisted, scratched. In violent, whip-like movement, she pulled partly away, kicked out with strong, supple legs. She succeeded in thrusting Sammy aside and scrambled erect, floundering through the deep, spongy surface under her feet.

Her panicky flight took her deeper into the barn. Abruptly one foot plunged through a gap in the hay and she fell. Before she could rise again, Sammy had reached her and was pressing her back with a savage eagerness.

She knew anger, then. Hatred and disgust swept her in a wave of scalding fury, drowning all caution, all thought of hiding. The virulence in her leaped out in a blast of mental force. Sammy shrilled with pain and convulsively jerked back, and for a stunned instant he stared at her, his pale eyes bulging and his mouth loose with almost mindless fright.

A glow radiated from her. It shone from her eyes, her skin, her hair. It lay over her like a supernal cloak. She was suddenly something more than a girl, something more than human.

Sammy drew away from her in superstitious dread, trembling, his mouth working futilely. "Monster!" he gasped at last. "You . . . you're a monster! *A monster!*"

Staggering drunkenly with panic, he ran from the barn.

Fran surged erect, starkly and coldly aware of a new and greater danger. She listened for a moment to

Sammy's hoarse cries, and knew only one course lay open to her. She would have to flee. In what little time remained she would have to put as much distance between the Beckers and herself as was possible

* * *

FAR away across the rolling field she heard the baying of hounds. She whirled to a stop within a grove of trees, listening. She breathed rapidly and deeply from the steady pace she had maintained well into the afternoon. Her dress had been shredded into rag-like strips by clutching branches, and her legs and arms were scratched and bleeding.

The distant baying held a note of eagerness. The dogs unmistakably were hot on her scent. Behind them, she knew, would be men on horseback, armed and merciless. Sammy, of course, had alerted Big Luke, who in turn had rounded up a group of neighboring farmers, always hungry for sport of any kind as an escape from their drab and near-primitive existence.

She knew her lead was swiftly being cut down. A kind of instinct had taken her toward the hills, which in more pleasant times she had seen bulking darkly against the horizon and had watched with the yearning to know what lay beyond. Once they had promised adventure; now they offered refuge. In the hills she hoped to find rough ground that would make the use of horses impossible and hinder the progress of men and dogs.

Her pulses raced with the awareness of dwindling time and distance, but she delayed a moment longer. Again, as she had done twice before, she sent her mind reaching out in an urgent, pleading call.

"Tom! Tom — can't you hear me? Where are you. Tom? Why don't you answer?"

As never before, she needed the comfort of his presence, needed his help. But he was not there. He was gone — gone as though he had never been.

She was alone. And in the distance the dogs bayed eagerly, drawing nearer, always nearer.

She drew a sobbing breath and turned to resume her flight . . .

The hills towered around her in rocky grandeur. She stood on a narrow ledge and looked down a long, broken slope toward a fringe of trees. Shapes were moving there — the shapes of dogs and mounted men.

Horses were useless now, but their riders would be fresh and their guns would bring her within easy reach. She glanced despairingly at the setting sun, aware that darkness was her only hope.

A strength and endurance beyond the ordinarily human had brought her this far, a power she had never known lay in her slender limbs. Time and again it had seemed impossible that she could continue further, but always she had drawn upon some new fount of energy. But even that, she realized, had its

limit.

A faint shout mounted to her on the breeze. One of the men was gesturing upward — and she knew she had been seen. In another instant a gun sent crashing echoes through the stillness.

The muzzles of other weapons were raising toward her as she slid around a shoulder of rock and lost herself from view. She resumed her climb upward, a slender, nymph-like figure, her gold-glinting hair tumbled about her small, pale face, her dress little more than a handful of tatters.

The baying of dogs and the shouts of men followed her.

She wound her way up rocky terraces and across stretches of gravelly soil. She worked around huge masses of rock and through narrow V-shaped clefts. Once she was able to tumble a precariously balanced boulder into a passage behind her to win a slight gain of time. But the sounds of pursuit seemed always closer.

Shadows were spreading and deepening over the hills as she reached a narrow, rushing stream among the rocks. She dropped gratefully to drink, and the deliciously cold water seemed to flood her with new strength. A little more time, she thought pleadingly. Just a little more time. Soon it would be dark. And then—

The touch of the water against her face brought a flash of inspiration. If she were to walk through the stream, she might succeed in throw-

ing the dogs off the scent. She could hear them not far off, no longer so eager or so loudly vocal, but still determined.

The water was numbingly cold against her legs and stung where sharp rocks had cut the flesh. Her path lay upward and her progress was made slow and difficult by the tumbling rock surface over which the stream flowed. But a current of triumph quickened in her. Ahead lay darkness—and escape.

The rocks under her feet were smooth and slippery from the constant rush of water. She was thinking how easy it would be to fall when one foot suddenly slid from a glass-like stone. Her ankle twisted with a tearing sensation and a burst of pain, and outlines tilted crazily as she plunged sidewise into the stream.

FOR a moment she lay utterly still, paralyzed with pain and horror. It couldn't have happened, she told herself frantically. Not now of all times! But when she finally rose and tried to walk, it was to find that the ankle would not support her weight. Sick with agony from her experiment, she dragged herself to the edge of the stream and lay with her face in her arms.

It was all over, she knew. There would be no escape after all . . .

Tom, she thought, then. *Tom!* I need you, Tom! *Why don't you answer?*

Silence — and the baying of dogs.

Close, now, so horribly close.

"*Fran!*"

Her heart leaped incredulously. That familiar presence . . . rushing nearer across some awful gulf.

"Fran, where are you? I know what has happened, but I couldn't reach you before this. Your being discovered so suddenly forced me to complete certain preparations ahead of schedule . . . But now, Fran — think carefully. Carefully. Picture the spot where you're located, the route you took reaching it. Picture it, Fran."

She squeezed her eyes shut, concentrating, thinking over in split seconds what had taken so many hours of toil and effort, of suffering and fear. Yet even as she thought, doubt and hopelessness weighted her. How could Tom possibly reach her in time?

"It *can* be done, Fran! Our abilities include the power to send ourselves instantaneously through space — teleportation. But an objective must be clearly visualized, or supplied by the mind of another. Your thoughts made a path for me."

A voice. Not a silent mental voice — but an audible voice that ended in a soft chuckle.

Unbelieving, she looked up. She saw a figure standing beside her and knew instinctively that it was Tom. But—

It wasn't Tom. Tom was an identity, a label for someone she had never seen.

This was — Davey.

Davey! The realization exploded in her, sent alternate waves of fire and ice crashing against the walls of reason.

Davey! But a changed Davey, taller and straighter, with a firmness in his face and a brightness in his eyes that had never been present before. He was somehow majestic — god-like.

DAZEDLY she realized that Davey was different, just as she was different. Behind the outward dullness of Davey, so carefully hidden that she had not suspected it, had been the flashing intelligence she had known as Tom.

He smiled again. "Yes, Fran. I'm a little surprised that you didn't connect Tom with Davey before this. You should have remembered that Davey was two years younger than Sammy — around the same age as yourself — which meant Davey had been born after the atom raids, just as you were, and was just as likely to have been . . . changed. Maybe Davey seemed a bit too empty — and he was, in more ways than one. He was never all there mentally until now.

"You see, Fran, an important part of Davey's mind was away most of the time. He was in contact with other changed children — gathering information, making plans for the future, developing his own abilities. And he had to be careful not to let Sammy or Big Luke discover his true nature. The difference between

Davey and themselves was so great that even family ties would have meant nothing. For that reason Davey pretended to be a simple-minded too, who helped Sammy in teasing you. But he wouldn't have done anything that meant actual harm."

"But why did you call yourself Tom?" Fran asked. "Why didn't you tell me you were different, too? We could have gone away — out of danger."

Davey shook his head. "You needed time to develop your full abilities, Fran, and that's done most quickly under pressure. If you knew Davey was like yourself, that pressure would be gone. There was also the chance that we might give each other away. And as for leaving, Fran, for a long time there seemed no place at all we could go to where men would not find us eventually. I and the others had to find an answer to that."

He hesitated, his gaze suddenly anxious. "It was really necessary for you to think of me as Tom, Fran. I'm sorry I had to hurt you by being secretive and on guard against you. And . . . well, I hope you're not disappointed! that I turned out to be Davey."

"No," she said quickly, smiling. For whether Tom or Davey, the kindness and quiet strength, the comfort and peace she drew from them, was the same.

THE clamor of the pursuing dogs had drawn close. Now their

lithe shapes came bounding out of the deepening shadows. They splashed across the stream, leaped forward with triumphant buglings. Fangs were bared, muscles gathering for the attack.

A soft, pale light glowed from Davey. It touched the dogs, and they plunged to a stop, frozen. And then they were yelping, tumbling over each other in panic as they whirled to flee. The shadows swallowed them.

The pale light touched Fran, touched her ankle — and the pain was gone. Pain would always go like that, she knew.

"Come," Davey said. "We're going to a place that has been waiting for us, Fran — a place none of us ever thought of until a while ago. . . . Follow the pattern in my mind. Carefully, now. Carefully."

The voices of men, puzzled and angry. The footsteps of men, grating on rock, rushing nearer.

"Quick, Fran! Quick!"

A bright thread that seemed to run endlessly through an awesome darkness. The hills around her vanished, and she felt herself whirl dizzily across an unimaginable void.

Then — The city took shape around her, glowing and spectral in the dusk. She and Davey stood on a deserted street, littered with wreckage. Ruin lay everywhere, but many of the buildings still stood.

Davey said softly, "The radiation here would kill ordinary people, Fran. But it gave birth to us and is

a part of us. We of the new race draw life and not death from it. The cities are home to us, for only we can live in them. And we will live in peace, safely and without being disturbed. In the cities we will build again, more wisely and strongly than those before us."

A group of figures appeared up the street, tall boys and slender girls. They hurried forward, laughing and dancing, and their friendly welcoming thoughts reached out.

"Home . . ." Fran murmured. She drew closer to Davey and felt a deep content.

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