

SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

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New Novels and Stories by Top Writers!

Short Novels:

HUNT THE SPACE-WITCH!.....Ivar Jorgenson 4

The blood-bond between Barsac and Zigmunn meant more than life itself, and Barsac would go through the fires of Hades to find his lost friend. But the fires of Hades were like cool breezes compared to the soul-searing forces of the Witch's Cult!

ONE AGAINST HERCULUM.....Jerry Sohl 50

The machine was never wrong, and the machine said that Alan Demuth had failed in his tests. With the entire planet against him, there was only one way for him to prove that even the machine was the testing chief's slave: he had to become a murderer!

Stories:

MAN OVERBOARD.....Alex Kirs 94

THE GIRL WAS DANGEROUS.....Walter L. Kleine 113

Departments:

THE FAN-SPACE.....Archibald Destiny 110

THE READERS' SPACE..... 128

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The Girl Was DANGEROUS

by WALTER L. KLEINE

*She told crazy lies about herself, but her strength
was inhuman and her way of using it even more so!*

Illustrated by Richard Kluga

THE GIRL with the funny accent sat on the edge of the bed and grinned up at Krojac. Flesh was beginning to swell around the ropes that bound her wrists and ankles. Her cheeks were raw and swollen, and two angry red welts ran across her back, plainly visible through her thin blouse.

Krojac let the belt buckle swing back and forth before her eyes. On the table behind him, the wide-handled knife he'd taken from the sheath taped to her thigh lay beside the pile of junk he'd dumped out of her battered purse.

"Okay, honey," he said quietly, "let's have it straight this time. Then we can all go home."

"Home? What's that?" she said, and Krojac felt the frustration of a man forced to listen to a cracked record playing the same groove over and over again. "I'm doing for the Brotherhood of Arcturus Area Planets an investigation to see if this planet can be admitted to the Brotherhood without extensive preparation. We recently have had to expand our operations, and much more territory for this is needed. It is better that we expand first to planets which do not need work done. I have reported that this one doesn't, and I am now waiting. I have been here four months, one week, three days, and," she twisted her head so she could

see the clock behind Krojac, "and thirteen hours and twenty-seven minutes. Unless someone else has turned in a report unfavorably, the boys should be here soon."

She clammed up and sat there grinning at him. It was the sixth time she'd told him the same insane story—or was it the seventh or eighth?—and she hadn't changed a word except about the time she'd been here.

Krojac suppressed an urge to beat a hole in the wall with her head and said quietly: "Why did you follow us out here tonight?"

"I didn't," she said, "I've been living here. If I had known that tonight you would be using it, I would not have come. I made a mistake badly."

Krojac forced down his anger and felt his stomach knot up. He was a Big Man in the Syndicate. Not top, or near it, but still a Big Man, not just a well-dressed goon like the two "protection" boys he'd brought along on this job. The Syndicate placed a high value on his ability to make people cooperate without making them mad, and paid him plenty to keep his nose clean and be available.

That was what the job had been tonight. A small-time bookie was trying to operate

outside the Syndicate, and didn't join when asked politely. A few hours ago they'd "borrowed" his daughter and brought her out to the old farmhouse in the middle of nowhere that they used for this sort of thing. They treated her right, and after they let her talk to her old man for a few minutes, he said sure, he'd sign up. As soon as they got a call confirming his promise, they'd take the kid back to him.

Fine; simple; no trouble at all. *Except that this grinning witch had to follow them all the way out from town!*

There was nothing on her or in her car that told them anything about her or why she followed them. And when he tried to get anything out of her—

HE WASN'T paying much attention to the protection boys behind him, and less to the book's kid, but he could feel their eyes boring into his back. The kid had never seen anything like this. The boys had heard, correctly, that he'd never taken over fifteen minutes to get cooperation from a woman.

He'd lost track of the time he'd spent on this one—half an hour, forty-five minutes?

He couldn't have much left; the call confirming the book's acceptance was due any minute. If he didn't get cooperation from the witch by then, he would have to admit his failure, and ask for instructions. That wouldn't do either his reputation or his bankroll any good. The Syndicate could not permit failure.

He forced himself to relax. She had a weak spot. Everybody had weak spots. Hers was just not one of the usual ones. He had to find it.

"You don't look dumb enough to expect anybody to believe that," he said in a soft monotone. "Do you really want me to give you the works, or are you going to give me some cooperation?"

She grinned. "If I had longer been here, I might be able to tell a lie you would believe. But I wouldn't if I could. I very much would like to know what you consider 'the works' to be."

As he stepped forward, Krojac heard one of the protection boys say: "Gees! She asked for it . . ."

Radnic Krojac knew how to use a belt. Her back was hamburger in thirty seconds.

Her grin had twisted slightly when she looked up. "Not bad," she said, "considering. But I should perhaps tell you

that on my born planet there is three and one-half times the gravity of this one. Your technique I admire, but you have not much really hurt me."

Krojac's shell of perfect self-control cracked for a fraction of a second and the belt flicked at her face. Blood dribbled down her cheek.

It was an accident, but it found her weak spot.

Her body jerked tense and the grin vanished as if turned off by a switch. "I wouldn't do that if I were you!" Her voice was a whispered snarl.

Relaxation swept over Krojac like a tidal wave. He grinned. "You're in a position to stop me?"

"I am. I will not let you make me afford plastic surgery on my face. I do not mind the back, but faces cost too much."

Krojac reached behind him and picked up her knife. He forced the grin off his face and his voice returned to its normal monotone. "Let's have a straight story this time. I won't enjoy carving you up any more than you'll enjoy your plastic surgery bill, but I promise you I can fix it so no surgeon in the world can make your face anything you'd want to see look back out of a mirror. I'm not going to ask you again. Let's have it."

He pointed the knife at the

tip of her nose and moved it slowly toward her.

"Don't do it, Krojac," she said rapidly, "don't do it for God's sake if you believe in God or your goons' sake if you don't—I don't want to kill anybody—" Abruptly she rolled back on the bed, threw her hands in front of her face and pulled her legs up tight against her body.

He stepped out of line with her legs; bent to pull her hands away from her face.

A spring exploded beneath him.

Radnic Krojac knew every judo hold in the book, and a lot that weren't put in books, but he didn't have a chance. Her fingers closed on his knife hand like steel claws, and her feet found his stomach, in spite of his precautions, and lifted him as easily as if he had been made of tissue paper. He hit the wall and felt it give. His head and shoulders dropped into the narrow space between the bed and the wall.

The sound of shots came through his daze. There were two brilliant flares of light, and the shots stopped. A woman's scream mingled with a woman's laughter. The sound of running feet cut off abruptly as the door slammed. Outside a car snarled and sprayed the house with gravel.

Krojac grabbed at the side of the bed and missed. He got it the second time and pulled himself clear. He staggered blindly across the room and grabbed the 'scope-sighted rifle off the wall.

His head had cleared a little by the time he got to the window, but it didn't do any good. She wasn't using lights and there was no moon. He could still hear her—she had taken one of the Syndicate's best "business" cars, an ancient Chevy with a souped truck engine that made it first cousin to an airplane—but the sound of the screaming motor was almost as bad as no target at all. He emptied the rifle in the general direction of the sound. It didn't stop.

He dropped the useless weapon and asked himself how it could have happened.

The only answer was that it couldn't have.

It had.

What if she had been telling the truth? No. He caught himself and swore briefly. He'd get nowhere on that angle. Things like that just didn't happen. There was a gimmick in the deal somewhere.

And how far did she think she was going in a Syndicate car, anyway? One call to the Boss and— He took two steps



Knoxy

toward the phone and stopped dead.

Tell this to the Boss?

Krojac knew that some men made a living sticking their heads into lions' mouths. He couldn't see it. If he could find the gimmick he'd be clear. The Boss would forgive almost anything to know how to pull off a stunt like that.

He took a good look at the room for the first time since she made her break.

It looked like a tank had been driven through it.

The two protection boys were flat on their backs with blood all over their chests. The bed, two tables, and three chairs were overturned. The book's girl was gone. Short bits of rope were scattered near the bed. Her knife was not in sight.

It began to make a little sense. She might have twisted his hand so that the knife cut her hands free. The knife handle was big enough to hold two short .22 barrels, and she'd had surprise in her favor. After she got the boys, she'd have had plenty of time to cut the ropes on her feet and get out before he could disentangle himself from the bed. The odds were against her being able to get away with it, but this time the dice had happened to fall right for her.

The Boss just might accept this.

Something about those pieces of rope bothered him. He walked over and picked one up, and his theory fell apart.

The rope had not been cut. Both ends were badly frayed. It had been *broken!*

"No!" he said, aloud.

The phone rang.

KROJAC made a snap decision. If he didn't answer it, and just ran, he might last one month or six, but not much longer. The Boss didn't know that the ropes were broken. If the frayed ends were cut off, the Boss just might accept his story. He practically dived at the phone.

"Rad? This is Eddie—"

"Get me the Boss, Eddie. This one blew up."

"But—"

"Don't 'but' me; get me the Boss! I said this deal blew!"

The line clicked, buzzed, clicked again. "Krojac?" The Boss's voice would have taken the paper off the walls. Krojac saw his chances dwindling. He must have caught the Boss in the middle of something big.

"Boss, did Eddie tell you we caught a tail on the way out from town?"

"No. Did you? What was he? State?"

"I don't know. He was a she. We snagged her on the lane out to the farm. She was about thirty seconds behind us. She—"

"Krojac, you called me at a time like this for a thing like that?"

"No! She killed Mike and Dom and got away with the book's kid and our car!"

There was a brief silence. Then the Boss said, very quietly, "This is serious. Which car were you driving?"

"The black Chev—4431."

Krojac could hear the Boss talking to someone else in the room, but the words were indistinguishable. Then: "How did it happen? Give me the important details and then get in here as quick as you can. We've got a bigger blow-up than yours on our hands here; we need you."

Krojac told him, with a few and as favorable details as possible.

The Boss grunted. "You said she had a crazy story about being from another planet. Did she say anything about the Brotherhood of Arcturus Area Planets?"

"Yes; how—"

"I thought so. Lock that place up tight and get in here. I'll send somebody out to

clean up the mess when I get a chance. And don't worry about it. You did this one right even if it did blow up." The phone clicked.

Krojac dropped it back on the hook, scooped up the .32 that Dom had dropped, flicked the lights off, and started running. He did not bother to lock the door behind him.

Radnic Krojac had no intention of following the Boss's instructions. He had not become a Big Man in the Syndicate by failing to put two and two together.

The only way the Boss could have known about the Brotherhood of Arcturus Area Planets was if there really was such a thing, and one of their ships had landed, or somebody else had run into one of their investigators. In either case, one thing was certain: the Brotherhood had to be a legit outfit.

If it planned on moving in on the Earth, it would not be happy about the Syndicate. If the Syndicate didn't bother them, they might not go out of their way to destroy it, but they wouldn't pass up a chance to do some damage if one came along. The girl would give them that chance. She'd probably taken the book's kid with her more for information than out of kindness.

The Boss wouldn't be Boss if he couldn't see that. The way he'd talked, something else as bad or worse might have happened.

What if some of the Brotherhood's agents had the specific job of discovering how many and what kind of syndicates were operating? That girl had acted as if she might have intended to get caught, just to see what he'd do with her.

A lot of things were possible, but they all came down to the same conclusion: the Boss wanted Krojac so he'd have somebody to throw to the wolves when they started howling.

Krojac knew that his chances of running and getting away with it were no better than they had been. If anything, they were worse. In a pinch like this the Syndicate might look even harder. But there was a slim chance that he might make it, and if he did get caught he was still no worse off than if he drove into town and let the Boss get him now.

He had one advantage: he would be driving her car, and nobody in the Syndicate knew what kind or what color it was, or what its license number was. If he played it right and drove around the city and

then south for sixty-seventy miles before he headed west, he stood a good chance of getting across the Mississippi River before morning, and before the Syndicate really got started looking for him.

They would expect him to either head north for Canada or south for Mexico, probably the latter because his money would last longer there. If he headed straight west, instead, he might be able to lose himself in some little—but not too little—western town for quite a while. Maybe until the Brotherhood of Arcturus Area Planets had time to put the Syndicate out of business. That was his chance, his one slim chance.

KROJAC missed the ashtray the first time, but found it the second, and stubbed out his half-finished cigarette. He stared up at the cracked ceiling and reached for the pack. It was empty. He crumpled it and threw it across the room, in the general direction of the wastebasket.

He swore unenthusiastically.

Only a week and a half and he was so tense and tight he felt as if he could be twanged like a violin string. Another few days and he'd have to

come out of this hole and start looking for a job—a job that couldn't give the Syndicate anything to trace him by, and a job that wouldn't call for any identification he couldn't produce. It wouldn't be easy, and it wouldn't pay much when he found it, but it would keep him going until the Syndicate either caught up with him or got taken apart in enough pieces to let him start cashing checks on his bank account back home.

He rolled off the bed and took three steps across the room and turned on the radio. A newscast was due. It might have something new.

The Brotherhood had landed, all right—he'd found that out from the radio in the girl's car—but so far they hadn't done a thing about the Syndicate. Or about any other syndicate.

The closest they'd come to it was an announcement that they would send advisers to any law enforcement agency or prison that requested it. It was the same thing they were doing for everything. Did you want help on guided missiles? Irrigation projects? Corporation finance? Polio research? Dressmaking? Petunia growing? Hairpin bending? It seemed as if all somebody had to do was name it and the

Brotherhood would offer to send advisers. If that wasn't enough, they'd offer to send people to their schools, travel expenses paid, and if there was enough demand they'd offer to set up branches of their schools at schools teaching similar courses on Earth.

They seemed to be very careful to avoid any reference to the price they were going to ask for it all.

Krojac knew that there would be a price. There always was. He wasn't worried about it. He wanted to know what the Brotherhood was going to do about the Syndicate.

The radio came to life in the middle of a commercial. The commercial driveled to a close and the news came on: "The Russian Premier, addressing a special session of the Presidium today, announced that in the future nominations for all political offices voted on by the people will be made through primary elections, instead of in party committees. A State Department expert, who declined the use of his name, said that this step, if carried out honestly, will have the effect of eventually converting the Soviet Union to a democracy. The Soviet constitution, he said, is actually a very democratic document, which has to date been ham-

strung by the complete control which the Communist Party has held over the selection of candidates for all offices. It is believed that pressure from the Brotherhood of Arcturus Area Planets was responsible for the move.

"In other action today, the Brotherhood approved two hundred and thirty-one requests for technical advisers, fifty-three requests for scholarships to their universities, and announced that it plans to set up a branch of the psychology department of one of its universities, to be named later, at an American school, to be decided upon after conference with the requesting authorities.

"In Paris today . . ."

After devoting almost ten minutes to things the Brotherhood had its fingers in, the announcer got around to local news.

It was the same sort of stuff Krojac had been hearing for the last ten days. The Brotherhood did this; the Brotherhood did that; the Brotherhood did something else; and the Brotherhood didn't do one thing about the Syndicate.

Krojac snapped the radio off and swore. *Why didn't they do something? They had the information; they must*

have it. They had that girl and the book's kid, at least. That would give them all they needed. *Why didn't they use what they had? Were they waiting for somebody to request an adviser to tell them how to get rid of that specific syndicate?*

He fumbled through his suitcase, found another pack of cigarettes. He lit one. It tasted awful. He stubbed it out. He needed a drink. He reached for the phone; stopped. The bar downstairs wouldn't be open yet. He swore again. He could call room service and get coffee. *Coffee!* The thought almost made him sick to his stomach. He'd guzzled enough coffee in the last ten days to float one of the Brotherhood's space battleships. He laughed shortly, without humor. That was a good one—float a spaceship!

He went down the hall to the bathroom and got a drink of water. It was almost as warm as the weather.

He went back to his room and sat on the bed and tried to relax.

He couldn't.

There was nothing to do. He'd read until he couldn't stand the sight of another page. He'd played solitaire until he couldn't stand the sight of the deck. He'd lis-

tened to the radio until he couldn't stand that.

He slipped the .32 out of his pocket and checked its action for perhaps the thousandth time. It was the only friend he had left, now. He hoped it would be a better friend to him than it had been to Dom. Poor Dom. He always took such good care of his guns. Krojac shrugged and dropped it back in his pocket.

If only *something* would happen to break up this deadly monotony—but thank God it hadn't. The only things that could happen out here were bad things.

There was a knock on the door.

THE .32 CAME OUT of his pocket almost before he reached for it. This *had* to be trouble. Nobody but the hotel people knew he was here, and they didn't know his real name, and they had no business up here at this time of day.

"Who's there?" he snapped. The .32 was steady on the door, at about belly-level. He had a sick feeling that it *couldn't* have happened so soon, but he was almost glad that *something* had happened.

There was no answer. He repeated the question.

The knob turned. The door moved inward a fraction of an inch before the inside bolt took hold.

"Who's there?" Krojac repeated. "I'll open it when you answer me."

Silence.

The door moved inward again, very slowly. The screws holding the bolt came out of the wood, almost soundlessly, it seemed.

Krojac stared.

The door opened and *she* stepped in. She closed the door behind her, gently. Her cheeks were smooth and clear, without a trace of a bruise, or of a scar. She was wearing a charcoal black business suit that looked like it had been poured onto her. She looked down at the gun in Krojac's hand. "I wouldn't do it, if I were you, Rad," she said. The corners of her lips tugged upward in a slight smile. "You'd have a hell of a time getting the blood off the carpet. And anyway, I took the precaution of being bullet-proof."

Krojac forced his voice to be normal. "Sit down," he said. "Take off your coat and stay a while, why don't you?" He stepped backward and leaned against the window ledge.

"Sure. Thanks." Her hands

moved up the front of her jacket in what seemed to be practically one continuous motion. She shrugged it off and tossed it onto the bed. There wasn't much under it. "I'm glad you suggested that," she said. "This planet has the warmest summer fashions I've run into since *Shedetch*." She lifted Krojac's suitcase off the room's only chair and sat down.

Krojac moved the gun up to cover her face. The Brotherhood might equip its people with flesh-colored bulletproof vests, but it would have a hard time doing the same above the neck. "I see you've gotten rid of your accent since we met," he said quietly. "Now let's see can you talk any better. For a start, how'd you find me? And why? I'm curious."

She said: "Put down the cannon, Rad. I came here to talk business, not admire the workmanship of your local artillery."

"Answer the questions and it won't go off."

She shrugged. "Well, you asked for it." Her left hand slapped at something in the air.

Something hit Krojac and jarred him to the bone. It was as if every joint in his body had been pulled apart and slammed back together. When

his head cleared, he saw the .32 lying on the floor in the center of the room.

He took one step toward it and her left hand snapped back. It was open now. It held something small and black. He stopped.

"Go ahead." She grinned wolfishly. "Go ahead; give me an excuse to do it again. The expression on your face was priceless."

Krojac stepped back.

She laughed with real humor. "I like this gimmick." She tossed it in the air and caught it. "I think it's much more effective than a belt, and," she laughed again, "it doesn't leave a mark."

She tossed it on the floor beside Krojac's .32. "Now maybe we can be friends. I said once already that I came here to talk business. You had some questions. About my accent—I never had one. I just fouled up some sentence structure so it would sound odd to you. I found you through some equipment I had on my car. You didn't know about it, so you didn't turn it off. I came after you because—"

"If you think you're going to make me rat on—"

SHE LAUGHED explosively. "Radnic, you have been listen-

ing to the propaganda on the radio. Not that there's anything wrong with that, but you've been believing it. And you should know better! Your Syndicate doesn't concern me in the slightest, unless it sticks its nose into my territory. And if it does that I still won't worry much, because somebody bigger than me will stomp them to a bloody pulp if they get out of line."

"But the Brotherhood—"

"The Brotherhood is a front! Not that it isn't a perfectly legit outfit—we're very careful about that. We're only a little part of a Galactic Federation, and the Federation has an equivalent of your FBI. It doesn't like us, but as long as we keep our front clean they can't touch us. We're the vacation spot of this end of the galaxy, and we're more than that. We're—well, take Las Vegas, Monte Carlo, and a few other similar spots, mix them up, and spread them over a few hundred thousand cubic light-years of space, and you've got the general idea.

"We operate, Rad; we operate big. But we operate big in little pieces, so if somebody goofs and the Feds stomp on him, we don't get hurt. There's thousands of—well, call them syndicates; it's as good a word as you've got—in the area of

the Brotherhood. There are big ones and little ones. Some of them cover half a planet; some of them cover a few square miles. But they all have one thing in common; they've got a good thing and they know it and they don't want to lose it. So they co-operate, and if somebody doesn't want to, he hasn't got a chance. Everybody else stomps all over him.

"Some syndicate or other has its fingers in every government in the Brotherhood—matter of fact, we made them form the Brotherhood, so we could work better and expand faster. You've seen how we're operating here—give them everything they ask for, and ask nothing in return. We don't have to ask for anything. It comes automatically. We get enough 'advisers' stuck in enough places, and people just naturally do what we want them to. No sweat; everybody's happy. It doesn't take long—four, five years maybe.

"The local syndicates get 'advisers' whether they want them or not, and they usually want them, because we've got a hell of a good deal for them. Where the syndicates don't cover, we send somebody in to fill up the gap. By the time anybody realizes what's happening we've ad-

vanced the planet so far and made so many people so happy that the people we make unhappy just don't count. We start bringing in tourists, and pretty soon the planet would go broke if they left. It's foolproof. If the Feds clean up a planet, it goes bust, and the minute they turn their backs people are begging us to come back.

"It's a good system, Rad. It's set up so it's foolproof and so it'll stay foolproof. The people that get to the top are smart ones and the tough ones. I'm smart and I'm tough—and don't you ever forget it.

"I started out in a house. That's the toughest place you can ask for, and I didn't ask for it. I went out with the wrong guy one night and got shanghied. Then somebody got me started on *jrudth* and didn't bother to tell me that the stuff will kill you in five years if you aren't addiction immune, and not more than one girl in a thousand is immune. I'm immune. The stuff deadens pain, and makes you about three times as strong as you should be. That's why it's popular in houses.

"Somebody in the exploration racket found out about me and bought my contract and gave me some training and started me out investigating

planets to see if their syndicates were big enough to be worth taking over. It's a rough job, but they pay pretty good money for it. Not enough so you can buy your contract back, of course, but good money. If you're smart—and I'm smart—you can pick up a pretty piece of change on the side. That kid I swiped from you guys brought a real pretty price.

"I could have bought my contract back a couple of years ago. I didn't—for which the Boss loved me dearly—because I wanted to make a pile and buy me a chunk of a good planet.

"This one is a *damn* good one, Rad. My old Boss sent one of his boys into your old Syndicate, and he saw to it that I got first shot at a nice chunk of uncovered territory about seventy miles or so southeast of there. He knows I'll do a good job, and set up good cooperation. It's a beautiful spot, Rad—three nice towns, lots of hills, and a river running right through the middle of it. Developed, it'll be worth a mint—a 'resort hotel' on the river, then another one . . ." She let her voice trail off, and grinned like a canary that had just swallowed the cat.

Krojac swallowed. "Good

deal, baby, but why tell it all to me? What have I done to rate this? Or do you just like to brag, or something?"

One corner of her mouth twisted up. "'Baby'—that's a good one; I like that. Well, Rad, it's this way. This job has to come from the inside out. It works like this. I put a bale of kale in your bank account—covered up right, of course. You use it to buy the land I want, and hire the architect I want. Then you ask the Brotherhood for an adviser on how to build and operate a resort hotel. They know I have that spot staked out; they send me. You know all the angles on this planet; I know all the angles in the Brotherhood. We work together and both get so rich we get stomach ulcers worrying about what to do with it all.

"That's the deal, Rad. You want it?"

She meant take it or get taken apart, and Krojac knew it. He said: "Sure, baby; I'd be a sap to pass up a deal like that. But I ask you; why me? Exactly what have I done to rate?"

She crossed the room and took his hand and shook it, and it felt like she was crushing every bone. "I said that we want smart guys and tough guys on top, Rad. You're smart enough, but you know, you're the meanest man I've met on a new planet in the last three years." She released his hand and took him in her arms and kissed him very thoroughly. She stepped back and grinned. "Radnic, I *like* you."

When Krojac could breath again, he said: "Yeah, baby; I like you, too."

