

# FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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# the huntress

by . . . *Richard R. Smith*

She was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen, and in her eyes was a promise of paradise. But to live in paradise a man must die.

MY HEADLIGHTS silhouetted her against the dark-surfaced billboard and even at sixty miles an hour, I could see she had curves and a thumb in the traditional position of a hitch-hiker.

I passed her, wonderingly. Then, on a sudden impulse, I stopped the car and backed up.

She opened the door, threw a suitcase on the back seat, slid across the front seat until she bumped against my arm and said, "Thanks."

It was too dark to see her face, so I mumbled something and started down the highway again.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"No place special." Her voice was soft, warm and joyous as if ready to burst into laughter at any moment.

"Where are *you* going?" she asked.

"No place special." It was a lie, but it sounded good. Actually, I had a very special destination: my home, wife and kids were approximately fifty miles down the highway.

I broke open a pack of cigarettes and thrust it toward her. She ac-

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*We have read a good many vampire tales by reading-lamp radiance, with the wind whistling eerily in the eaves, and a steeple bell tolling from afar. But seldom have we read such a vampire thriller as this, with its aura of billboards, weather, hitchhiking and quite realizable future science. This is Mr. Smith's third story for us, and with each new yarn his stature has grown.*

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cepted the offer. She lit my cigarette, then her own.

"Are you a salesman?" It was meant to be a question but some inflection in her voice made it sound like a statement.

"How did you know?" I asked.

"A guess. I saw your briefcase and papers on the back seat. What do you sell?"

Her perfume thrilled me. It was different than any I'd ever smelled. Would *exotic* describe it? It was as if the most exciting scents from a hundred types of flowers had been mingled in just the right proportions.

"I sell paints," I told her. "Not door to door, but to big businesses and factories that need a lot of paint."

We talked for the next two hours. Some people talk about the weather, politics and sports. She and I talked about destiny, the ecstasies of life, space travel and alien civilizations. We talked about how it feels to kill something, to fear the unknown, to die, to love and to be drunk. We even discussed jungles, work, pain and types of people.

It was the most interesting conversation of my life. It was so interesting that I drove fifty-four miles in the wrong direction before I realized where I was.

I stopped the car and glanced in the rear-view mirror. My house was only a few miles from the highway. A small side-road leads directly to the front porch. That side-road

was now fifty-four miles behind the car.

"What's the matter?" she asked in a soft voice.

"I was so busy talking to you that I drove fifty miles out of my way!"

"I'm sorry."

I turned to stare at her. The headlights of an approaching car illuminated her face and for the first time, I got a good look at my companion. She was beautiful. It was the kind of beauty that makes men abandon all caution. For a full minute I stared into her fathomless blue eyes.

"What's your name?" I whispered.

"Almira. It's Arabic. It means: a princess."

"You are a *princess*."

She laughed. "I am."

We continued to stare into each other's eyes, neither of us moving or speaking. We said a lot without saying a word . . . Messages and replied. Offers and acceptances. It was the first time in my life that I had carried on a long conversation with my eyes.

I drove to the nearest motel.

The modern log cabins clustered at the edge of a forest, but although the small buildings were close together the surrounding trees and bushes gave each an appearance of isolation and serenity. Only the brightly-lighted brick office building struck an incongruous note.

The clerk was bald, unshaven and engrossed in a pin-up girl

magazine. He looked up as we entered the office, hid the magazine, took the cigar from his thick lips and asked, "Can I help you?"

"Got a cabin?" I inquired.

He replied with a little speech of three dozen words that said in effect, "Yes."

While I fumbled for my wallet, I saw him glance at Almira's left hand and the wedding ring that wasn't there. He looked at me and smiled. One of *those* smiles. Then he looked at Almira . . . really *looked* at her for the first time. He had difficulty taking his eyes from her.

He gave me a key and I clutched it in my palm as if it were a key to paradise. He pronounced a number and I memorized it as if it were a password to eternal ecstasy.

As we walked to the cabin, I was acutely conscious of every surrounding detail, as if inner excitement had sharpened my senses abnormally. My ears registered the crunch of our feet on gravel, the hum of tires on the distant highway, the whispering of the wind in the trees and even the chatter of invisible crickets. Each sound seemed distinct, almost thunderous.

It was a small cabin.

I turned on the lights, locked the door and sat down. My knees felt weak.

She undressed with majestic poise, and without a trace of shyness. She was not ashamed, though I never took my eyes from her. She acted as if it was the most natural

thing in the world for her to undress before an audience.

When she was undressed, she turned and smiled at me. The smile seemed to say, *You may look but I'll never let you touch me.*

Her body was unbelievably beautiful, white and voluptuously formed. My temples started pounding.

I found myself thinking, *I don't want you. I love my wife. I don't know why I came here . . .*

She smiled again, turned out the lights and reclined on the bed.

And then it began.

Something left my mind and with it went *desire*. All desire for all women. The erotic ardor drained from my mind, floated away and vanished completely. Somehow, I knew the emotion had departed forever. I would never be attracted to a woman again as long as I lived.

Compassion vanished as well. For a brief moment, I had felt sorry for myself but even as I experienced the emotion, I could feel it draining from my body like water through a sieve. *All* compassion for the living—and the dead.

Sadness departed next and I knew I could never feel sad about *anything* again. I would be incapable of sorrow. My wife and children could die and I would not grieve.

It rained—beat against the roof and windows and splashed on the driveway outside the cabin.

Fear drifted away from my brain. Fear of all things—even of pain

and death. Fear of the unknown. I would never again be afraid of anything.

And because of that, for the briefest instant, I felt *proud*. Then pride itself slipped from my mental fingers, and a numbness took its place.

One by one, my human emotions slipped away into the dark night to some unknown, unimaginable destination. I could feel them going one by one: little emotions, and big, overpowering ones, and some so elusive they seemed scarcely emotions at all.

I tried to rise from the chair and discovered that my legs had become paralyzed, useless. Hate grew within me like a raging inferno. Anger at the unknown *thing* that was stealing my most precious possessions.

The rain stopped.

I wasn't angry anymore.

*Joy* was the last to go, and its departure became an eternity of pain. It was like swimming through an endless sea of broken glass. I wanted to scream, but something wouldn't let me. Hours flew by like the passing of seconds.

Dawn came, and I still sat in the chair, staring at the woman on the bed.

The paralysis of my legs ended abruptly.

Almira arose, dressed and smiled at me as she started for the door.

I followed her.

"Will you explain?" I begged, clutching desperately at her arm.

She turned and studied my face while a smile trembled at the corners of her mouth. The smile vanished. Her face changed visibly, and tears glistened on her smooth cheeks. I thought: *She looks like a woman who has shot a rabbit and is glad. Glad. And then, she goes to the rabbit, and looks into its large, tormented eyes . . . and cries.*

She explained but not with words. We stood by the door and in my mind, I saw a majestic city. Shining structures of metal thrust their towers high above the clouds and their foundations deep into the ground. The buildings were thronged with radiantly-garbed men and women, and, everywhere in the city, there were massive, audibly droning machines a hundred times more complex than an atomic generator.

I saw *farms* filled with strange pink animals, and as I watched in horror I saw the inhabitants of the great city devour them with a sickening greediness. It was not the animals' flesh which they devoured. *With their minds, they feasted on the creatures' multitudinous emotions, drawing them into their own coldly inhuman minds, and digesting them with relish.*

The last telepathic picture: A ship that traveled through space with a speed incalculable. I saw it flash through dark, empty dimensions and land on Earth. A woman left the strange ship . . .

"You see," Almira whispered, "on my native planet, I *am* a princess. I came here to *hunt*." She

cried out ecstatically and raised her arms. "Your planet is a jungle and your race are beasts in the jungle. I hunt them and I trap them. And I eat their emotions as I consumed yours." She pressed slender fingers against her temples. "And I do it because it gives me a rapturous satisfaction which you could not even comprehend."

Her arms dropped and she stared at me pleadingly through tear-filled eyes. "Do you understand?"

I nodded. I felt exactly like a dying rabbit staring up in hopeless torment at a victorious hunter.

She opened the door and left. The room was empty—and so was I.

I wanted to be afraid and could not.

I wanted to cry and couldn't.

I couldn't even be angry.

I opened the door. She was standing beside the highway, waiting.

I wanted to run and scream a warning to everyone but my legs refused to move and my mouth wouldn't shout. She had done something to my mind. As long as I lived, I would *never* be able to tell anyone about the strange huntress from another world.

My lips were forever sealed.

She signalled a bus to stop.

I watched her as she boarded the bus, and wondered how many disguises she would use, and had used in the past. How many men would she meet in bars, and hotels, on roads and beaches—*everywhere?*

*How long had she been on Earth?*

The bus hurtled down the busy highway.

