

FUTURE SCIENCE FICTION

NO. 34

35¢

CLOAK AND STAGGER

by Gordon R. Dickson



SILVERBERG
ST. CLAIR
SCORTIA



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AUTHOR, AUTHOR!

THOMAS N. SCORTIA also has a sense of humor, even though our crack about him last time had to be explained. The lad's real serious about letting someone else mix, sell, or discover chemicals while he turns to full-time writing.



★ THE LONELY STARS ★

by Scott Nichols

"When your own race finally looks outward,
you'll find how lonely it is to live in an end-
less desert."

YEARS LATER, as he tiredly circled the two thousandth lifeless world, saffron-washed by the thousandth yellow sun, Arnold Brin could still remember her vividly. She was a tinge of golden mist, drifting with a strange grace across the meadow, the rising sun turning her wind-swept hair into glowing metal threads.

It seemed that the universe was filled with yellow suns, he thought, watching the endless sweep of textured land below, each waiting for the single thing that gave it meaning: a world of life to shatter the sterile silence.

"Had we not found you," she had said those years ago, "you might have searched for us for centuries."

"We *would* have searched," he remembered answering. "Man couldn't have remained alone forever."

Alone! The word had the sound of echoing corridors. "To be lonely is like a star," his sister's small son had said, when the boy's teacher asked him to define the word.

How strange, Brin

thought, and yet how natural that a small child, looking for a way to express his feeling for the word, should have defined it in terms of this fundamental longing of the race.

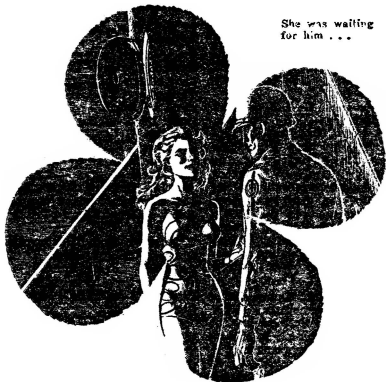
And that longing had sent an endless stream of ships out among the stars to search for one yellow sun, one golden world, one race of beings... lost in the endless night...

To circle the single world of the yellow star had taken a bare hour; to check the radiation and spectrum plots another ten minutes. In the end he ran the spore and bacteria counts from the atmosphere-sample collected by a low-flying drone torpedo he had dispatched earlier.

Then he sat, crowding the disappointment into a tiny corner of his mind, feeling very tired and trying not to think of the time when he and the countless other searchers throughout the galaxy had not been the seekers, but the sought-and-found.

When, for a scarce instant the 'Avanu and men had met; and 'Elyea had come from the great ship onto the green

She was waiting
for him . . .



meadow in a shining haze of golden motion . . .

FIRST LIEUTENANT BRIN had already returned to the Bachelor Officers' Quarters when Division Headquarters called his company to signal a yellow alert for Emergency Plan White. His battalion had jumped that day under full combat equipment, in spite of a heavy wind. The Corps G-3 had designated Bougainville Drop

Zone for the operation, forgetting the tall stands of pine ringing the area. Brin supervised the evacuation of their three bad Parachute Landing Fall casualties; completed a field inventory with his supply officer of the scattered major equipment from the heavy drop that had preceded their bailout; held a field muster of the company, and entrucked them for the main. By the time that was done, he had become aware of a nag-

zing muscle strain in the shoulder from the violent opening shock of his parachute and a heavier muscle fatigue from three days without adequate sleep.

As soon as he had checked the Battalion Daily Bulletin, and signed three supply requisitions he gave First Sergeant Dowd instructions to have the Charge of Quarters call him thirty minutes before reveille the next morning. Brin returned to the BOQ, pulled the dusty jump boots from his tired feet, kicked his limp field pants into a corner, showered, and literally fell onto the field cot.

It seemed that he had barely closed his eyes when a thick hand shook him awake. It took him a moment to recognize his first Sergeant in the sudden glare of harsh light. The expression on the man's face drove the haze of sleep from his eyes in a second.

"What's wrong?" he asked, throwing his feet to the cold floor.

"They're not kidding this time," Dowd said. "It's a yellow alert and they mean it."

"Bombers?"

He began to dress rapidly.

"Who knows? Battalion trucks are due in the company area in twenty minutes."

"They're crazy. Those men can't jump; they're dead on their feet," Brin muttered, buckling his web belt.

"Battalion said twenty minutes."

BY THE TIME they reached his orderly room the platoon sergeants were forming the men in the company street. Mr. MacBlade, his Company Administrator, arrived seconds later. McBlade's right lapel, where his Chief Warrant Officer's bar should have been, was empty, showing the haste with which he had dressed. His graphite-grey hair was showing tangled and uncombed under his visored, stiffly-blocked field cap.

"I can't find Lieutenants Gorm or Dale," he said. "They must have gone into town."

"Get yourself a helmet," Brin told him. "You'll have to jump with us."

Behind him he heard the roar of the troop carriers marshalling in the main street, their automatic transmissions screaming as they reversed themselves and backed into the curb for loading.

"Move the men out," he told Sergeant Dowd, as the tail gates of the trucks fell with a rattle of chains.

Major Lawson, the Division G-3, was waiting for them at the field.

"Listen," he told Brin, "the drop area is twenty minutes away. Low altitude. The pilot will show you the field. You're to throw a skirmish line around the field and hold it until we can bring in planes for a heavy equipment drop. Corps will have a 240 mm recoilless howitzer dropped a

mile south within the hour. She'll be ready to drop big stuff on your position ten minutes later."

"Big stuff," he said. "You mean atomic?"

"Mister," the major said: "We're pouring everything we can on that Kentucky bluegrass meadow. An hour ago, a rocket landed there. Washington says it intersected the transatlantic T.V. beam that bounces from the moon."

"A space ship?"

"Exactly. The whole eastern seaboard is arming to the teeth. What worries me is that maybe our best won't be enough."

A NIGHT jump without a moon is frightening—falling into blackness, with heavy pressure of the ground a solid thing as you fall. A low altitude jump under such conditions is worse. You can't see the ground until the last few feet and then it's often too late to take a stiff-leg roll on the PLF. A bad Parachute Landing Fall under those conditions can splinter a leg before the jumper can compensate for his misjudgement. Fortunately, a skeleton reserve company had arrived minutes earlier, from nearby Louisville, and had lighted five bonfires to mark the area.

In spite of the darkness and the fatigue of the men, the bonfires brought them in safely; when Sgt. Dowd held his muster, Brin was pleased to find only one casualty, a

Walbrook gunner. He had lost his automatic rifle in the jump, however, which left them with only eight.

He called his platoon NCO's together, listened while the reserve lieutenant, whose men had lighted the fires, briefed them and then gave orders to the non-coms on posting their men and weapons.

It was only then that he was able to look out, over the dark meadow, to the mass occulting the stars and faint glow of the horizon.

It was only then that the full exciting impact of what he was seeing burst upon him.

A ship from space...from the stars. The thought brought a throbbing knot to his throat and it was suddenly painful to swallow.

THE MEADOWLAND upon which the ship had landed stretched out for a rolling mile, the reserve lieutenant had told him. The ship looked massive from what he could judge at a distance; it was from a hundred to a hundred-and-fifty feet tall, he estimated—a vague white shape that loomed powerfully against the night sky, at perhaps a quarter of a mile.

How, he wondered, could they hope to throw more than a series of outposts around such an area, with the bare hundred and eighteen men he had?

"What kind of bugs do you think they are in that thing,"

Mr. McBlade's voice said behind him.

The sudden sound made Brin's hand dart automatically to the service automatic at his hip. In the dark, he smiled unseen at his fright. "Bugs? Why do they have to be bugs?"

"You can't tell me men built that thing," the Warrant Officer said drily.

"Not any man of earth," Brin agreed.

"Whatever they look like, it's ten to one you'll want to get drunk after seeing one. That is—if you or any of us lives long enough to get back to a bar."

BRIN STARTED to say something, then thought better of it. He shrugged, wondering what twist in the minds of most men caused them to hate and fear the strange.

He thought of the brilliant yellow and black spiders in his aunt's garden when he was a kid. He had known that they were harmless. One summer he had found one near the decaying board fence that set off the rear yard; its graceful web stretched between a hollyhock and a rose trestle, gleaming with the diamond glints of morning dew. When he hadn't come to breakfast, his aunt had found him sitting directly under the web, watching the golden creature build its fabric higher and higher, like a cloud, from the juices of its

own body. His aunt had pulled him bodily from the spot and attacked the jeweled web with a broom. He still remembered the way the green juices g'ittered on her undersole after she lifted her foot from the crushed thing that had been so beautiful to him.

"No," he said, "whoever or whatever they are, I don't think we have to worry. They wouldn't have landed this way if they meant trouble. They'd have come in shooting."

"We've just tied into Corps and Division Command Radio Net. Try and convince *them* of that," MacBlade snorted.

Brin felt a flash of annoyance for a moment. Like most enlisted men who had gained their warrant late in their Army career, MacBlade always spoke to officers with a faint undercurrent of impatience and contempt in his voice.

"What about Corps?" Brin asked.

"Corps C. P. is back in Louisville. Division Command Post is fifteen miles to our rear. No other troops are to come nearer than five miles. That's in case they have to drop a big one in. Which means we're the patsies if your aliens turn out to have tentacles and 'fight' in their bug eyes."

You had to play it safe, Brin admitted but... "I hope Division Artillery doesn't get itchy lanyard fingers," he said.

MMORNING brought a faint glow in the east and a dis-

tant rustling of conversation. He pulled out of his field bed-roll and looked across the meadow. There were scattered groups of civilians, ringing the area. For a moment he swoce silently; then he yelled for Sergeant Dowd.

"Where in hell did they come from," he demanded.

"They started showing up about an hour ago. Most of them drove in from Louisville."

"How the blazes did they get past Division's road-blocks?"

"Division only blocked the main highways. That reserve lieutenant told me there's a whole web of dirt roads to the north and west." He gestured over his shoulder.

"Didn't want to wake you. I gave our boys orders to keep 'em herded back. Told the boys to get a little rough if necessary. Crazy flatheads think they're at a picnic."

By the time it was light enough to make out the details of the spaceship, the crowd of civilians was an unbroken line hemming the north extension of his lines. Brin turned and, for a moment felt the sudden tightness of his throat again. Every time he looked at the great gleaming ship, he felt excitement. He had borrowed an M-3 compass from one of the gunners and shot a vertical azimuth to the tip of the ship. By juggling his angles

a bit and doing some pencil calculation on the canvas leg of his field trousers, he found that the ship was nearly a hundred and thirty feet tall.

IT WAS A single, seamless Ivaned needle shape, with the exception of four circular ports near the tip and a gleaming insignia halfway down the body that looked like green anodized aluminum. The insignia was shaped like the petals of a four-leafed clover without the stem. For some reason the sign made him smile. Maybe the four-leafed clover didn't mean to the aliens what it meant to men; but if men had built the ship, they might well have graced it with something half-humorously symbolic, such as that. Peculiarly enough, the idea was comforting. Perhaps the aliens in the ship knew men well enough to use just such a device in an attempt to reassure them.

The civilians were beginning to give his men trouble, and Brin started toward the restless line of people. Mac-Blade fell in beside him.

"Div Arty says they got a geodetic survey map of this area and have the ship surveyed in. Give 'em the word and they start dropping stuff. High Explosive first, to give us a chance to get out. Then a big one, twenty K. T."

"Twenty thousands tons of T.N.T.? That's a firecracker."

"Oh, they got a B-60 in the

air with a granddady, if they need it. Coupla hundred megaton type."

"O.K.," Brin said. "I want you by that radio. Give the order if you have to, but don't do anything wild."

"Yes, sir, Lieutenant," Mac-Blade replied with a faint touch of insolence, and turned away before Brin could say anything.

HE WALKED over to the line of civilians and yelled, "All right, listen to me."

They were all talking at once. Damned fools; some of them had even brought their kids along.

He unholstered his .45 and fired twice into the air. In the sudden silence, he yelled, "If you've got any sense, you'll go home. There's liable to be artillery dropping in here soon."

"Ah, Cap'n," a slurred voice yelled from his left, "we wanna see the monsters."

"Damn it," he yelled, "you get in the way of my men and I'll bring tear gas in here."

A young man near at hand yelled, "Forty eight..."

Others who could be former army men took up the chant, "Forty-eight, forty-nine, fifty..."

"Hurray for the soldier boy," a woman yelled and they all began to yell, drowning out even the last of the vulgar Army chant the young man had started.

In that instant, it were as if someone had pulled a switch. Like a wave, deadening silence flowed over the crowd; it seemed as if the mass of people were breathing in perfect unison.

He saw one of the riflemen near him staring toward the ship, his carbine pressed into his hip alertly as he half-crouched. Brin turned his momentary sweeping glance, saw all his men freezing into menacing positions. Then he saw that a hatch had opened near the base of one of the spaceship's airfoils; a small platform moved silently down the side of the needleshape. Before it disappeared between the tripod extensions upon which the ship rested, he saw a black shape on its surface. He watched the hatch disappear as though it had melted into the metal.

This is it, he thought. Oh, Lord, this is it, and he felt his hand straying toward the newly-holstered automatic.

He saw a shape moving under the ship then, but the morning shadows blotted out all details.

HE GLANCED up and down his side of the meadow, seeing his automatic rifle crews flattened behind their weapons, the arming bolts at full load... waiting.

He turned back, watching the approaching figure. The far end of the crowd nearest the ship suddenly broke its

calm and he heard a shrill rebel yell.

He saw one of the automatic gun crews jump from behind their weapon and begin to pound each other on the back. Then he turned and looked again. Recognition came with the force of an electric shock.

For a moment he forgot the people around him. The sudden change from silence to confused noise behind him didn't register. For an instant, emotion held him paralyzed.

The feeling washed over him like scented air. The feeling of wanting, needing, and final realization. A part of his mind sneered at the fears of MacBlade, for here was the complete realization of the impossible desire for completion that every man had ever felt.

She was like a mist floating toward him, something so completely unmortal that, for an instant, the distant childhood awe of things beautiful and unreal seized him.

THE MORNING sun glinted in her hair, turning it into yellow metal. He knew her limbs were moving, that she was walking, but no such prosaic explanation could explain the supernal grace with which she moved.

Near at hand, some of his men were throwing down their weapons without thought. He saw golden skin

with ochre shadows—the youthful hollows of the throat, between slender cords that rippled as she turned her head. He saw impossibly smooth skin with the faint ripple of light muscles as she walked. The incongruity of her abbreviated costume flitted through his mind and was discarded.

Then, as he heard the swelling sound of the crowd behind him, he was suddenly aware of what was happening. "Sergeant Dowd," he yelled. "Get your men under control."

The First Sergeant seemed to start visibly.

"Move these damned civilians back. Use your rifle butts if you have to."

"Yes, sir," Dowd said without enthusiasm. He began to yell commands at the men, trying to snap them out of the spell.

The golden woman paused, looking at Brin with wide eyes. He started toward her as Dowd and his men began to move in on the crowd.

"No..." the voice was organ music, deep and vibrant but very feminine. He could scarcely see her lips move.

"No," she said, "don't force them; I'll return to the ship."

"It would be better," he said, wondering at the calm matter-of-factness of his tone, "if we could both move back toward the ship."

AN HOUR later, after the woman, whose name was 'Elyen, (*Funny, he had thought, it sounds like "Helen."*) had returned to her ship, he made his way to the gulley where MacBlade had mounted his command radio and set up the company C.P. Up to that moment, he had taken the mammoth forces centered on this small piece of land for granted; but now the sheer brute power, poised to obliterate everything within the mile, weighed upon him with the oppression of a coming storm.

He could imagine the wide sighs of relief when he radiated the meeting with the girl back to Division, and they in turn transmitted it to Corps. He had still not returned completely to normal. The remembered warmth of the woman lived with him, an emotional aura, as though she radiated physical warmth like the sun.

MacBlade looked up with a grin as he came over the edge of the wash. "Why'n't you call me, Lieutenant? I missed most o' the show."

"I was busy," Brin said.

"Nice kinda business. Boy, what a piece, I hear. Man, wouldn't I like to..."

"You shut your damned mouth, Mister," Brin told him, angrily, "That's an order."

For a minute, anger flared in the Warrent Officer's eyes.

Then he twisted his lips in a humorless smile and said, "Yes, sir," stretching out the second word.

BRIN PICKED up a pad of message blanks and began to write a description of what had happened. Then he handed it to MacBlade.

"Code that and send it out. Better use verification, too. We don't want this to get out to the civilian newsmen until the brass decides."

He left the gully, walked over to the spot where he had left his bedroll, and sat down.

Now, he thought, *it's out of my hands.*

Would the men who were the final recipients of his message believe him, believe that there was no menace in the great ship on the meadow? Well, if they came to see the woman, they would certainly believe.

He thought of what her offer of technical and cultural exchange between the two races would mean to Earth.

They'd get along, he told himself, Earthmen and the race she called 'Avanu.

Thank God, they're not too different, he thought.

THREE MEDIUM tanks, equipped with flame-throwers, moved into the area in the afternoon. The flame-throwers had been loaded with a crude oil-water emul-

sion; and under the threat of being sprayed with high pressure jets of such a messy combination, the crowd of civilians began to disperse. Brin silently thanked the bright boy in the rear who had thought that one up.

After the second lieutenant in charge of the tank detail had reported to him, and he had assigned an area of responsibility for them, he returned to the Command Post in the gulley and waited. In due course, the radio operator handed him a decoded message from General Hickman, the Corps Commander. He wasn't particularly surprised that the General had jumped command channels for the moment.

Allow no one to leave the immediate area of the ship, the message directed. Representatives of the Departments of State and Defense would arrive sometime in the morning to assess the situation. Good work out there. Period. End of Message. Hickman, MGen.; FECORCOG.

"What now?" MacBlade asked.

"We wait," Brin said, handing him the message.

FOR THE first time in his career, Arnold Brin violated one of his own orders. As soon as it was quite dark, and most of the men not on duty had sought sleep in their bedrolls, he walked across the

meadow toward the great ship. He was not sure of what he would find, but he couldn't resist.

He paused under the great shape and peered up into the blackness of the jets, imagining the flame that could pour from them. Where had they first thrown out their fury?

Within the system or from far out? The girl hadn't told him and he hadn't thought to ask. The emotional effect of her closeness had been so great that just the thought of her brought the same quick tenseness, the...

He turned and sensed her close at hand.

"Yes," she said, in the darkness, "the rockets do give us a high velocity, but you need more than a reaction motor to bridge the distance between your world and mine."

"Your world?"

"Very far away," she said huskily. "It's a beautiful world, with a sun larger than yours, but gentler—a golden sun, rather than a fiery yellow. With even the drive it took a long time."

"If your world is so far away, why come to Earth then? Why not some nearer world?"

"OH, WE VISIT other worlds," she said. "But life is a rare thing in the universe. We've searched for centuries of your time for another race, and we have better

means of detecting such than your people. When we found your people, a decade ago..."

"A decade ago..." he said, seizing on the words. "And you've just made yourself known?"

He felt her touch on his arm.

"You must understand," she said. "There's nothing sinister in this. We wanted some other race, some partnership. When your own race finally looks outward, you'll find how lonely it is to live in an endless desert. But we had to be sure before we contacted you. We had to learn your way of thinking, how best to approach you. When we were ready, we changed the form of our ship to something you would recognize as a space vessel; we picked the good-luck symbol that the English-speaking people use, to help allay your fears. That's why only I appeared today... because we knew that my appearance would be completely disarming to a group of men."

"Others?" he asked.

"Yes, three men, two other women. They generated the empathy field that had such an emotional effect on your men."

For the first time, Brin felt sudden doubt. If these people could control emotions in that manner...

HE MUST have moved away from her for she

said, "No, please believe me; we need you, but only as fellow beings. You don't know the loneliness..."

"We...perhaps you'll regret knowing us," he said after a moment.

"We must take that chance."

"You're close enough to us so that there shouldn't be major trouble."

"We seem to be alike," she said, "but this fear of your people for the strange—the outre—I don't understand. We know instinctively that the form isn't important. There is an essential humanness, an essential maleness or femaleness in races we might meet, that transcends form..."

He thought of the pain and fear that the colors of men's skin, of worshipping God, had brought in times past, but said nothing. In the end they talked of what the stars were like outside, the vast stretches of lifeless void.

"Had you been the one to develop the drive, without certain instrumentes, you might have searched for centuries without finding us, or any other life," she said.

And they talked of what she would give to men tomorrow, the knowledge of their star drive and knowledge of bio-chemistry that would prolong life—even the possibility of rejuvenation. Of techniques unthought of in Earth

culture, like the robots her race built—in which a man's distant mind might go searching in depths of the ocean while he still remained on land, or where that same mind might brave the crushing pressures of Jupiter.

And the new ways of thinking, the growth of both their races with this contact after years of searching by the 'Avanu.

And they stood silently for long moments, just savoring the awareness of closeness.

It was like no other experience in Arnold Brin's life, this feeling of completeness, he realized suddenly the feeling for this alien woman, growing in him.

When finally he started to go, she stopped him for an instant and said, her voice suddenly uncertain:

"I...I wanted you to know that the empathy field... Well, it was turned off this afternoon."

He was not even aware of walking the distance from the ship to where he had left his bedding.

AT TEN THE next morning the staff helicopter arrived. Brin and MacBlade watched it land, and then ran forward. Two men in business suits alighted, followed by an officer whom Brin recognized as General Hickman.

He stopped before the group and saluted.

"This is Lt. Brinn, whom I mentioned," the General said after he had returned the salute. Then he introduced Mr. Swinton of the Defense Department and Mr. Hale of State.

"Would you like a guard," Brinn asked.

"I don't think that will be necessary," Hale said.

"No point in delaying," Swinton added. "Will you lead the way, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir," he said and turned toward the ship, MacBlade flanking him on the left.

THEY WALKED in silence for several minutes and then Brin halted. The girl had appeared near a tripod leg and was approaching them. As she came closer, Brinn saw that she was now wearing a loose-sleeved flowing robe of some white textured cloth.

'Elyen he thought. *Helen... Helen, thy beauty is to me like those Nicean barques of old...*

'Elyen... Helen who would start the race of man on the path to the stars...

Helen... Is this the face that launched a thousand ships?

"Good morning," she said, "I'm very happy to see you." Organ music...

"The others have asked me to give you this." He saw that she was carrying a sheaf of

papers, bound between plastic boards. She smiled shyly then. "Guests should always bring presents."

Beside Brin, MacBlade snorted faintly.

"On behalf of the President of the United States..." Hale began.

"Would it be better?" she asked, "if the leader of this party were present."

"Aren't you the only one?" Hale inquired.

"No," she said.

"We would like very much to meet him," Swinton said.

"Do you think this wise?" she asked, turning to Brin.

"Of course," he replied. "Mr. Hale represents the President."

IT WASN'T until she called out in a chopped guttural language that he felt the premonition of what was to come.

He was too stunned to speak for an instant.

Someone—he thought it was the General—screamed. Even at that detail-blurring distance, he saw enough to make him want to vomit.

MacBlade was yelling. "Oh, my God, my God," and his revolver was suddenly in his hand, its blast drowning his voice.

"No!" Elyen screamed and stepped in front of him. Bullet after bullet tugged at her robe. Brin heard the sound of

ricochets and stared at her with sudden horror.

"Get down," she yelled and fell forward, missing MacBlade and felling Brin, and the General, and the two civilians to the ground.

There was a sudden roar of sound and a wave of fading heat. He rolled over to see the great ship, streaking for the heavens.

Someone was sobbing as he rose to his feet. He looked down and saw her sitting while her body shook with the force of her grief. As they ringed her, she looked up at them. "What beasts you are," she said.

"Wait," Hale protested; "you don't understand."

"No, not until you have changed will we meet."

"You've got to come back," Swinton said.

"No," she said, her voice fading in intensity, "when my mind leaves this body, you will not see us again until you yourselves find us. When you want us badly enough to search for us, as we have searched for you, that will be the time. You have the drive and the knowledge to prolong your life. When you are ready you will find us."

She turned dulling eyes on Brin. "Remember, the essence of maleness, of femaleness no matter what form. I tried to tell you."

He could feel the horror of

what had happened closing on him.

As her body sank back limply to the green grass, he heard her say softly, "I did love you."

THE UNIVERSE was filled with yellow suns, endless sterile suns. Nowhere in the galaxy was there the sign of life. Arnold Brin sat with the limp coils of paper in his hand, the coils of paper with the jagged lines that told of failure.

Long ago, he had found a sign—a fused place on the desert planet, but the sand was radioactive.

And there had been the jagged foundations of a temporary camp on a nearer sun. All clues that might point the way.

And throughout the stars,

men of Earth search endlessly for the single golden sun, with the golden planet and the single race that had come to offer to man their hand in the loneliness of the stars.

Brin looked at the wrinkled flesh of his hand, felt the tired weight of his aging body—which might be young again if only he found them... found her.

He keyed the drive, feeling the ship surge forward in its endless search. The clues. Perhaps they had been left deliberately. He would never know until he found the golden sun.

But he had to find them.

Helen. Of the thousand ships his must find them.

Someday.

But it must be soon

————— ★ —————