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MATING SEASON

By WILTON G. BEGGS

Arnalla was a violent world.

*But no more so than the violence that
remained hidden in the
hearts of men—and women.*

IN less than a month," Mary Gibbs whispered, hating the circling beasts. "Thank God I won't be alive to see it again."

Mary had awaked only moments before, but the twin Arnalla suns were already hot above the jungle fronds. The sky was harsh and metallic, a bilious green inverted over a rank world of silence. Through a window Mary watched the gray creatures wheeling in the distance.

Their movements had a nightmarishly somnolent quality. The huge, leathery wings flapped so slowly that it seemed the beasts would lose momentum, and fall into the smoking lake beneath them. There were no placid cries, no calling to one another. The animals of Arnalla had not risen above a semireptile stage of evolution. They were voiceless, except during the mating season,

when the females' screams pervaded the jungles from pole to pole.

"Devils." Mary rose painfully from the sweat-soaked bed. Taking her dress off the back of a chair she slipped the rotting material over her head. She swayed as she worked. "In less than a month the'yll make this planet even more a hell."

Mary had witnessed the spectacle ten times, but she had never accepted it. The thing was too ghastly, too insane. It was in no way like the animal courtships of Earth.

"Why are the females the aggressors?" Mary had asked her husband that first year, ten years ago, while the colonists were still living in the wrecked spaceship that had brought them to Arnalla. She had cowered with the others, awed by the raging hor-

ror outside, waiting for an end to the weeks of death.

"Arnalla isn't Earth, darling," James had said back then, his handsome face untroubled by the shrieking, and the guts and blood on the transparent portholes. "It's a different world, but this is basically the old story of the survival of the fittest. The strong females kill off the weaklings. That way, only the best eggs are laid."

Mary had accepted this explanation of the annual carnage during her first season on the planet. She did not accept it later. Often, she had noticed, some battle-scarred veteran would become so fierce that she lived for years. Too old for egg-laying, the veterans killed hundreds of healthy but inexperienced young females before they finally drowned in their own blood. From the safety of the spaceship, where the colonists took refuge each mating period, Mary had seen these aged murderesses killing right and left for days on end. It was as if the ancient beasts were determined to annihilate their entire race.

"They are as I am," Mary said dully, staring at the once-pretty face in the mirror beside her bed. She held up her pale hands, from which the flesh seemed in the process of melting away. "But where are my claws and fangs?"

She sighed and looked out at the far-off, circling beasts.

Though not the largest of Arnalla's animals, they were gigantic creatures, with wingspreads of at least thirty feet. From the armor-plated dragons of the northern seas, to the jungle behemoths, all the animals of Arnalla were monsters. Even the swamp vegetarians possessed crocodilian teeth and claws of iron.

"They have to be terrible," her husband, James, had told Mary long ago. "No defenseless group could survive the mating. The madness hits every animal at the same time, on the same indefinite day. The males are always weaker. After performing their duty they are immediately killed. For several weeks the females will attack anything that moves. Most of them die in combat, and the victors lay millions of eggs. The new generation hatches with incredible swiftness. By the end of the Arnallan year the youngsters are full-grown. The planet teems with life, and the cycle is repeated."

Mary shuddered, turning away from the window. This morning the pain in her stomach blazed with the force of lightning. She bent double. She moaned as the agony became more intense.

A door opened, the rusted hinges screeching. "Darling?" Mary's husband strode to her across the warped floor. Glowing with health he lifted her in his muscular arms. He was naked,



for the majority of the colonists had stopped wearing clothes after their third year on Arnalla. The humid, hot atmosphere ruined cloth, shredded it, made the briefest skirt or trousers sticky and uncomfortable. Mary was of the few who had refused to discard the rotting Earthian garments.

"Are you ill again, darling?" James's sun-bronzed face was concerned. "I wanted you to sleep as long as possible. Last night . . . Perhaps I shouldn't have . . ."

Mary put her wasted fingers over her husband's mouth. "Don't apologize. You hadn't treated me like a woman for such a long time."

She started to say more, then bit her colorless lips. She did not blame him because his love-making had been born of guilt rather than of desire. Held against his deep chest Mary could almost feel the vibrant life pounding through her husband's hard young body.

It is not his fault, she told herself grimly.

The pain eased, and Mary stood up, using James's arm for support. "I wonder why it's progressing so slowly. I just hang on, don't I? The others went faster. They . . ."

"Don't," said her husband. "Don't, darling."

Mary smiled sadly, thinking of the others. They, too, had con-

tracted this Arnallan disease without a name, this strange sickness the hostile climate produced. They, too, had experienced pain, and had lingered until they were shells of their former selves. Then they had died, and not any of the medical knowledge brought with the colonists from Earth had eased that dying by one iota.

"You've not been resting enough lately," James said, forcing a cheerful tone. "You're . . ."

"Of course I can't rest!" The anguished words were out before Mary could dam them back. "Don't you think I know what's in your mind?"

They glared at each other a moment, wildly, miserably. The twin suns were beating upon the room. It was being changed into an oven. Perspiration darkening her dress Mary ran to the window. Her arms were outstretched, as if in homage to the winged obscenities circling in the bilious green sky.

"They would understand," she said, choking. "Those scarred old demons would understand how I feel."

Far below Mary, a few hundred feet beyond a strip of jungle, the lake shore began. A stone pier jutted into the water down directly opposite the window. A dugout was tied to the pier. The bubbling surface of the lake was hazy with smoke.

"I'm sorry," Mary said after a while, gaining control of herself. "The approach of the mating season always sets me on edge." Shielding her eyes she could barely see the great spaceship through the smoke. Rusted and stained it sat upright where the colonists had crash-landed ten years before, on a small volcanic island out in the lake. "Susan and I are going over this morning to prepare the quarters for this year's refuge. I'm too weak for the heavy tasks, but she wants me to show her where the cleaning utensils are."

Mary swung about. She stared at her husband, daring him to speak, begging him mutely. He blanched beneath the golden tan. His mouth opened, but no sound came forth.

They left the room and went into the upstairs hall of the immense house. The big, rambling building had been erected by the colonists during their first months on the planet, before they recognized the trap into which they had plunged themselves. There had been one hundred of them then, the original number. Few of them were over thirty at the time, and they had built grandly, for the future, for the overflow of babies expected within the next decade.

"I hate the house," Mary said, leaning on James as they walked toward a staircase at the end of

the long hall. "To me it is the symbol of our failure in this awful world." Desolation lay on both sides of her. All the generous rooms by which she and her husband passed were empty of people, the handmade furniture moldy and mildewed, gaping doors fallen inward, or hanging by a rusted hinge. "On Earth it would have taken a century to make this havoc. But Arnalla! Arnalla is Hell!"

They went down the creaking stairs carefully, avoiding the steps ready to give way under a heavy weight. Sometimes it seemed to Mary that nothing they had built on this planet, or brought with them, had lasted more than a score of weeks. Something in the air, something in the exhalation of the very soil, hastened all forms of decay and death. The colonists' powerful weapons and work tools had worn out years ago, though everything of this sort had been almost indestructible on Earth.

"I wish I had died with my mother and father," Mary said bitterly. "Don't you wish we had lived in dignity, until the bombs fell?"

Her husband lowered his head, but made no reply, and Mary realized he did not wish the thing at all. Dreadful as Arnalla was, he clung to his life. For some reason he thrived in the malevolent atmosphere. He accepted each de-

gradation, the hunger and fear, the Adamic nudity, the advancing loss of every vestige of Earthian civilization. He accepted, and he had bloomed while the others wilted and perished.

Mary remembered James's excitement on the day far in the past when the famous explorer, Enno Arnal, invited them to be among his settlers on this bizarre world. "Think of it!" James had exulted to her that evening. "My family's old friend has stumbled upon the only hospitable planet besides Earth that man has found in the Galaxy. He wants us to go. He needs strong young men and girls. Marry me, darling. Give our children a chance. I'm certain the next war is going to wipe out the human race on Earth."

So Mary had married the boy she loved, not because she believed Earth doomed, but because he would have gone without her if she had refused him. She was eighteen, and he barely twenty, and the tears of her parents had been forgotten during the long, long honeymoon through space.

"Anral promised us so much," Mary said, struggling for her breath at the foot of the moldering staircase. "But I've stopped hating him, James. I envy Arnal, that the beasts snatched him away before we stopped hoping."

She chuckled without humor, remembering how the optimistic

young settlers had maintained their high spirits after their leader was killed by a lake caco-demon during the first mating season. After the sickness began, and the crashed spaceship proved unrepairable, they had still hoped. Even after the tools and weapons fell apart in their hands, their hope had remained, and even after they were reduced to hunting food with spears and axes. In the beginning they expected the overdue ships that were to bring fresh supplies and new people. Then, when four years of wretchedness slipped by, and five, and six, the remnant left alive had searched the green sky just for a rescue vessel to take them off the planet of death.

No ship came, however, and finally the shrinking emigrant band had experienced the full horror of their abandonment. They could question no further whether the ultimate war which must not happen, had happened, or whether the rockets which must never be loosed, had obliterated the cities of Earth. They the dying prisoners of Arnalla, were the last human beings alive in the universe.

"It seems incredible yet," Mary said, as she and James walked across the rubble covering the ground floor of the house. Through a hole in a wall created by some night monster, she could see a girl bending over a

fuming cook fire. The girl was nude, and no more than sixteen by the Earthian age scale. She was auburn-haired and very pretty. "You and I and Susan. The last of our kind anywhere, James."

The girl glanced up on hearing Mary's voice. She waved artlessly, but Mary did not miss the unspoken signal that sang between the nubile child and the man. The pain and nausea of her illness rose in Mary like a sword. She fought it sternly, sorrowfully amused by her husband's boyish expression of lust.

No effort had been made in years at keeping the ground floor repaired. The big room Mary and he traversed was filthy with a brown, noisome fungus. It was spread across the boards like a carpet. Pulpy bunches of the blight reared in balls upon the crumbling tables and chairs. Mary and James went outside into a tiny area of packed dirt beside the house.

"Breakfast," the naked child said, turning a rickety spit slowly over the fire. She removed a lump of meat gingerly, and handed it to James. The greasy mass was half-raw. He tore it with his gleaming teeth. Mary declined her portion, shaking her head and shoving her trembling fists deep inside the pockets of her sweat-dampened dress.

"Aren't you hungry?" Juice

trickled down the girl's dimpled chin as she ate. "James may not kill anything today."

Mary leaned against the house wall. "It doesn't matter." The exterior of the building was tortured to the roof by a thick mat of blackish, mosslike plants. Mary rested against the rubbery substance gratefully. "After the weapons ruined, and it became so difficult to get our food, I used to be starved all the time. But the sickness takes care of that. Like the others, I've lost my appetite."

Instinctively the girl and the man looked behind them into the tangle of primitive trees and ferns and vines abounding toward the west. In that direction lay the cemetery. It was submerged by the sultry wilderness, but once the region about the house had been cleared for miles. The clearing had extended to the beast barrier that had kept animals away except during the insanity of the mating season. Now the barrier was inoperative, and the jungle was tightening a noose about the building, pushing at it everywhere with mushrooming varieties of trees and ferns that grew several inches in a single day.

"Are you ready to help me at the ship?" the girl said to Mary with a cordiality ludicrous in its falseness. "I don't think we should wait about preparing for the annual move. The rage may

hit the beasts early this year. Those metal doors will look good to us in a couple of weeks."

James shuffled his bare feet uncomfortably, and Mary resisted an urge to slap the pretty, lying face. "Really, Susan," she said, "one would think you're afraid."

Mary knew this was not the case. Susan was fearless. Often, when some lake or jungle animal invaded the ground floor at night, the girl left the safety of the upper apartments and accompanied James down the stairs to scare the creature away with nothing but flickering torches.

Susan had been the only child among the colonists on the flight to Arnalla, and she scarcely remembered Earth. Following the early death of her parents the new planet had become her natural home. She had entered adolescence in excellent health, untouched by the misfortunes overwhelming her elders. James alone matched her in determination to carve out some sort of future for themselves despite all odds. He and she seemed physically immune to the effects of the inhuman struggle and the poisonous air.

"A wounded swamp dragon was on yonder side of the lake yesterday," James said, sorely ill at ease. He bit his lip and looked vaguely toward the east. "If it's weak enough, maybe I can get some more meat for us."

Mary watched the naked pair intently. She was struck, not for the first time, by a dazed sensation that she was dead already, that this graceful man and girl were a latter-day Adam and Eve, and Arnalla the hellish Eden from which another tribe of reptilious brutes would eventually spring. Again she caught a flash of understanding leaping between the two, as James turned to go.

Mary was not certain how long her husband and Susan had been lovers. The affair stretched back some months, toward the death of Lois Jones, the ninety-seventh human victim of Arnalla. Lois was of the older colonists, and she had mothered the child at night, when the four of them were alone in the upstairs apartments they shared with ninety-six ghosts and Lois's bright memories of a Texas childhood. Afterwards, the drawling Southern voice silenced forever, Mary had grieved for Susan.

"We must be gentle," she had told James many times in the weeks that followed. "We recall our Earthian happiness. Susan was too young. She knows nothing but this torment."

Mary had not realized until much later that the girl was contented with her lot. Only when the initial stages of the familiar sickness had fastened upon Mary, and she would awake in the mid-

dle of the night to find James absent from their bed, did she begin to suspect the betrayal in Susan's room down the hall. She examined the girl through different eyes then. What she found had alarmed Mary as no beast of Arnalla ever had. In Susan, Mary saw the first truly Arnallan woman, physically desirable to any virile man, but a woman devoid of conscience. A soulless female as cold-blooded in her passions as the semireptiles of the Arnallan jungles.

"I'll walk with you a little way, James," Mary said tensely. He was picking up his hunting ax from a crude bench beside the fire. By endless polishing they managed to keep the blade partially free of rust. "I want to be with you this morning. Perhaps I'll not see you again."

She said the quick sentence purposely, to test them. Their reaction showed her beyond any lingering doubt that she was not mistaken. She heard Susan's startled gasp, and James had almost dropped the ax. He was stupid with confusion, his cheeks reddening, the sleek muscles of his torso strained and taut.

"I always worry when you track for food," Mary continued, as if unaware of the consternation she had provoked. "I'm afraid you'll be killed someday."

James relaxed, the flush draining from his face. "There's no

real danger just before the mating. All of them are sluggish till the madness hits."

Even then Mary did not blame him. An intolerable burden was on her heart, but no hatred. He had loved her once with the affection of an idealistic young bridegroom. She had never forgotten his tenderness; she could not condemn him now. She knew the prime mover in the plot against her was not he.

"Don't go far, Mary," Susan said anxiously. "We should cross to the island before the noon geysers boil. It's going to take at least until nightfall to get the compartments ready for occupancy."

Mary gazed at the mature child with genuine sadness, thinking of the naive high-school belle Susan would likely have been at this age, in the old days. Whatever Earth might have produced, it would not have been this lovely and precocious fiend.

They went down the steep slope together, away from the black and rotting building. At a number of places James hacked out a path for them through the undergrowth that had shot up during the night. Overhead, the twisting, evil-smelling ferns rose in a canopy eighty feet thick. They shut out any trace of light. Everywhere there was a pall of silence in a world without birds or insects.

Under the burning suns again, Mary and James left Susan stamping her feet impatiently beside the stone pier. The two of them walked slowly off, along the strip of sand between the jungle edge and the smoky water of the lake. Steam rose about them, pushing up from fissures leading downward into the bowels of the planet. The pain was so cruel, and Mary's legs trembled so much that she feared her husband would notice, but he was preoccupied in his own misery.

She did not speak until a backward thrust of the lake had hidden them from Susan at the pier. "I can't go farther," she said, taking his hand and holding it to her breast. She stared at him wearily, thinking how beautiful he was, his long-lashed eyes downcast, the moistness weaving ringlets in his curly hair. "Let me rest a minute, James. Then do you wish me to go back to her? To Susan?"

Once more he started and glared at her wildly. He groaned, and suddenly, without warning, she was comforting him in her wasted arms as though he were a bewildered child. Through a gathering mist of agony she took the ax from his grasp. He shut his eyes and sank upon his knees before her. The angry sound of masculine weeping hung heavily on the clouded air.

"It's Arnalla." Inch by inch

Mary raised the ax to her shoulder. "Arnalla poisons everything. I've known for a week Susan intends to murder me at the ship today."

"God," said the man. "Oh, god!" His broad back was twitching beneath the scourge of her words, and he buried his face in her dress. At first Mary thought he would beg forgiveness, but when he spoke she knew he was lost to her for eternity. "You'll live too long," he said thickly. "You'll live into the mating season, and be in our way. Time is so short. Each year is precious. Don't you see, darling? Susan and I are the only chance our race has left. Why is it she and I alone have escaped the sickness? It's because Arnalla has accepted us, somehow. If our babies are conceived during the proper procreative season, we're convinced the planet will spare them, and gradually alter and absorb their descendants into her scheme of life."

Above Mary the twin suns were blotted out by a flapping leather wing. She looked up, and saw a trio of filthy, lizard-headed monsters circling in the sky. They were not dangerous, with the mating orgy so near, but she shuddered nevertheless. Two were young, male and female, but the third was a nightmare of sterility and scars and grinning teeth.

"When the madness strikes," Mary said to James quietly, "the barren one will kill both of them before an egg is laid. In her own poor witless way she'll try to rob this planet of its powers. And she'll be right, for Arnalla is Hell, and the Arnallan way of existence should be opposed by any method possible."

The man pushed away from Mary abruptly, and his handsome face was crazed and stubborn. "No!" he said, admiring the beasts in the sky. "Arnalla is our adopted mother. No matter what she does to my offspring, I know they'll owe her their gift of life."

Dark visions burst at Mary then, specters of the future bubbling in her frightened brain like the water in the lake. "The human race?" she cried, loathing him at last. "Can we not welcome doomsday possessing the souls and the minds and bodies of our ancestors? Would you let Earth's noblest achievement grovel finally on all fours, in the ooze?"

He was beginning to straighten himself distrustfully when she hit him with the ax. It was a surprising blow, swifter and stronger than she had any reason to demand of her feeble frame. He

gave a barking scream as he slumped forward. She struck him twice more, and the blood concealed his expression of pain and incredulity.

"The only way," Mary said, stumbling blindly. "The human way!"

She kissed her husband's hands and spread sand over the crimson mask that had been his countenance. With infinite tiredness she sat down on a slimy boulder near him. Heat shimmered along the ground. The humid jungle was behind her, the lake in front, and steam rose around the stone on every side. In the air three shadows wheeled, the oldest beast rising and falling between the unscarred youngsters.

"I am a daughter of Earth," Mary said softly, addressing the entire, listening planet. "And a jealous woman. And my mother's priceless children will never belong to you."

She waited, calm and resolute. She fought grimly each time the pain flamed at her in an attempt to block her from the kindness she must now perform. Soon Susan would come to investigate the prolonged absence. Mary held the ax ready in her lap.

THE END