

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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the vapor horn

by . . . Ethel G. Lewis

Rizia could only wait in terror while Jonie was made ready for the coming of Eternity. Would he be healed—or lost to her forever?

THE WEARY, anxious eyes of Rizia Dom saw nothing but the two inch wall button, a lighter blue than the wall into which it was set. For two hours she had uncomprehendingly watched while Davi, her husband, worked at feverish pitch. The final step in the Vapor Horn apparatus, this button represented the difference between life and death for their six year old son Jonie.

In the night, behind them now, she and Davi had taken turns cradling the frail body wracked by fierce coughing seizures. Jonie was the victim of a rare bronchial ailment for which no medicine had been devised, and often in the past months it had seemed to Rizia that Jonie could not continue to live.

When, at last, Jonie was mercifully able to slip into an exhausted sleep, Davi had drawn her from the boy's room. Gone was the anguished father, and from his fatigued-narrowed eyes the stern scientist looked at her.

"I shall set up the HORN," he said. He seemed to forcibly gather the reluctant words from the back of his throat in order to push them from his pale, sad lips. "It is Jonie's

There are aspects of Time and Eternity which must, of necessity, place the reader of a story such as this in constant double jeopardy. So if you want to be safe and comfortable you may prefer not to blow upon THE VAPOR HORN. But if you do you'll find that Ethel Lewis knows exactly how to overcome the fearfulness of the Unborn with the kind of fantasy entertainment that calls for encore after encore. And what is safety when dark wonder beckons?

only chance. Another such night and we shall lose him."

Glancing across the room to make certain the draperies were tightly drawn, he set to work at once without a lost movement. He drew THE CARTON from the hall enclosure and began deftly to assemble the parts it contained. Rizia had always thought of the container as THE CARTON, its connotations filling her with an uneasiness founded not in knowledge but in fruitless surmise.

In the past months Davi had referred to his secret experiment but once. Holding her very close to him, he had murmured, "Very soon, the HORN may be completed. I have reached the final step in its structure. And my heart is not glad, Rizia."

She had never known why Davi's drive as a scientist, to build the HORN, was coupled with painful reluctance to see the job done. Nor could she force herself to ask questions. This morning, with dawn beginning to stretch out rosy fingers, she felt only a great gratitude because the HORN stood on a shelf in Jonie's room, because the disc was here, ready for her touch, in mute testimony to Davi's skill. It was Davi's skill which would hold their Jonie to life.

As Davi rose from his stooping position, the empty container now out of sight once more, Rizia stood up to go to him. She saw his hands clench at his sides in one brief expression of inner qualms. And in the first lifting of the night dark-

ness, she looked at this slender man with tenderness. He was gray-faced with fatigue.

"Davi," she whispered.

He caught her shoulders with urgency. "What I have done is dangerous," he said. "You must follow my instructions to the letter!"

"Of course, Davi," she said.

He released her, but he remained close enough so that his whispering voice would come clear to her trembling attentiveness.

"I have done for Jonie," he began, "what I have avoided doing for the Authorities. A year ago, you will remember, I attended the special convening of the scientists for study in the realm of INTERDIMENSIONAL PENETRATION."

Voiceless, she nodded.

"Since that time, I have been summoned again and again to appear before the Authorities. They are eager to penetrate," his voice thickened, "Eternity."

"Eternity," she echoed and clasped her hands in terror.

"I have been able to plead incompleteness of my materials. I have put them off. They have used bribes. Extra rations, time off from the Station to journey to the Entertainment Sector for the yearly concert. Rizia—" He leaned toward her, an attitude of beseechment making him seem thinner and more fragile than ever. "Rizia, you must understand that as a human being I am revolted by their demands. I cannot countenance their penetration of Eternity. The scientist in me is driven to com-

plete a momentous undertaking, but he too is revolted. Frightened, perhaps. Knowledge can bring fear."

He drew a long breath and half turned from her. "For Jonie I have ~~done~~ the task. Jonie will, in the atmosphere evoked by the HORN at the peak of his suffering, be able to draw breath. To live." Now his face was lined with harassment. "But in that same atmosphere, it is possible for the materialization of those who dwell in Eternity."

Drums beat in her temples and she felt her eyes distend. "I cannot," she whispered. "Oh, Davi, I cannot comprehend."

Patience overlaid his thirty-five years with an added ten, so that he seemed to her in that moment an old man.

"I shall try to explain in simple language. You might term what I have done something of a filtering process. I have worked with the oxygen atom, specifically with the positive elements of the nucleus. That is the vital key. By freeing the oxygen atom of all negative elements such as is contained in electrons, I was able to bring about the rarefied air Jonie must have.

"I—ah, Rizia, your eyes grow cloudy. You are weary and this is all far beyond your comprehension. And that is best. Let it suffice that I have accomplished my task. Let it suffice that our Jonie shall be able to draw life into his lungs during his crisis."

Desperately she tried to meet him on common ground. "I want to

know," she said urgently. "I must not be entirely ignorant. I begin to accept facts. Your machine breaks down and then reassembles in another form the parts of the oxygen you need."

She was rewarded by the dart of light in his tired, brown eyes.

"Yes," he nodded. "The HORN reforms the combinations of the positive elements, thinning the air which is too heavy for Jonie's tortured lungs."

And now they were both very still, their eyes clinging.

"But in this thinner air," she said in the manner of one mesmerized, "those who dwell in Eternity may be evoked."

One of his hands clamped down on her upper arm. "My hope is that thirty minutes will not be long enough for a materialization," he said.

"I may see—the creature?" She was whirling in a dark circle of growing terror.

"Creature?" A faint smile curved Davi's dry lips. "These are from Eternity, Rizia. THE UNBORN. THE DEAD. I suspect that ONE of THE UNBORN would be beautiful, that he would be of such beauty that it might blind a mortal." Davi seemed to be drawing himself back from a faraway land to which he had travelled alone. He drew a hand over his eyes.

"There's little time," he said suddenly. "I must report to the forty-eight hour shift. This means I shall not return for the night, Rizia, as

you know. All night you will be alone with Jonie. I rely on you to listen to my instructions with utmost care. And this morning I must be prompt. No one must suspect what I have done."

No one must know, she said over and over in her mind. As no one must know how ill dear Jonie had been. Children ill as Jonie were entered in THE BOOK under Deficit. One day a white gyrocar drew up before a home and a white-robed figure descended with outstretched arms. No allowances were made for grief or plea. The child was placed into the outstretched arms. The gyrocar lifted into the air. The child was never seen again.

"I promise," she said, summoning strength. "I shall do exactly what you instruct me to do. No one shall know."

They would save Jonie, she thought desperately. She and Davi between them would guard their child and keep him safe.

"Tell me," she urged.

"If Jonie's seizure begins lightly, wait," Davi said slowly. "If the seizures continue, and gather fury, you must press the button and begin to count off thirty minutes. You are to give all of your attention to the counting, for the HORN must run no longer than that. Do you understand?"

"I understand," she said. I understand, she thought, that you, Davi, are among the martyrs of the year 2006. Now, among the items of my total comprehension, you stand out

as a man of genius, suffering torment because of that genius, and helpless against it.

"Rizia, one last thing. I have waited with the last because of its importance among these things of which we spoke. The average human being could not survive in the aura created by the HORN. You are not to go into Jonie's room. *You are not to go into Jonie's room until you have pressed the button to shut off the HORN after thirty minutes.* Indeed you are not to leave this room. Some of the odor will permeate the house but the aura itself will not be insinuated beyond Jonie's room. Remember. Do not step over the threshold into the connecting hall. The hall will not be safe for you until after you have pressed the button for shut-off."

His voice stopped abruptly.

"Now, I must go."

"But you too are so weary," she cried. "Davi, take a ration, possibly a bath."

"No." His voice was a faint sigh. He picked up one of her hands and gently brought it to his lips. It was months since they had loved, and yet there had been deep feeling between them at their union. The feeling, she knew, lay there now waiting for their attention in a tense, cruel, difficult life from which they could not escape.

"And if Jonie calls out," she asked, torn twofold.

"You are not to go to him." Davi's face took on the sternness of the scientist. The father in him, the

husband, were displaced and he stood before her a slender man tormented by his own capabilities. "I wish to find you both here," he went on, his voice a deliberate monotone. "I want to find Jonie alive and well. I want to find you here, Rizia—as I left you. So that I may find it possible to go on with my life."

"Davi, I promise. I promise!" Anguish tore at her throat.

"Good." Davi left the room.

She heard the sounds of his gyrocar, the lift of wings and then only the faint hum of a motor carrying him from her.

The day was uneventful. Although Jonie did not ask to leave his bed as a healthy child would have done, he was cheerful and appeared to be without discomfort. The night was Jonie's enemy. *It is the night, Rizia cautioned herself, which I must battle.* She performed her usual daily duties and had her own rations in company with Jonie at his bedside.

Some of the clutching fear left her, so that she prepared her child for the night without the weight of nameless threat. Her hands lingered on his tiny face, and then she smoothed the cool white sheets repeatedly so that no wrinkle would press against Jonie's tender skin. He was smiling when he told her good-night . . .

In the blue-walled room, she sat to rest, intending to switch on the overhead panel which serviced women who had been unable to attend the weekly lecture on WOMEN'S

PLACE IN OUR CIVILIZATION. Three absences a year were permitted and this week she had used up her second. She had experienced a strange reluctance of late to mingle with the other women all uniformly clad, all silent, all docile.

Had she dozed? She sat up and shivered as the sound of coughing came to her. Jonie! Fully awake now, she forced herself to remain where she was, fearfully alert to the rise of the child's seizures. Louder. More torn and prolonged. Anguish tore at her. How long has he been coughing? How long had she slept in exhaustion? Her body quickened with intent to run to Jonie, but Davi's admonition sprang to her mind: If the seizures begin lightly, *wait*. If they continue and gather fury, press the button.

Another furious paroxysm coming from the direction of Jonie's room catapulted her toward the small round button. Her fingers pounced and pressed, and her own breathing became a labored, wheezing noise in the room. Now, the time, she told herself, seeking calm, drawing on the intelligence of the individual to replace the mother. She fastened her eyes on her time-piece strapped to her wrist, as she sat down once more.

Carefully she guarded the minutes as they crept away. Ten minutes passed, and to her joyous, incredulous ears came the lessening sounds from Jonie's room. Slower beat her thudding heart, and exquisitely sweet was the sense of peace that

came upon her. Each spasm was brief and devoid of the fury which had thrice rent her own breast with fire. Suddenly her impulse was to laugh. Almost she had forgotten what a joyous relief laughter could bring. She had a sense of soaring skyward, of spreading her arms in an ecstasy of flight. . . . Jonie's coughing had ceased altogether.

Gradually she became aware of a sweet, strange odor that was not unpleasant. Peering into the hall, she saw nothing and then quickly she dropped her eyes to her time-piece. Twelve minutes remained. Uneasily she pondered. Since Jonie no longer coughed, was it perhaps wise to use the button control before the passage of thirty minutes. She half rose, but upon hearing a faint cough from Jonie's room, she chided herself for having been tempted to deviate from Davi's instructions.

As she sat in her chair, the scent of the Vapor brought with it a sense of euphoria, and sweet was the realization that Jonie was saved. Now she must give her full attention to her time-piece and count off the passing minutes. Davi had devised a miracle and she was its guardian. She had heard no alien sound as these thoughts occupied her, but quite suddenly a presence announced itself to her consciousness. Turning to look into the hall she saw a figure! At once astonishment and fear drove the blood in torrents from her heart.

She stood up, crying, "No!"

The figure came closer, and as he

neared the doorway she shrank away, her hands pressed tightly against her lips lest she scream outright and inflict upon herself an even more unendurable burden of terror.

"Do not fear me," came a voice.

"Go away!" she whispered hoarsely.

He stood just beyond the threshold and she saw that he was slender and clothed in shining raiment. She saw that his movements had grace and lightness, and forcing herself into scrutiny, that his eyes were golden and that he wore a cap of gleaming gold. Radiant slippers covered his feet, and upon his face there was a look of gentle calm. It was a handsome face with perfect features. A glow emanated from the skin.

"Who are you?" she whispered.

"I am Dom," he said. In his voice there sounded the ringing of bells.

"Dom!" she repeated. "But we are Dom. Davi Dom is my husband. There is little Jonie, our son."

"I know," Dom said. He extended one of his long, slender hands, gold-tipped, and the fingers curled in a gesture of grace. "You are Rizia."

"But you are a stranger. How can you know my name?"

His smile was wondrously sweet. "We visit the home of our Name. I am here because I am Dom."

Confused, but with each passing moment less fearful, Rizia said, "May I offer you refreshment?"

"Thank you. I require none," he said.

"But from which family of Dom are you?" she asked. "Davi has a brother Jon who is stationed at the Wheat Farm. He has three very young sons. But there are no others. I have never been told of Doms in another community."

"Rizia," he said gently, repeating her name without emphasis, but giving it to her heightened awareness the sound of some precious thing. "I come from Eternity."

The cry of *Davi, help me*, began within her aching mind, for now she knew that the unthinkable had taken place! A materialization had taken place!

"Do not fear me, Rizia," he said, his face expressing concern.

"But you are an Unborn or are you a—" She faltered.

"I am not one of the Returned," he said, his voice ever more gentle. "I am an Unborn."

Oh, was he dangerous behind that handsome exterior, the voice of bells and movements of grace?

"You would not hurt Jonie!" she cried.

"I would not hurt Jonie," Dom said.

"Why have you come? Tell me why? Is it because of the VAPOR HORN that you could come?"

"Yes," he said, and now he raised both arms and held his hands out before him and she saw the gold-tipped fingers and she whirled in renewed terror.

"Davi has made my materializa-

tion possible," he went on. "There are no secrets from us, Rizia. Dwellers in Eternity exist perpetually and we are knowledgeable beyond the span of any human being's scope. We knew of the possibility of the proper aura for materialization but we are powerless to create such an aura. We have been watching. Waiting."

"But why?" she cried. "Why did you wish to come here? Go back now. Dom. Please, go now before—before—"

She could not go on. Her thoughts were no longer obedient to her will. What could she do? If she sprang to press the button now would they all be safe once more?

His voice came to her in the monotone rhythm of a lesson learned. "The Earth Species in its masochistic drive toward *improvement* have impaired the peace of Our Dimension. First, some time ago, it was the harnessing of lightning for the generation of electricity. We were able to absorb that shock, but your Machine Age followed quickly, dousing us with blasts both beneath the sea and high in the firmament.

"The surcharges from your perpetual radio and television antenna caused chaos among us. And, of late, there has been the new, searing inroads upon us of fall-out from your atomic blasts. Our orbit is penetrated deeply, and now only the very strongest survive. The era of Nuclear Fission is our anathema."

"But progress," she whispered desperately.

His eyes seemed to flame and his voice took on its bell tone once more. "An inverse term. We have been forced to view the soul in relation to the body in quite unorthodox perspective. For instance such Earth Forms as the one in which I appear have been constructed for our missions here."

"Missions—" She felt drained of all strength.

Sadness overlay his golden skin. "It has been advocated by our Council that we borrow from the human body. Housing, the process will be called. Earth-strength as found in sinew and bone, may possibly be our answer." His voice seemed to be no more than a sigh.

"Borrowing." She could only repeat the word woodenly. I must do something at once, she thought frenziedly, and could not move.

"Very soon," Dom said gently, shaking his handsome head, "there will be a dearth of Souls. A pity—for only Eternity can provide souls for the newborn." His voice was a gentle stir of bells and music such as she knew had been heard long ago, in another time and in another civilization. "As more of us disintegrate, the time grows shorter in which measures may be taken."

Time! His words brought realization of the passing of time to her. In a great panic she saw by her time-piece that three minutes remained of the thirty.

"Do not fear me," Dom said.

"We seek immunity to our destruction in much the same way that mortals seek immunity from disease by being injected with a serum containing the plague germ which threatens them. We shall lose our identity as it exists today. Possibly the result will not be one of beauty. A Demi-Species, able to exist in either Dimension—"

He too was torn. Rizia saw that now. He was made unhappy by the whole scheme of 'borrowing.' He was good . . . he was very beautiful. How could he be an enemy? 'Of such beauty as might blind a mortal,' Davi had said.

She felt herself caught by a wave of longing to touch the contours of Dom's face. She wanted his closeness, and even as the thought came to her, she heard him speak her name.

"Rizia."

Looking fully at him she saw in his golden eyes the longing which he most surely saw in her own.

"You are more beautiful than the sunrise," she said.

"Rizia, come back with me," he pleaded.

"I promised Davi to be here," she said painfully. "We . . . Jonie and I, make life possible for Davi. The man and the scientist are in constant battle within him."

"I know," Dom said. He put out a hand and it seemed to her that the golden tips reached through a veil into the air of the blue room where she stood transfixed. "I must take back a Dom with me," he said gently.

ly. "You carry a seed of Dom within you, although you were not born Dom."

A seed? Then it was so. She had thought it possible, had hoped and had not been certain, with many months of strangeness between her and Dom to wipe out the memory of a night when she had not been lonely.

"I cannot go!" she cried. How could she leave Dom now? And Jonie? Who would care for Jonie!

With a great effort she threw off the magic of Dom's beauty. Enthralled, she was becoming enslaved.

"Does it seem cruel to you, Rizia, to ask you this? To come back with me?"

She permitted herself one last look deep into his eyes and he became the ultimate need, the golden, sweet, glowing truth she had needed for so very long.

"I cannot," she said.

"Then I must take Jonie." His voice was sad.

"Not Jonie! I'm his mother. I shall not permit it!"

Dom shook his head gently. "Ah, Rizia, in Eternity there are no subdivisions. All are mothers and all are fathers. All are brothers and all

are lovers. We have existed in soundless, soothing peace."

"But on earth we must have subdivisions," she cried. "Without it there would be confusion!"

"And have you not confusion now?" Dom asked.

She had reached within a foot of the blue disc which her shaking hand must press. The huge balloon of terror distending the skin of her sweating body must wait and not explode before she pressed the disc. There! Her finger jammed down and pressed and with the action the little cries begin to issue from her mouth.

He was gone when she found strength enough to move toward the doorway. And with him had vanished the last scent of the Vapor.

"Jonie!" she cried and began to run in the direction of the boy's room.

In the dark of the room she saw nothing but she found her way to the bed. Her hands groped the length and breadth of the bed in futile hope. She knew beyond doubt, that she would find no little boy there, but only the sheet which she had carefully drawn smooth a short time ago.

