

Collectivum

Mike Lewis

The background of the page is a solid light green color. Overlaid on this background is a complex, abstract graphic composed of thick blue lines. These lines form a series of interconnected shapes, including a large 'X' in the lower right, a curved line resembling a partial circle or arc, and several horizontal and vertical segments that create a grid-like structure. The overall effect is a modern, geometric design.

Project Gutenberg

The Project Gutenberg EBook of Collectivum, by Mike Lewis

This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at www.gutenberg.org

Title: Collectivum

Author: Mike Lewis

Illustrator: Smith

Release Date: February 7, 2010 [EBook #31208]

Language: English

*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK COLLECTIVUM ***

Produced by Sankar Viswanathan, Greg Weeks, and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net>

Transcriber's Note:

This etext was produced from Space Science Fiction July 1953. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed.

COLLECTIVUM

BY MIKE LEWIS

ILLUSTRATED BY SMITH

The Oren were one and their strength was legion. They had it all figured out, in their own parasitical, cold-blooded way. But they'd neglected one she-cat of a girl....

He crossed the rickety bridge at sundown and saw the squat, fat fellow whipping the girl with a board. His mind leaped to a conclusion: *an Orenian prowler, convincing his victim to hold still*. He clubbed the fat fellow with a rock and toppled him over the seawall into the lagoon where he floated face-down.

"Are you stung?" he asked the girl.

She picked herself up weakly, and she was a gold-bronze beauty with a black mane of hair and long, narrow eyes. She shook her head to his question and whimpered slightly while she examined her bruises.

"He was my husband," she explained.

"Not an Orenian?" he gasped.

She shook her head. "But he was going to kill me."

Morgan shot a horrified glance at the body floating far out on the swift tide. Three sharks were circling lazily. He looked around for a boat, saw none. He swiftly estimated his chances of swimming out after the fat man and towing him in. The chances appeared to be nil. Nevertheless, he began stripping off his shirt.

"Don't bother," said the girl. "He was stung last week."

Morgan stared at her silently for a moment. She seemed not in the least perturbed. If the man had been stung by an Orenian, he was lost anyway. Ruefully, he rebuttoned his shirt.

"I leapt to a bad conclusion."

"That he was an Orenian? He would have been, soon. Besides—you *have* to leap to conclusions nowadays, to stay alive."

"You don't seem to worry."

"I told you, he was going to kill me."

"Why?"

"Because—" She paused and stared out across the twilight water, gathering a slow frown. "Because he was crazy."

Morgan's eyes flickered over her trim figure, and he thought—*maybe*. She had a trace of Seminole blood, he decided—with the quiet sultriness that it lent to her face.

"I'm heading west," he announced.

"To the cypress?" She coolly inspected his sturdy arms, clipped features, and the hatchet in his belt-rope. She nodded faintly to herself. "Want company?"

He shrugged and turned half away. "It's okay with me." He set off down the road and she followed a few feet to the rear.

"Florida coast's getting to be lousy with them," she called.

"Orenians?"

"Yeah. Whole truckload of them passed through yesterday. On their way to Miami, I guess. One man said he saw an airplane yesterday."

"They must be reviving the industry up north."

"Yeah. Trucks by the dozen. Say—where've *you* been hiding?"

"Mangrove island. Been there six months."

"Get lonesome?"

"And tired of sitting still. Small island."

"You should have stayed—but I'm glad you didn't."

He shot her a sharp glance. She failed to look bereaved at the loss of her mate. But that was not unusual. Most marriages nowadays were contracted by brute force—and dissolved the same way. She probably felt that rolling the fat one in the drink gave her a claim on him.

When the last trace of gray fled from the west, they walked westward along the old highway beyond the limits of the coastal town which was now nearly deserted. They talked softly as they trudged along, and he learned that her name was Shera and that she had been a dancer in a small Miami nightspot, before the Orenians came. She had joined the fat one a year ago—because he owned a gun, and was therefore good insurance against wandering Orenians. But when the ammunition was gone, she tried to leave him, which resulted in the incident by the waterfront.

Morgan was irked that he had blundered into a family affair, and troubled that he had relieved the fellow of all worldly cares. Nevertheless, if the man had been stung, the free world would say—"job well done." For in a few weeks he would have ceased to be strictly human, becoming a dangerous threat to his fellows. And if the girl had been unable to escape from him before that time, she would have been subject to the same plight. Morgan decided that he would have done the same thing if given time to weigh the situation beforehand.

"How far are we going?" she asked.

"We're turning off on the next side-road," he grunted.

"You know the country?"

"I used to." He waved his arm to the south. "Road winds through a swamp, then climbs to high ground. Ends in a spruce forest."

"Got any food?"

"Will have, tomorrow. Ditches are full of warmouth perch. Plenty of swamp cabbage, wild oranges, bull frogs, papaya."

"I'm hungry now."

"That's tough."

She whimpered a little but soon fell silent. He saw she was limping, and he slowed his pace. Pity was a lost emotion in an age of chaos; but she was strong, healthy, and appeared capable of doing a day's work. He decided to humor her, lest she decide to trudge alone.

When they reached the swamp, branches closed over the narrow trail road, screening off the sky and hiding the thin slice of moon. The girl hung close to his elbow. A screech owl hooted in the trees, and a thousand frogs clamored in the blackness. Once the scream of a panther split the night, and the girl sobbed as if echoing the cry. They hurried ahead through the overgrown weeds.

"Drop flat!" he hissed suddenly.

She obeyed without a sound. They crouched together at the edge of the road, listening. A distant rustling came from the roadway to the south.

"Orenians?" she whispered.

"Orenians."

"How many?"

"Can't tell. They always march in step. Keep quiet."

Morgan gripped the hatchet and set himself for a quick spring. As they drew nearer, he decided that there were two of them. Their movements were perfectly coordinated, since they were of one mind, one consciousness—that of Oren. The girl tapped his arm with the blade of a knife.

"I'll take one," she breathed.

When the footsteps were almost upon them, Oren halted. There was no outcry; the Orenians had no need for vocal communication; their thought-exchange was bio-electromagnetic.

"Now!" howled Morgan, and launched himself at the enemy.

His hatchet cleft the face of the nearest foe, and he turned instantly to help the girl. A pair of bodies thrashed about on the ground. Then she stood up, and he heard her dry the knife on some grass. It was over in an instant.

"Not stung?"

"No."

"That was too easy," he said. "I don't like it."

"Why?"

"They don't ambush that easy unless they're in rapport with another group someplace close. We'll have some more of them after us if we don't get away."

They hurried about the unpleasant task of splitting open the once-human skulls to remove the legless parasite-entities that filled the bony hollows where brains belonged. The Oren creatures lived in their stolen homes long after the borrowed body died, and they could signal others to the vicinity. Morgan tossed the globular little creatures in the ditch where they lay squeaking faintly—helpless, once-removed from the body of the host who had long since ceased to exist as a human being.

"Let's go!" he grunted.

"Same way?"

"Yeah."

"But they *came* from that way!"

"Have to chance it. Too dangerous, hanging around the highways. Out here we can find places to hide."

They set off at a trot, chancing an ambush in reverse. But Morgan reasoned that the Orenians had been returning to the highway after a day's exploring on the side-roads. After plunging for half-an-hour through the darkness, the road began winding upward. The cypress archway parted, revealing star-scattered sky. They slowed to a walk.

"Can't we sit down to rest?" she panted.

"Can if you like. Alone."

She shuddered and caught at his arm. "I'll stick."

"Sorry," he murmured. "We can stop soon. But they'll be chasing along the road looking for us. I want to get into the spruce forest first."

She was silent for a time, then said; "With Earlich, it was the other way around."

"Earlich? The fat boy? What do you mean?"

"I always had to wait on him."

"Did you wait?"

"Until he ran out of bullets."

Morgan clucked in mock disapproval. But he was not in the least shocked. In the flight from Oren, it was devil take the hindmost. Weaklings, and people who paused for pity, had long since been stung. After several weeks of agony in which the brain became the nutrient fodder of the growing Oren embryo, they were lost in the single communal mind of Oren, dead as individuals. The adult parasite assumed the bodily directive-function of the brain. The creatures so afflicted became mere cells in a total social organism now constituting a large part of humanity.

Shera suddenly whistled surprise. "Is that a *cabin* there?—through the trees?"

They had penetrated several hundred yards into the spruce. A black hulk lay ahead in a small clearing.

"Yeah," Morgan grunted. "I'd hoped it'd still be there."

She nudged him hard. "Close-mouthed, aren't you?"

"If I told you it was here, and then it was gone—how would you feel?"

"You think about things like that?" She stared at him curiously in the faint moonlight. "Nobody else does. Not now."

"Come on," he growled. "Let's see if it's occupied."

The door was locked. Morgan chopped it open without ceremony. The cabin was vacant except for a corpse on the floor. The corpse was of ancient vintage and slightly mummified. He noticed that it had killed itself with a shotgun—possibly because of an Oren-sting. He caught up the scarce weapon lest the girl grab it and run. Then he dragged the corpse out by the foot and left it under an orange tree. The oranges were green, but he picked a few to stave off the pangs of hunger.

When he returned, Shera had found matches and a lamp. She sat at a table,

counting twelve-gauge shells.

"How many?"

"Even dozen." She gazed greedily at the gun. "I won't steal it."

He pitched her an orange and propped the gun in the corner. "If you did, it would be a mistake."

Her eyes followed him about the room as he inspected the meagre, dust-laden furnishings.

"I like you, Morgan," she murmured suddenly.

"Like you liked fat-boy?"

"He was a pig."

"But you liked his gun."

"You'd do all right without a gun."

"So?"

"Why don't we team up?"

"Whoa! We may not be looking for the same things."

She shrugged and toyed with the shells while she stared thoughtfully into the lamplight. "What's there to look for? Besides escape from Oren."

"Nothing maybe."

"But you think so, huh?"

He straightened suddenly and waggled a pair of cans over his head for her to see—beans, and a tin of tobacco. He set them aside and continued searching the cupboards.

"But you think so, huh?" she repeated.

"Shut up and heat the beans."

Shera caught the can and speared it with her knife. It spewed. She sniffed, cursed, and threw them out. "We eat oranges."

"But what *are* you looking for, Morgan?"

He rolled himself a cigarette with the aged tobacco which was little more than dust. He came to the table and sat facing her. She had placed an orange before him. Almost absently he laid the blade of his hatchet atop it. The weight of it split the fruit neatly.

"Sharp," she muttered.

"Sharp enough to split Oren skulls."

"And that's all you're looking for?"

"I don't know. Ever hear of the Maquis?"

She hesitated. "Two wars ago? The French underground? I remember vaguely. I was a *little* urchin then."

"They had a goal like mine, I guess. To harass. They couldn't win, and they knew it. They killed and wrecked and maimed because they hated. I want to organize a band of Oren-killers—with no purpose save to ambush and slaughter. I sat on that island and thought and thought—and I got disgusted with myself for hiding."

The girl munched a cheekful of bitter orange pulp and looked thoughtful. "Wish I had some clothes," she muttered indifferently.

He shot her a hard glance then stood up to pace the floor. "Ambush, slaughter, and *rob*," he amended, and looked at her sharply again.

"Rob?"

"Oren's taken our cities. He's reorganizing industry. With individuals coordinated by a mass-mind, it'll be a different kind of industry, a more efficient kind. Think of a factory in which a worker at one position shares consciousness with a worker in another position. Does away with control mechanisms."

"You said 'rob'."

He grinned sourly. "When they get production started, there'll be plenty to steal."

Guns; explosives—clothes."

She nodded slowly. "Trouble is: every time you kill an Orenian, they all feel him die. They come running."

"Sometimes. Unless they're too busy. They don't care too much about individual deaths. It's the total mental commune of Oren that matters. Like now. They could find us if they really tried. But why should they? They'd come as recruiting agents—with bared stingers—if they came."

"They'll come tomorrow," she said fatalistically.

"We'll try to be ready."



She inspected him carefully, as if weighing his size and strength. "I still want to team up with you."

He recalled how quickly she had knifed the Orenian to death on the road. "Okay—if you'll follow me without argument."

"I can take orders." She folded her arms behind her head and leaned back with a grin. Her breasts jutted haughtily beneath a torn blouse. "*Most* orders, that is."

"Hell, I'm not marrying you!" he snapped.

She laughed scornfully. "You will, Morgan, you will."

Morgan lashed the shotgun to a chair, aimed it at the door, and ran a length of cord from the trigger to the shattered lock. "Don't trip over the cord in the night," he warned as he blew out the lamp. Then he bedded down in the corner on the floor.

A short time later he heard her sobbing softly. "What the devil's wrong?" he snarled disgustedly.

"Thanks, Morgan—thanks," she whispered.

For a moment he felt sorry for her. Apparently she was thanking him for the bed. Fat boy had evidently taken the best of everything and given her the crumbs of Lazarus. Such were the mores of chaos. But Morgan quit congratulating himself.

He had chosen the floor because it looked cleaner than the bed.

He was awakened before dawn by the rapid sputter of rain on the roof. It dribbled through several holes and spread across the floor. He sat up shivering. Shera was a glowing cigarette near the window.

"Can't sleep?" he asked.

"I'm scared," she answered.

Faintly he could see her profile silhouetted against the pane. She was watching outside the cabin.

"I've got a funny feeling—that something's out there."

"Heard anything?"

"Just a feeling."

Morgan felt ice along his sides. "Shera—do you get hunches, feelings, intuitions very often?" His voice was hushed, worried.

"Yeah."

"Have you always?"

"No—I don't think I used to."

He was silent for a long time; then he hissed, "Are you *sure* you haven't been stung recently?"

Another brief silence. Then the girl laughed softly. A wave of prickles crept along his scalp.

"I've got the shotgun in my lap, Morgan."



"How long?" he whispered in horror.

"Six months."

"*Six months!* You're lying! You'd be fully depersonalized! You'd be in complete liaison with Oren!"

"But I'm not. Sometimes I can feel when they're near. That's all."

"But if it were true—your brain would be replaced by the parasite!"

"I wouldn't know. Apparently it's not."

Morgan couldn't believe it. But he sat stunned in the darkness. What was this thing in the cabin with him? Was she still human? He began inching along the wall, but a board creaked.

"I don't want to shoot you, Morgan. Don't rush me. Besides—there's something outside, I tell you."

"Why should *you* worry about that?—if you've really been stung."

"The first sting evidently didn't take. The next one might. That's why."

"You weren't sick?"

"During the incubation period? I was sick. Plenty sick."

Morgan shook his head thoughtfully. If she had been through the violent illness of the parasite's incubation, she should now have one of the squeaking little degenerates in place of a brain. The fibers of the small animals grew slowly along the neural arcs, replacing each nerve cell, forming a junction at each synapse. There was reason to believe that the parasite preserved the memories that had been stored in the brain, but they became blended with all the other individualities that comprised Oren, thereby losing the personality in the mental ocean of the herd-mind. Was it possible that if one invader were out of mental contact with the herd-mind, that the individual host might retain its personality? But how could she be out of contact?

"They're getting close to the door," she whispered.

Morgan gripped his hatchet and waited, not knowing who would be the greater enemy—the girl or the prowlers.

"When the door opens, strike a match. So I can see to shoot."

Morgan crouched low. There came a light tapping at the torn screen, then several seconds of silence. Someone pushed at the door. It swung slowly open.

"Jerry?" called a faint voice. "Jerry—thet you in theah?"

Morgan breathed easily again. An Orenian would not have called out. "Who is it?" he barked.

There was no answer. Morgan groped for the lamp, found it, and held the match poised but not lighted.

"Come in here!" he ordered. "We've got a gun."

"Yes, suh!"

A shadow appeared in the door frame. Morgan struck the match. It was an ancient Negro with a burlap sack in one hand and a bloodstained pitchfork in the other. He stood blinking at Shera's shotgun and at the lamp as Morgan lit it. His overalls were rainsoaked, his eyes wild.

"Come in and sit down."

"Thankya suh, thankya." He shuffled inside and slumped into a rickety chair.

"What're you doing wandering around like this?"

"Been a hunting. Yes, suh, been doing me a little hunting." He sighed wearily and mopped the rain out of his tight coils of graying hair.

Morgan eyed the burlap sack suspiciously. It was wet, and it wriggled. "What's that?"

"Ass my night's work," said the man and jerked a corner of the sack. It opened, and three Oren parasites spilled out with weak squeaks of anguish.

The girl gasped angrily. "They're still in contact with Oren. Kill them!"

"Yes'm, they're in contact—but without eyes, how're they gonna know wheah they are?"

Morgan made a wry mouth at Shera. The old man was smart—and right. But he felt another uneasy suspicion. The old man said "hunting." Hunting for what—food? The idea twisted disgust in Morgan's stomach.

"What're you going to do with them?"

"Oh—" The oldster kicked one of them lightly with his toe. The pink thing rolled against the wall. There were vestigial signs of arms, legs, but tiny and useless, grown fast to the body. The visitor glanced up with a sheepish grin.

"I feed 'em to my dawgs, suh. Dawgs like 'em. Getting so my dawgs can smell the difference twixt a man and an Orenian. I'm training 'em. They help me with my hunting."

Morgan sat up sharply. "How many dogs you got, and where do you live?"

"Fo' dawgs. I live in the swamp. They's a big hollow cypress—I got my bed in it."

"Why didn't you move in here?"

The old man looked at the place in the center of the floor where the dust outlined the shape of a human body. "Suicide," he muttered. Then he looked up. "'Tain't superstition, exactly. I just don't—"

"Never mind," Morgan murmured. He glanced at the girl. She had laid the shotgun aside and was lighting a cigarette. He tensed himself, then sprang like a cat.

The gun was in his hands, and he was backing across the room before she realized what had happened. Her face went suddenly white. The old man just sat and looked baffled.

"Can you call one of your dogs?"

"Yes, suh, but—"

"Call one, I want to try something."

Shera bit her lip. "Why, Morgan? To see if what I said is true?"

"Yeah."

"I'll save you the trouble." She stared into his face solemnly and slowly opened her mouth. From beneath her tongue, a barb slowly protruded until its point projected several inches from her lips. Morgan shivered.



The Negro, who was sitting rigidly frozen, suddenly dove for his pitchfork with a wild cry. "Witcherwoman! Oren-stinger!"

Shera darted aside as the pitchfork sailed toward her and shattered the window.

She seized it quickly and held him at bay. The old man looked startled. Orenians tried to sting, not to fight.

"Hold it!" bellowed Morgan.

Reluctantly, the oldster backed away and fell into the chair again. But his eyes clung to the girl with hatred.

"She stung ya, suh?"

"No, and she won't sting you." He gazed at Shera coldly. "Drop that fork."

She propped it against the wall but stayed close to it. "Okay, Morgan," she purred. "It's your show."

"It's going to be yours. Sit down and tell us everything that happened before you were stung and after. I want to figure out what makes you different from the others, and why you aren't in liaison with Oren."

She smiled acidly. "You won't believe it."

"You'll tell it though," he growled darkly.

She turned to gaze at the door. "Earlich had a little girl—by his first wife. She got stung eight months ago. Before she ran away, she stung her pet kitten. I didn't know it. The kitten stayed with us. *It* stung me." She paused. "Here's the part you won't believe: before Earlich killed it, I was coming into liaison with the cat."

"*God!*"

"It's true."

"Have you ever stung anyone?"

"No. Earlich didn't even know."

"Any desire to?"

She reddened slowly and set her jaw.

The old man giggled. "Wants ta sting a cat, ah bet, suh."

She shot him a furious glance, but didn't deny it. They sat for a long time in silence. Morgan lowered the shotgun, then laid it aside.

"Thanks," she murmured, and looked really grateful.

But Morgan was staring thoughtfully at the oldster. "Your dogs ever tree a panther?"

"Yas, *suh*, they're good at that!" He grinned and wagged his head.

"Many panthers in the swamp?"

"Lo'dy, yes—" He paused. His eyes widened slightly.

Both of them looked suddenly at the girl. Her eyebrows arched, her mouth flew open. She put a frightened hand to her throat.

"Oh *no!* Oh God, *nooo!*" she shrieked.

Morgan glanced at the window, sighed, and stood up.

"It's getting light outside. We better hunt some food."

Morgan and the old man, whose name was Hanson, went out to prowl along the outskirts of the swamp. They returned at mid-morning with a string of perch, a rabbit, and a heart of swamp cabbage. The girl cooked the meal in silence, scarcely looking at them. Her face was sullen, angry. Morgan turned while he was eating and saw her staring contemplatively at the back of his neck—where the Oren-sting was usually planted.

"Nobody's going to force you into anything, Shera," he said quietly. "We won't mention it again."

She said nothing, but stopped glaring at him. He wondered how much the Oren organ had affected her personality.

"Do you still feel the same—as you did a year ago?" he asked her. "Any difference? Any loss of memory? Loss of function?"

"No."

"That means the alien organ exactly duplicates the neural circuits it supplants."

"So?"

"So the rapport is the only special feature. Without it, you're apparently still human."

"Thanks." It was a bitter, acid tone.

"I can't understand why the cat-business caused ... unless ... rapport is achieved by a sort of resonance—and you couldn't get it with a cat and with humans too —"

"Drop it, will you!" She turned and stalked out of the shanty. At the doorway, she broke into a run.

Morgan looked at Hanson. Hanson wagged his head and grinned ruefully. "That —uh—lady likes you, suh."

Morgan snorted and went to the door. She was just disappearing into a tangle of weeds that had once been an orange grove. He set off after her at a quick trot. "Shera, wait—"

He caught up with her at the edge of the swamp, where she was backing quickly away from a coiled water-moccasin. He tossed a stick at the snake, and it slithered into the shallow water. Then he caught her arms, and she whirled to face him with defiant eyes.

"You think I'm a—a—"

"I don't."

"You act like I'm barely human."

"I didn't mean it that way—"

"You don't even trust me, and you want me to—"

"I *don't*."

"Trust me." She nodded.

"I do."

She stamped her foot in the soft muck. "Then kiss me."

A grim possibility occurred to him, and he hesitated an instant too long. She wrenched herself free with a snarl and bolted back toward the shanty. "*I could* have done *that* last night," she snapped over her shoulder, "while you were asleep."

The chase led back to the house. When he burst back inside, she was already panting over the sink, scraping plates. When he approached her from behind, she whirled quickly, clenching a platter in both hands. When she brought it down across his head with a clatter of broken china, Morgan gave up. He retreated, nursing his scalp, then stalked angrily out to join Hanson. Dogs were baying to the north. The old man looked worried.

"They're comin', suh. Must be a lot of 'em. I got my dawgs trained so they don't bark less they's a bunch of 'em."

Morgan listened for a moment. "I hear a truck."

"That's so?" Hanson shook his head. "They ain't never come in a truck before."

"Truck—must be a dozen of them at least." He eyed Hanson sharply. "Run or fight?"

The old man scratched his toe in the dirt. "Ain't never yet run from a fight."

Morgan turned silently and strode back in the house for the gun. Shera ignored him. "Orenians coming," he grunted, and went back out to join the oldster.

Morgan and Hanson trotted through the scrub spruce, heading for the roadway. But they turned short and cut north through the edge of the brush. Morgan caught a glimpse of the truck far ahead. Hanson's hounds were snarling about the wheels and leaping up toward the bed. The road was soft sand to their right. Ducking low, they darted ahead until it appeared firm enough to admit the truck.

"We want them to get past us," he hissed to Hanson. "When they do, you stand up and show yourself. When they start piling out, I'll start shooting. Okay?"

"Yes, suh." He patted his pitchfork and grinned. They stopped and crouched low in the brush.

"Please, suh—don't hit my dawgs."

"I'm counting on them to help."

The truck grumbled slowly past them. The hounds were snapping furiously as they tried to leap over the tailgate. Morgan caught a glimpse of white faces, staring fixedly at nothing. Then he nudged the oldster.

Hanson stood up, shaking his pitchfork and shrieking hate at the occupants. The truck moved on a few yards, then ground to a stop.

"*Come and join us,*" thundered a collective voice. "*For we are Oren, who is one.*"

Morgan could see nothing through the screen of foliage. But the old man was still howling invective.

"*From the stars comes Oren. To the stars he goes. Come and join us.*"

"Come get me, you devils. I'll kill ya!"

"*Oren is millions. He cannot die. We come.*"

Hanson's foot nudged Morgan's nervously. Still he lay under cover, waiting for their advance. Feet shuffled on the bed of the truck. The hounds were going wild. There was something weird about sounds of Orenian movement. It was always coordinated—so many marionettes with one set of controls. But they could shift from parallel coordination to complementary, dovetailing each set of movements to achieve the common purpose.

Morgan burst forth from the brush and fired at the tight group of bodies near the back of the truck. They were packed in a circle to protect the group from the slashing fangs of the dogs. Two of them fell, without outcries. He fired three times before they broke apart. There were still at least eight of them, but the dogs had two down.

"Oh, God! Children!" Morgan bellowed. "Call off the dogs!"

"Not *human* children."

"Call them off!"

Hanson obeyed reluctantly. A pair of calm-eyed child-things scrambled to their feet and began advancing with the group of adults. The Orenians fanned out and began closing in like the fingers of a giant fist. Morgan shot four of them before the circle closed to hatchet range. He and Hanson stood back to back, slashing out at the ring of fanged faces.

The attackers were weaponless. They cared nothing for individual bodies. The collectivum swayed, writhed, darted in—and fell in blood. The wounded crawled close to their ankles, barbs protruding from their lips. They roared constantly, "*Oren is paradise. Come to Oren.*"

A child, who had been rescued from one of the dogs, crawled among the legs of the adults and lunged for Morgan's feet. He was forced to kick it back with a hard heel.

Suddenly their ranks broke. There were only four of them left standing. They backed away and stopped—three men and a middle-aged woman. "*Oren will return.*" They turned and marched toward the truck.

"We need the truck," panted Morgan.

Hanson flung his pitchfork and caught the last one in the center of the back. The others moved on unheeding. Morgan sadly lifted the shotgun.

When it was over, they went to look at the two child-things. One was unconscious, but not badly wounded. The other had a broken arm. It shot out its fang and circled. With a sick heart, Morgan lashed out and caught it by the hair, before it could sting him.

"See if there's pliers in the truck," he muttered.



Hanson returned with them after a moment's rummaging. They jerked out its fang and let it go. It walked calmly to the north, purpose defeated. They did the same to the other.

"It's crazy," he was gasping. "Stark crazy. They spend over a dozen Orenians just to get two of us. And they didn't want to kill us at that."

"Lo'dy, suh! Who is Oren? You know?"

Morgan shook his head. "He's the collectivum, Han."

"But suh—he had to come from some place. People weren't like this—"

"Yeah. I guess he came from space, like they say."

"Just them little pink brain-gobblers?"

"Uh-uh! Scientists figure they came in some alien host. The hosts couldn't take Earth conditions. They stung a few humans and died."

"Anybody ever see 'em?"

"Not that I know of. Nor found their ships."

"O Lo'dy, I'm sick, suh."

"Let's go back to the shanty, Han."

"Yes, suh. Look on the back o' my neck, will you suh?"

Morgan looked, then turned slowly away.

"Is it, suh?"

Morgan took a deep breath. "I—I—guess—"

"I stumbled once. I guess he got me then."

Morgan laid a hand on the old man's arm. There was nothing to say.

"Mistuh Morgan—would you do me a favo'?"

Morgan knew what he wanted. "I can't shoot you, Han. I'll leave you the gun, though."

"No, suh, that ain't it. I was wondering—could you help me catch a painter tonight—before I go?"

"A panther?" Morgan squeezed his arm and blinked hard. He grinned. "Sure, Han."

"Guess it'll be two, three days afore it starts happening to me."

"Yeah. Will you want the gun?"

"No, suh, don't think much of suicide. I'll just go out and wrestle me a 'gator in the swamp."

They went back to the house. Shera was sitting on the step.

"I've made up my mind," she said dully.

"About what?"

"I'll do it."

She got up and walked away. When Morgan tried to follow, she turned and flicked out the barb at him, then laughed coldly. Shivering, he turned away.

That night the dogs treed a panther, and Hanson died. It happened while he was climbing with pole and rope, angling to get a noose on the lithe beast while Morgan waited with another rope below. The lantern was hung from a branch while Hanson inched out on the limb. When he thrust the noose forward, the panther brushed it aside with a quick slap. It leaped. Hanson lost his balance and crashed to the ground with a howl. The panther slapped a dog spinning and darted away in the night with three dogs following.

Morgan knelt quickly beside the old man. His back was broken.

"Please, suh—don't move me. The Lo'd's a-comin' fo' old Han."

"Hush, fellow," Morgan murmured.

"Suh, that painter's a she. And they's cubs somewheres."

"Cubs?"

"Yes, suh. She's spooky-like. Cubs. You stay with my dawgs. Take care of 'em, suh."

"Sure, Han."

"You lemme be now, suh. Lemme be alone." His voice was a faint whisper. "I gotta die by myself. Man oughtn't to have company then."

Morgan hesitated. He sighed and climbed slowly to his feet. He stumbled away, leaving the lantern hanging overhead. He sat a hundred yards away in the shadow of a gaunt cypress, listening to the baying of the hounds, the moaning of the old man, and the croaking of the swamp. When he returned, the oldster was dead.

Morgan returned to the shanty at dawn, carrying a pair of whimpering panther cubs and the skin of the mother. He exchanged a dark glance with Shera at the door. She took them silently and fondled them for a moment.

"Hanson's dead."

She nodded gravely. "Soon there'll be no one but Oren."

"The collectivum."

They went inside and sat facing one another. His eyes moved over the dark slope of her shoulders, the proud set of her breasts, and back to the sweetly sullen face with its narrow eyes.

"I'm going to join you," he said.

The eyes widened a little. She shook her head quickly. "In a liaison of two? No. It might spread, get linked up with Oren."

"Not if it's through these." He stroked one of the cubs. It snarled.

"It's a chance."

"We'll take it." He leaned forward to kiss her....



A year had passed since the night of Hanson's death. A freight train dragged southward in the twilight, wending its way through pine forest and scrubland. Oren was its crew. It crossed a trestle and moved through a patch of jungle. A sudden shadow flitted from the brush, leaped the ditch, and sprinted along beside the rails. Another followed it, and another. The low-flying shadows slowly overtook the engine. The leader sprang, clung for a moment by its forepaws, and pulled itself aboard. Brakes howled on the rails as Oren stopped the train. Two man-figures leaped from the cab—and into the jaws of a killer-cat.

Another cat scrambled upon the tender, leaped to the top of a box-car and sped backward along the train to seek the rest of the crew. The bodies were left in the ditches.

When it was over, the cats collected in a group on the road-bed. They sat licking their forepaws while a dozen shabbily dressed guerrillas moved out of the jungle in a disorderly band.

"Joe, have your bunch unload the dynamite!" bawled a burly leader. "We'll take the tank-car. Emmert, get the packs on those carts."

"I wonder," said a voice to a comrade, "who's controlling those animals. You'd think they were Oren. Why don't they sting?"

"Stingers ripped out, chum. Why ask questions? They're on our side. And we'll win, eventually—if this keeps up."



As a group, the panthers looked at the two men as they passed. One of them shuddered.

"Lordy! I'd swear those cats were grinning!"



End of the Project Gutenberg EBook of Collectivum, by Mike Lewis

*** END OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK COLLECTIVUM ***

***** This file should be named 31208-h.htm or 31208-h.zip *****
This and all associated files of various formats will be found in:
<http://www.gutenberg.org/3/1/2/0/31208/>

Produced by Sankar Viswanathan, Greg Weeks, and the Online
Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net>

Updated editions will replace the previous one--the old editions
will be renamed.

Creating the works from public domain print editions means that no
one owns a United States copyright in these works, so the Foundation
(and you!) can copy and distribute it in the United States without
permission and without paying copyright royalties. Special rules,
set forth in the General Terms of Use part of this license, apply to
copying and distributing Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works to
protect the PROJECT GUTENBERG-tm concept and trademark. Project
Gutenberg is a registered trademark, and may not be used if you
charge for the eBooks, unless you receive specific permission. If you
do not charge anything for copies of this eBook, complying with the
rules is very easy. You may use this eBook for nearly any purpose
such as creation of derivative works, reports, performances and
research. They may be modified and printed and given away--you may do
practically ANYTHING with public domain eBooks. Redistribution is
subject to the trademark license, especially commercial
redistribution.

*** START: FULL LICENSE ***

THE FULL PROJECT GUTENBERG LICENSE
PLEASE READ THIS BEFORE YOU DISTRIBUTE OR USE THIS WORK

To protect the Project Gutenberg-tm mission of promoting the free
distribution of electronic works, by using or distributing this work
(or any other work associated in any way with the phrase "Project
Gutenberg"), you agree to comply with all the terms of the Full Project
Gutenberg-tm License (available with this file or online at
<http://gutenberg.org/license>).

Section 1. General Terms of Use and Redistributing Project Gutenberg-tm
electronic works

1.A. By reading or using any part of this Project Gutenberg-tm
electronic work, you indicate that you have read, understand, agree to
and accept all the terms of this license and intellectual property
(trademark/copyright) agreement. If you do not agree to abide by all
the terms of this agreement, you must cease using and return or destroy
all copies of Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works in your possession.
If you paid a fee for obtaining a copy of or access to a Project
Gutenberg-tm electronic work and you do not agree to be bound by the
terms of this agreement, you may obtain a refund from the person or

entity to whom you paid the fee as set forth in paragraph 1.E.8.

1.B. "Project Gutenberg" is a registered trademark. It may only be used on or associated in any way with an electronic work by people who agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement. There are a few things that you can do with most Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works even without complying with the full terms of this agreement. See paragraph 1.C below. There are a lot of things you can do with Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works if you follow the terms of this agreement and help preserve free future access to Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works. See paragraph 1.E below.

1.C. The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation ("the Foundation" or PGLAF), owns a compilation copyright in the collection of Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works. Nearly all the individual works in the collection are in the public domain in the United States. If an individual work is in the public domain in the United States and you are located in the United States, we do not claim a right to prevent you from copying, distributing, performing, displaying or creating derivative works based on the work as long as all references to Project Gutenberg are removed. Of course, we hope that you will support the Project Gutenberg-tm mission of promoting free access to electronic works by freely sharing Project Gutenberg-tm works in compliance with the terms of this agreement for keeping the Project Gutenberg-tm name associated with the work. You can easily comply with the terms of this agreement by keeping this work in the same format with its attached full Project Gutenberg-tm License when you share it without charge with others.

1.D. The copyright laws of the place where you are located also govern what you can do with this work. Copyright laws in most countries are in a constant state of change. If you are outside the United States, check the laws of your country in addition to the terms of this agreement before downloading, copying, displaying, performing, distributing or creating derivative works based on this work or any other Project Gutenberg-tm work. The Foundation makes no representations concerning the copyright status of any work in any country outside the United States.

1.E. Unless you have removed all references to Project Gutenberg:

1.E.1. The following sentence, with active links to, or other immediate access to, the full Project Gutenberg-tm License must appear prominently whenever any copy of a Project Gutenberg-tm work (any work on which the phrase "Project Gutenberg" appears, or with which the phrase "Project Gutenberg" is associated) is accessed, displayed, performed, viewed, copied or distributed:

This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at www.gutenberg.org

1.E.2. If an individual Project Gutenberg-tm electronic work is derived from the public domain (does not contain a notice indicating that it is posted with permission of the copyright holder), the work can be copied and distributed to anyone in the United States without paying any fees or charges. If you are redistributing or providing access to a work with the phrase "Project Gutenberg" associated with or appearing on the work, you must comply either with the requirements of paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 or obtain permission for the use of the work and the Project Gutenberg-tm trademark as set forth in paragraphs 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.3. If an individual Project Gutenberg-tm electronic work is posted

with the permission of the copyright holder, your use and distribution must comply with both paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 and any additional terms imposed by the copyright holder. Additional terms will be linked to the Project Gutenberg-tm License for all works posted with the permission of the copyright holder found at the beginning of this work.

1.E.4. Do not unlink or detach or remove the full Project Gutenberg-tm License terms from this work, or any files containing a part of this work or any other work associated with Project Gutenberg-tm.

1.E.5. Do not copy, display, perform, distribute or redistribute this electronic work, or any part of this electronic work, without prominently displaying the sentence set forth in paragraph 1.E.1 with active links or immediate access to the full terms of the Project Gutenberg-tm License.

1.E.6. You may convert to and distribute this work in any binary, compressed, marked up, nonproprietary or proprietary form, including any word processing or hypertext form. However, if you provide access to or distribute copies of a Project Gutenberg-tm work in a format other than "Plain Vanilla ASCII" or other format used in the official version posted on the official Project Gutenberg-tm web site (www.gutenberg.org), you must, at no additional cost, fee or expense to the user, provide a copy, a means of exporting a copy, or a means of obtaining a copy upon request, of the work in its original "Plain Vanilla ASCII" or other form. Any alternate format must include the full Project Gutenberg-tm License as specified in paragraph 1.E.1.

1.E.7. Do not charge a fee for access to, viewing, displaying, performing, copying or distributing any Project Gutenberg-tm works unless you comply with paragraph 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.8. You may charge a reasonable fee for copies of or providing access to or distributing Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works provided that

- You pay a royalty fee of 20% of the gross profits you derive from the use of Project Gutenberg-tm works calculated using the method you already use to calculate your applicable taxes. The fee is owed to the owner of the Project Gutenberg-tm trademark, but he has agreed to donate royalties under this paragraph to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. Royalty payments must be paid within 60 days following each date on which you prepare (or are legally required to prepare) your periodic tax returns. Royalty payments should be clearly marked as such and sent to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation at the address specified in Section 4, "Information about donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation."
- You provide a full refund of any money paid by a user who notifies you in writing (or by e-mail) within 30 days of receipt that s/he does not agree to the terms of the full Project Gutenberg-tm License. You must require such a user to return or destroy all copies of the works possessed in a physical medium and discontinue all use of and all access to other copies of Project Gutenberg-tm works.
- You provide, in accordance with paragraph 1.F.3, a full refund of any money paid for a work or a replacement copy, if a defect in the electronic work is discovered and reported to you within 90 days of receipt of the work.
- You comply with all other terms of this agreement for free distribution of Project Gutenberg-tm works.

1.E.9. If you wish to charge a fee or distribute a Project Gutenberg-tm electronic work or group of works on different terms than are set forth in this agreement, you must obtain permission in writing from both the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and Michael Hart, the owner of the Project Gutenberg-tm trademark. Contact the Foundation as set forth in Section 3 below.

1.F.

1.F.1. Project Gutenberg volunteers and employees expend considerable effort to identify, do copyright research on, transcribe and proofread public domain works in creating the Project Gutenberg-tm collection. Despite these efforts, Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works, and the medium on which they may be stored, may contain "Defects," such as, but not limited to, incomplete, inaccurate or corrupt data, transcription errors, a copyright or other intellectual property infringement, a defective or damaged disk or other medium, a computer virus, or computer codes that damage or cannot be read by your equipment.

1.F.2. LIMITED WARRANTY, DISCLAIMER OF DAMAGES - Except for the "Right of Replacement or Refund" described in paragraph 1.F.3, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the owner of the Project Gutenberg-tm trademark, and any other party distributing a Project Gutenberg-tm electronic work under this agreement, disclaim all liability to you for damages, costs and expenses, including legal fees. YOU AGREE THAT YOU HAVE NO REMEDIES FOR NEGLIGENCE, STRICT LIABILITY, BREACH OF WARRANTY OR BREACH OF CONTRACT EXCEPT THOSE PROVIDED IN PARAGRAPH F3. YOU AGREE THAT THE FOUNDATION, THE TRADEMARK OWNER, AND ANY DISTRIBUTOR UNDER THIS AGREEMENT WILL NOT BE LIABLE TO YOU FOR ACTUAL, DIRECT, INDIRECT, CONSEQUENTIAL, PUNITIVE OR INCIDENTAL DAMAGES EVEN IF YOU GIVE NOTICE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGE.

1.F.3. LIMITED RIGHT OF REPLACEMENT OR REFUND - If you discover a defect in this electronic work within 90 days of receiving it, you can receive a refund of the money (if any) you paid for it by sending a written explanation to the person you received the work from. If you received the work on a physical medium, you must return the medium with your written explanation. The person or entity that provided you with the defective work may elect to provide a replacement copy in lieu of a refund. If you received the work electronically, the person or entity providing it to you may choose to give you a second opportunity to receive the work electronically in lieu of a refund. If the second copy is also defective, you may demand a refund in writing without further opportunities to fix the problem.

1.F.4. Except for the limited right of replacement or refund set forth in paragraph 1.F.3, this work is provided to you 'AS-IS' WITH NO OTHER WARRANTIES OF ANY KIND, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR ANY PURPOSE.

1.F.5. Some states do not allow disclaimers of certain implied warranties or the exclusion or limitation of certain types of damages. If any disclaimer or limitation set forth in this agreement violates the law of the state applicable to this agreement, the agreement shall be interpreted to make the maximum disclaimer or limitation permitted by the applicable state law. The invalidity or unenforceability of any provision of this agreement shall not void the remaining provisions.

1.F.6. INDEMNITY - You agree to indemnify and hold the Foundation, the trademark owner, any agent or employee of the Foundation, anyone providing copies of Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works in accordance

with this agreement, and any volunteers associated with the production, promotion and distribution of Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works, harmless from all liability, costs and expenses, including legal fees, that arise directly or indirectly from any of the following which you do or cause to occur: (a) distribution of this or any Project Gutenberg-tm work, (b) alteration, modification, or additions or deletions to any Project Gutenberg-tm work, and (c) any Defect you cause.

Section 2. Information about the Mission of Project Gutenberg-tm

Project Gutenberg-tm is synonymous with the free distribution of electronic works in formats readable by the widest variety of computers including obsolete, old, middle-aged and new computers. It exists because of the efforts of hundreds of volunteers and donations from people in all walks of life.

Volunteers and financial support to provide volunteers with the assistance they need, are critical to reaching Project Gutenberg-tm's goals and ensuring that the Project Gutenberg-tm collection will remain freely available for generations to come. In 2001, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation was created to provide a secure and permanent future for Project Gutenberg-tm and future generations. To learn more about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and how your efforts and donations can help, see Sections 3 and 4 and the Foundation web page at <http://www.pgla.org>.

Section 3. Information about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation is a non profit 501(c)(3) educational corporation organized under the laws of the state of Mississippi and granted tax exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service. The Foundation's EIN or federal tax identification number is 64-6221541. Its 501(c)(3) letter is posted at <http://pglaf.org/fundraising>. Contributions to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation are tax deductible to the full extent permitted by U.S. federal laws and your state's laws.

The Foundation's principal office is located at 4557 Melan Dr. S. Fairbanks, AK, 99712., but its volunteers and employees are scattered throughout numerous locations. Its business office is located at 809 North 1500 West, Salt Lake City, UT 84116, (801) 596-1887, email business@pglaf.org. Email contact links and up to date contact information can be found at the Foundation's web site and official page at <http://pglaf.org>

For additional contact information:

Dr. Gregory B. Newby
Chief Executive and Director
gbnewby@pglaf.org

Section 4. Information about Donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

Project Gutenberg-tm depends upon and cannot survive without wide spread public support and donations to carry out its mission of increasing the number of public domain and licensed works that can be freely distributed in machine readable form accessible by the widest array of equipment including outdated equipment. Many small donations (\$1 to \$5,000) are particularly important to maintaining tax exempt status with the IRS.

The Foundation is committed to complying with the laws regulating charities and charitable donations in all 50 states of the United States. Compliance requirements are not uniform and it takes a considerable effort, much paperwork and many fees to meet and keep up with these requirements. We do not solicit donations in locations where we have not received written confirmation of compliance. To SEND DONATIONS or determine the status of compliance for any particular state visit <http://pglaf.org>

While we cannot and do not solicit contributions from states where we have not met the solicitation requirements, we know of no prohibition against accepting unsolicited donations from donors in such states who approach us with offers to donate.

International donations are gratefully accepted, but we cannot make any statements concerning tax treatment of donations received from outside the United States. U.S. laws alone swamp our small staff.

Please check the Project Gutenberg Web pages for current donation methods and addresses. Donations are accepted in a number of other ways including checks, online payments and credit card donations. To donate, please visit: <http://pglaf.org/donate>

Section 5. General Information About Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works.

Professor Michael S. Hart is the originator of the Project Gutenberg-tm concept of a library of electronic works that could be freely shared with anyone. For thirty years, he produced and distributed Project Gutenberg-tm eBooks with only a loose network of volunteer support.

Project Gutenberg-tm eBooks are often created from several printed editions, all of which are confirmed as Public Domain in the U.S. unless a copyright notice is included. Thus, we do not necessarily keep eBooks in compliance with any particular paper edition.

Most people start at our Web site which has the main PG search facility:

<http://www.gutenberg.org>

This Web site includes information about Project Gutenberg-tm, including how to make donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, how to help produce our new eBooks, and how to subscribe to our email newsletter to hear about new eBooks.