

Competition

James Causey



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COMPETITION

By JAMES CAUSEY

They would learn what caused the murderous disease—if it was the last thing they did!

GRETA

January 18, Earth Time

I WISH Max would treat me like a *woman*.

An hour ago, at dinner, John Armitage proposed a toast, especially for my benefit. He loves to play the gallant. Big man, silver mane, very blue eyes, a porcelain smile. The head of WSC, the perfect example of the politician-scientist.

"To the colony," he announced, raising his glass. "May Epsilon love them and keep them. May it only be transmittal trouble."

"Amen," Max said.

We drank. Taylor Bishop put down his glass precisely. Bishop is a gray little man with a diffident voice that belies his reputation as the best biochemist in the system. "Has Farragut hinted otherwise?" he asked mildly.

Armitage frowned. "It would be scarcely prudent for Senator Farragut to alarm the populace with disaster rumors."

Bishop looked at him out of his pale eyes. "Besides, it's an election

year."

The silence was suddenly ugly.

Then Armitage chuckled. "All right," he said. "So the Senator wants to be a national hero. The fact still remains that Epsilon had better be habitable or Pan-Asia will scream we're hogging it. They want war anyway. Within a month—boom."

FOR a moment, I was afraid he was going to make a speech about Earth's suffocating billions, the screaming tension of the cold war, and the sacred necessity of Our Mission. If he had, I'd have gotten the weeping shrieks. Some responsibilities are too great to think about. But instead he winked at me. For the first time, I began to realize why Armitage was the Director of the Scientists' World Council.

"Hypothesis, Greta," he said. "Epsilon is probably a paradise. Why should the test colony let the rest of the world in on it? They're being selfish."

I giggled. We relaxed.

After supper, Armitage played chess with Bishop while I followed Max into the control room.

"Soon?" I said.

"Planetfall in eighteen hours, Doctor." He said it stiffly, busying himself at the controls. Max is a small dark man with angry eyes and the saddest mouth I've ever seen. He is also a fine pilot and magnificent bacteriologist. I wanted to slap him. I hate these professional British types that think a female biochemist is some sort

of freak.

"Honestly," I said. "What do you think?"

"Disease," he said bitterly. "For the first six months they reported on schedule, remember? A fine clean planet, no dominant life-forms, perfect for immigration; unique, one world in a billion. Abruptly they stopped sending. You figure it."

I thought about it.

"I read your thematic on Venusian viruses," he said abruptly. "Good show. You should be an asset to us, Doctor."

"Thanks!" I snapped. I was so furious that I inadvertently looked into the cabin viewplate.

Bishop had warned me. It takes years of deep-space time to enable a person to stare at the naked Universe without screaming.

It got me. The crystal thunder of the stars, that horrible hungry blackness. I remember I was sort of crying and fighting, then Max had me by the shoulders, holding me gently. He was murmuring and stroking my hair. After a time, I stopped whimpering.

Illustrated by STONE

"Thanks," I whispered.

"You'd better get some sleep, Greta," he said.

I turned in.

I think I'm falling in love.

January 19

TODAY we made planetfall. It took Max a few hours to home in on the test colony ship. He finally found it, on the shore of an inland sea that gleamed like wrinkled blue satin. For a time we cruised in widening spirals, trying to detect some signs of life. There was nothing.

We finally landed. Max and Armitage donned spacesuits and went toward the colony ship. They came back in a few hours, very pale.

"They're dead." Armitage's voice cracked as he came out of the airlock. "All of them."

"Skeletons," Max said.

"How?" Bishop said.

Armitage's hands were shaking as he poured a drink. "Looks like civil war."

"But there were a hundred of them," I whispered. "They were *dedicated*—"

"I wonder," Bishop said thoughtfully. "White and brown and yellow. Russian and British and French and German and Chinese and Spanish. They were chosen for technical background rather than emotional stability."

"Rot!" Armitage said like drums beating. "It's some alien bug, some toxin. We've got to isolate it, find an antibody."

He went to work.

January 22

I'M scared.

It's taken three days to finalize the atmospheric tests. Oxygen, nitrogen, helium, with trace gases. Those trace gases are stinkers. Bishop discovered a new inert gas, heavier than Xenon. He's excited. I'm currently checking stuff that looks like residual organic, and am not too happy about it. Still, this atmosphere seems pure.

Armitage is chafing.

"It's in the flora," he insisted today. "Something, perhaps, that they ate." He stood with a strained tautness, staring feverishly at the chronometer. "Senator Farragut's due to make contact soon. What'll I tell him?"

"That we're working on it," Bishop said dryly. "That the four best scientists in the Galaxy are working toward the solution."

"That's good," Armitage said seriously. "But they'll worry. You *are* making progress?"

I wanted to wrap a pestle around his neck.

We were all in the control room an hour later. Armitage practically stood at attention while Farragut's voice boomed from the transmitter.

It was very emetic. The Senator said the entire hemisphere was waiting for us to announce the planet was safe for immigration. He said the stars were a challenge to Man. He spoke fearfully of the Coming World Crisis. Epsilon was Man's last chance for survival. Armitage assured him our progress was satisfactory, that within a few days we would have something tangible to report. The Senator said we were heroes.

Finally it was over. Max yawned. "Wonder how many voters start field work at once."

Armitage frowned. "It's not funny, Cizon. Not funny at all. Inasmuch as we've checked out the atmosphere, I suggest we start field work at once."

Taylor blinked. "We're still testing a few residual—"

"I happen to be nominal leader of this party." Armitage stood very tall, very determined. "Obviously the atmosphere is pure. Let's make some progress!"

February 2

THIS is progress?

For the past ten days, we've worked the clock around. Quantitative analysis, soil, water, flora, fauna, cellular, microscopic. Nothing. Max has discovered a few lethal alkaloids in some greenish tree fungus, but I doubt if the colony were indiscriminate fungus eaters. Bishop has found a few new unicellular types, but nothing dangerous. There's one tentacled thing that reminds me of a frightened rotifer. Max named it *Armitagium*. Armitage is pleased.

Perhaps the fate of the hundred colonists will remain one of those forever unsolved mysteries, like the fate of the *Mary Celeste* or the starship *Prometheus*.

This planet's *clean*.

February 4

TODAY Max and I went specimen-hunting.

It must be autumn on Epsilon. Everywhere the trees are a riot of scarlet and ocher, the scrubby bushes are shedding their leaves. Once we came upon a field of thistlelike plants with spiny seed-pods that opened as we watched, the purple spores drifting afield in an eddy of tinted mist. Max said it reminded him of Scotland. He kissed me.

On the way back to the ship we saw two skeletons. Each had its fingers tightly locked about the other's throat.

February 20

WE have, to date, analyzed nine hundred types of plant life for toxin content. Bishop has tested innumerable spores and bacteria. Our slide file is immense and still growing. Max has captured several insects. There is one tiny yellow bush-spider with a killing bite, but the species seem to be rare. Bishop has isolated a mold bacterium that could cause a high fever, but its propagation rate is far too low to enable it to last long in the bloodstream.

The most dangerous animal seems to be a two-foot-tall arthropod. They're rare and peaceable. Bishop vivisected one yesterday and found nothing alarming.

Last night I dreamed about the first expedition. I dreamed they all committed suicide because Epsilon was too good for them.

This is ridiculous!

We're working in a sort of quiet madness getting no closer to the solution.

Armitage talked to Senator Farragut yesterday and hinted darkly that the first ship's hydroponics system went haywire and that an improper carbohydrate imbalance killed the colony. Pretty thin. Farragut's getting impatient. Bishop looks haggard. Max looks grim.

February 23

OUR quantitative tests are slowing down. We play a rubber of bridge each night before retiring. Last night I trumped Max's ace and he snarled at me. We had a fight. This morning I found a bouquet of purple spore-thistles at my cabin door. Max is sweet.

This afternoon, by mutual consent, we all knocked off work and played bridge. Bishop noticed the thistle bouquet in a vase over the chronometer. He objected.

"They're harmless," Max said. "Besides, they smell nice."

I can hardly wait for tomorrow's rubber. Our work is important, but one does need relaxation.

February 25

ARMITAGE is cheating.

Yesterday he failed to score one of my overtricks. We argued bitterly about it. Taylor, of course, sided with him. Three hands later, Armitage got the bid in hearts. "One hundred and fifty honors," he announced.

"That's a lie," I said.

"It was only a hundred," he grinned. "But thank you, Greta. Now I shan't try the queen finesse."

No wonder they've won the last three evenings! Max is furious with them both.

February 28

WE played all day. Max and I kept losing. I always knew Armitage was a pompous toad, but I never realized he was *slimy*.

This afternoon it was game all, and Armitage overcalled my diamond opener with three spades. Bishop took him to four and I doubled, counting on my ace-king of hearts and diamonds.

I led out my diamond ace and Armitage trumped from his hand. Bishop laid down his dummy. He had clubs and spades solid, with doubleton heart and diamonds.

"None?" Max asked Armitage dangerously.

Armitage tittered. I wanted to scratch his eyes out. He drew trump immediately and set up clubs on board, dumping the heart losers from his hand, and finally sluffing—*two diamonds*.

"Made seven," he said complacently, "less two for the diamond renegade

makes five, one overtrick doubled. We were vulnerable, so it's game and rubber."

I gasped. "You reneged deliberately!"

"Certainly. Doubleton in hearts and diamonds in my hand. If you get in, I'm down one. As it was, I made an overtrick. The only penalty for a renege is two tricks. The rule book does not differentiate between deliberate and accidental reneges. Sorry."

I stared at his florid throat, at his jugular. I could feel my mouth twitching.

On the next hand I was dummy. I excused myself and went into the lab. I found a scalpel. I came up quietly behind Armitage and Bishop saw what I was going to do and shouted and I was not nearly fast enough. Armitage ducked and Bishop tackled me.

"Thanks, dear," Max said thoughtfully, looking at the cards scattered on the floor. "We would have been set one trick. Club finesse fails."

"She's crazy!" Armitage's mouth worked. "The strain's too much for her!"

I cried. I apologized hysterically. After a while, I convinced them I was all right. Max gave me a sedative. We did not play any more bridge. Over supper I kept staring at Armitage's throat.

After eating, I went for a long walk. When I got back to the ship, everyone was sleeping.

March 1

BISHOP found Armitage this morning, in his cabin. He came out, very pale, staring at me.

"You bitch," he said. "Ear to ear. Now what'll I do for a partner?"

"You can't prove it," I said.

"We'll have to confine her to quarters," Max said wearily. "I'll tell Farragut."

"And let him know the expedition is failing?"

Max sighed. "You're right. We'll tell them Armitage had an accident."

I said seriously, "It was obviously suicide. His mind snapped."

"Oh, God," Max said.

They buried Armitage this afternoon. From my cabin, I watched them dig the grave.

Cheaters never prosper.

March 2

MAX talked with Senator Farragut this morning. He said Armitage had died a hero's death. Farragut sounds worried. The Pan-Asians have withdrawn their embassy from Imperial Africa. Tension is mounting on the home front. Immigration *must* start this week. Max was very reassuring. "Just a few final tests, Senator. We want to make sure."

We puttered in our laboratories all afternoon. Bishop seemed bored. After dinner he suggested three-handed bridge and Max said he knew a better game, a friendly game his grandmother had taught him— hearts.

March 5

IT'S a plot!

All day long Bishop and Max have managed to give me the queen of spades. It's deliberate, of course. Three times I've tried for the moon and Bishop has held out one damned little heart at the end. Once Max was slightly ahead on points and Bishop demanded to see the score. I thought for a moment they would come to blows, but Bishop apologized.

"It's just that I hate to lose," he said.

"Quite," Max said.

When we finally turned in, Bishop was ahead on points.

Too far ahead.

March 6

I SUPPOSE it's Bishop's laugh. It has a peculiar horselike stridency that makes me want to tear out his throat. Twice today I've broken

down and cried when he made a jackpot.

I'm not going to cry any more.

Supper was the usual, beef-yeast and vita-ale. I remember setting Bishop's plate in front of him, and the way his pale eyes gleamed between mouthfuls. "Three thousand points ahead," he gloated. "You'll never catch me now. Never, never!"

That was when he gripped his throat and began writhing on the floor.

Max felt his pulse. He stared at me.

"Very nice," he said. "Quick. Did you use a derivative of that green fungus?"

I said nothing. Max's nostrils were white and pinched. "Must I make an autopsy?"

"Why bother?" I said. "It's obviously heart failure."

"Yes, why bother?" he said. He looked tired. "Stay in your cabin, Greta. I'll bring your meals."

"I don't trust you."

His laughter had a touch of madness.

March 10

MAX unlocked my cabin door this morning. He looked drawn. "Listen," he said. "I've checked my respiration, pulse, saliva, temperature. All normal."

"So?"

"Come here," he said. I followed him into the lab. He indicated a microscope. His eyes were bright.

"Well?"

"A drop of my blood," he said. "Look."

I squinted into the microscope. I saw purple discs. Oddly, they did not attack the red blood cells. There was no fission, no mitosis. The leucocytes, strangely enough, let them alone.

My hands were shaking as I took a sterile slide and pricked my finger. I put the slide under the microscope. I adjusted the lens and stared.

Purple discs, swimming in my bloodstream. Thriving. Minding their own business.

"Me, too," I said.

"They're inert," Max said hoarsely. "They don't affect metabolism, cause fever, or interfere with the body chemistry in any way. Do they remind you of anything?"

I thought about it. Then I went to the slide file that was marked *flora* —*negative*.

"Right," Max said. "The purple thistle. Spores! The atmosphere is clogged with them. Greta, my sweet, we're infected."

"I feel fine," I said.

All day long we ran tests. Negative tests. We seem to be disgustingly healthy. "Symbiosis," Max said finally. "Live and let live. Apparently we're hosts."

Only one thing disturbs me.

Most symbiotes *do* something for their host. Something to enhance the host's survival potential.

We played chess this evening. I won. Max is furious. He's such a poor sport.

March 11

MAX talked with Senator Farragut this morning. He gave Epsilon a clean bill of health and the Senator thanked God. "The first starship will leave tonight," the Senator said. "Right on schedule, with ten thousand colonists aboard. You're world heroes!"

Max and I played chess the rest of the day. Max won consistently. He utilizes a fianchetto that is utterly impregnable. If he wins tomorrow, I shall have to kill him.

MAX

March 13

IT was, of course, necessary for me to destroy Armitage and Bishop. They won far too often. But I am sorry about Greta. Yet I had to strangle her.

If she hadn't started that infernal queen's pawn opening it would have been different. She beat me six times running, and on the last game I

pulled a superb orang-outang, but it was too late. She saw mate in four and gave me that serpent smirk I know so well.

How could I have ever been in love with her?

March 14

F RIGHTFULLY boring to be alone. I have a thought. Chess. Right hand against left. White and black. Jolly good.

March 16

I HAVEN'T much time.

Left was black this morning and I beat him, four out of five. We're in the lab now. He's watching me scribble this. His thumb and forefinger are twitching in fury. He looks like some great white spider about to spring.

He sees the scalpel, by the microscope. Now his fingers are inching toward it. Treacherous beast. I'm stronger. If he tries to amputate ...

—JAMES CAUSEY

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