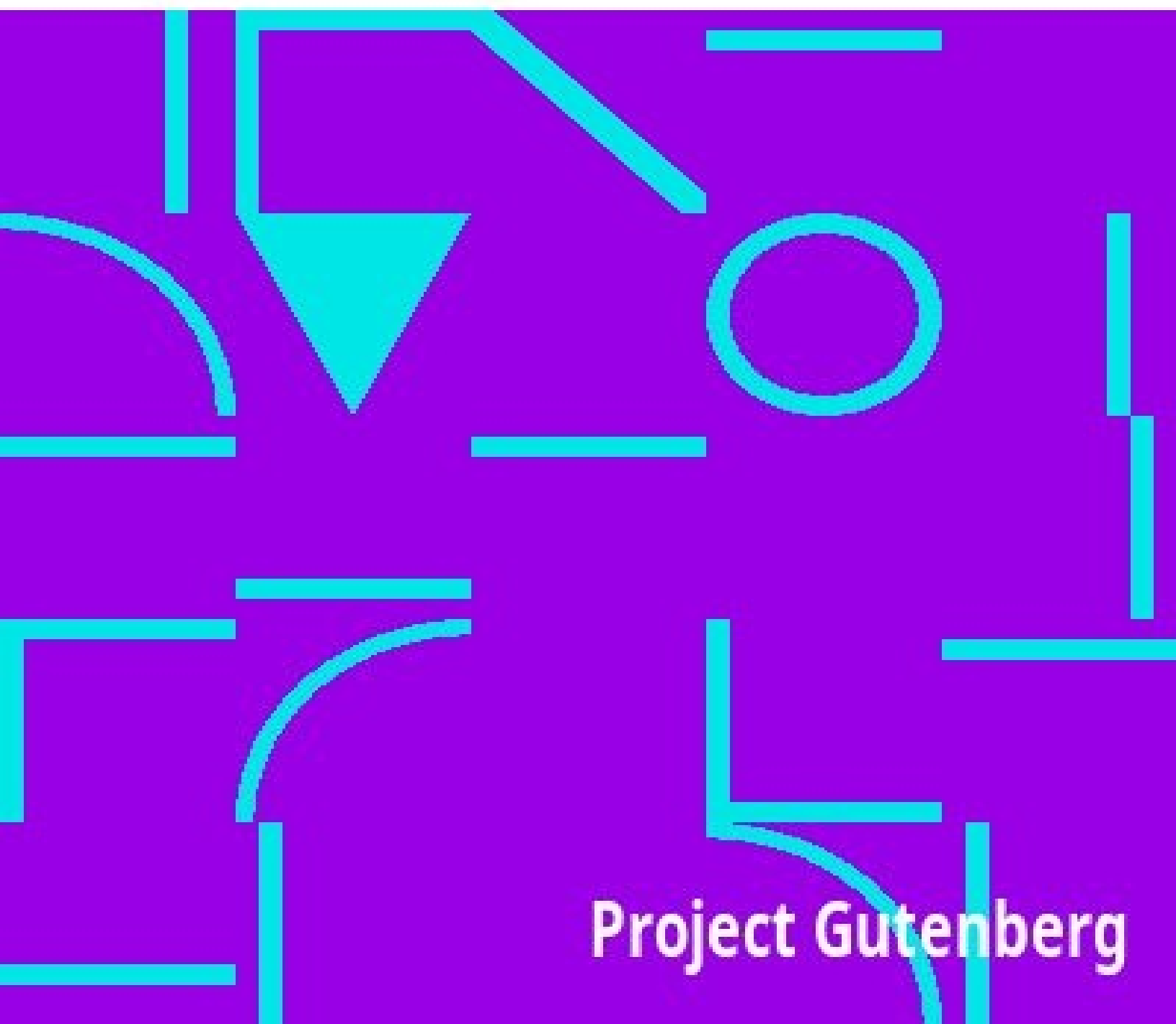


Home is Where You Left It

Stephen Marlowe



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HOME IS WHERE YOU LEFT IT

By ADAM CHASE

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The chance of mass slaughter was their eternal nightmare.

How black is the blackest treachery? Is the most callous traitor entitled to mercy? Steve pondered these questions. His decision? That at times the villain should possibly be spoken of as a hero.

Only the shells of deserted mud-brick houses greeted Steve Cantwell when he reached the village.

He poked around in them for a while. The desert heat was searing, parching, and the Sirian sun gleamed balefully off the blades of Steve's unicopter, which had brought him from Oasis City, almost five hundred miles away. He had remembered heat from his childhood here on Sirius' second planet with the Earth colony, but not heat like this. It was like a magnet drawing all the moisture out of his body.

He walked among the buildings, surprise and perhaps sadness etched on his gaunt, weather-beaten face. Childhood memories flooded back: the single well from which all the families drew their water, the mud-brick house, hardly different from the others and just four walls and a roof now, in which he'd lived with his aunt after his parents had been killed in a *Kumaji* raid, the community center where he'd spent his happiest time as a boy.

He went to the well and hoisted up a pailful of water. The winch creaked as he remembered. He ladled out the water, suddenly very thirsty, and brought the ladle to his lips.

He hurled the ladle away. The water was bitter. Not brackish.

Poisoned.

He spat with fury, then kneeled and stuffed his mouth with sand, almost gagging. After a while he spat out the sand too and opened his canteen and rinsed his mouth. His lips and mouth were paralyzed by contact with the poison. He walked quickly across the well-square to his aunt's house. Inside, it was dim but hardly cooler. Steve was sweating, the saline sweat making him blink. He scowled, not understanding. The table was set in his aunt's house. A coffeepot was on the stove and last night's partially-consumed dinner still on the table.

The well had been poisoned, the town had been deserted on the spur of the moment, and Steve had returned to his boyhood home from Earth—too late for anything.

He went outside into the square. A lizard was sunning itself and staring at him with lidless eyes. When he moved across the square, the lizard scurried away.

"Earthman!" a quavering voice called.

Steve ran toward the sound. In the scant shadow of the community center, a Kumaji was resting. He was a withered old man, all skin and bones and sweat-stiffened tunic, with enormous red-rimmed eyes. His purple skin, which had been blasted by the merciless sun, was almost black.

Steve held the canteen to his lips and watched his throat working almost spasmodically to get the water down. After a while Steve withdrew the canteen and said:

"What happened here?"

"They're gone. All gone."

"Yes, but what happened?"

"The Kumaji—"

"You're Kumaji."

"This is my town," the old man said. "I lived with the Earthmen. Now they're gone."

"But you stayed here—"

"To die," the old man said, without self-pity. "I'm too old to flee, too old to fight, too old for anything but death. More water."

Steve gave him another drink. "You still haven't told me what happened." Actually, though, Steve could guess. With the twenty-second century Earth population hovering at the eleven billion mark, colonies were sought everywhere. Even on a parched desert wasteland like this. The Kumaji tribesmen had never accepted the colony as a fact of their life on the desert, and in a way Steve could not blame them. It meant one oasis less for their own nomadic sustenance. When Steve was a boy, Kumaji raids were frequent. At school on Earth and Luna he'd read about the raids, how they'd increased in violence, how the Earth government, so far away and utterly unable to protect its distant colony, had suggested withdrawal from the Kumaji desert settlement, especially since a colony could exist there under only the most primitive conditions, almost like the purple-skinned Kumaji natives themselves.

"When did it happen?" Steve demanded.

"Last night." It was now midafternoon. "Three folks died," the Kumaji said in his almost perfect English, "from the poisoning of the well. The well was the last straw. The colonists had no choice. They had to go, and go fast, taking what little water they had left in the houses."

"Will they try to walk all the way through to Oasis City?" Oasis City, built at the confluence of two underground rivers which came to the surface there and flowed the rest of the way to the sea above ground, was almost five hundred miles from the colony. Five hundred miles of trackless sands and hundred-and-thirty-degree heat....

"They have to," the old man said. "And they have to hurry. Men, women and children. The Kumaji are after them."

Steve felt irrational hatred then. He thought it would help if he could find some of the nomadic tribesmen and kill them. It might help the way he felt, he knew,

but it certainly wouldn't help the fleeing colonists, trekking across a parched wilderness—to the safety of Oasis City—or death.

"Come on," Steve said, making up his mind. "The unicopter can hold two in a pinch."

"You're going after them?"

"I've got to. They're my people. I've been away too long."

"Say, you're young Cantwell, aren't you? Now I remember."

"Yes, I'm Steve Cantwell."

"I'm not going anyplace, young fellow."

"But you can't stay here, without any good water to drink, without—"

"I'm staying," the old man said, still without self-pity, just matter-of-factly. "The Earth folks have no room for me and I can't blame 'em. The Kumaji'll kill me for a renegade, I figure. I lived a good, long life. I've no regrets. Go after your people, young fellow. They'll need every extra strong right arm they can get. You got any weapons?"

"No," Steve said.

"Too bad. Well, good-bye and good luck."

"But you can't—"

"Oh, I'm staying. I want to stay. This is my home. It's the only home I'll ever have. Good luck, young fellow."

Slowly, Steve walked to his unicopter. It was nothing more than a small metal disk on which to stand, and a shaft with four turbo-blades. It could do sixty miles an hour at an elevation of two thousand feet.



Steve turned the little turbo-jet engine over, then on impulse ran back to the old man and gave him his canteen, turning away before it could be refused and striding quickly back to the unicopter and getting himself airborne without looking at the deserted village or the old man again.

The old man's voice called after him: "Tell the people ... hurry ... Kumaji looking for them to kill ... desert wind ought to wipe out their trail ... but hurry...."

The voice faded into the faint rushing sound of the hot desert wind. Steve gazed down on bare sun-blasted rock, on rippled dunes, on hate-haze. He circled wider and wider, seeking his people.

Hours later he spotted the caravan in the immensity of sand and wasteland. He brought the unicopter down quickly, with a rush of air and a whine of turbojets. He alighted in the sand in front of the slow-moving column. It was like something out of Earth's Middle East—and Middle Ages. They had even imported camels for their life here on the Sirian desert, deciding the Earth camel was a better beast of burden than anything the Sirius II wastelands had to offer. They walked beside the great-humped beasts of burden, the animals piled high with the swaying baggage of their belongings. They moved through the sands with agonizing slowness. Already, after only one day's travel, Steve could see that some of the people were spent and exhausted and had to ride on camelback. They had gone perhaps fifteen miles, with almost five hundred to go across searing desert, the Kumaji seeking them....

"Hullo!" Steve shouted, and a man armed with an atorifle came striding clumsily through the sand toward him. "Cantwell's the name," Steve said. "I'm one of you."

Bleak hostility in his face, the man approached. "Cantwell. Yeah, I remember you. Colony wasn't good enough for young Steve Cantwell. Oh, no. Had to go off to Earth to get himself educated. What are you doing here now on that fancy aircraft of yours, coming to crow at our wake?"

The bitterness surprised Steve. He recognized the man now as Tobias Whiting, who had been the Colony's most successful man when Steve was a boy. Except for his bitterness and for the bleak self-pity and defeat in his eyes, the years had been good to Tobias Whiting. He was probably in his mid-forties now, twenty years Steve's senior, but he was well-muscled, his flesh was solid, his step bold and strong. He was a big muscular man with a craggy, handsome face. In ten years he had hardly changed at all, while Steve Cantwell, the boy, had become Steve Cantwell the man. He had been the Colony's official trader with the Kumajis, and had grown rich—by colony standards—at his business. Now, Steve realized, all that was behind him, and he could only flee with the others—either back to the terribly crowded Earth or on in search of a new colony on

some other outworld, if they could get the transportation. Perhaps that explained his bitterness.

"So you've come back, eh? You sure picked a time, Cantwell."

The refugees were still about a quarter of a mile off, coming up slowly. They hardly seemed to be moving at all. "Is my aunt all right?" Steve said. She was the only family he remembered.

Tobias Whiting shook his head slowly. "I hate to be the one to tell you this. Brace yourself for a shock. Your aunt was one of those who died from the poisoned water last night."

For a long moment, Steve said nothing. The only emotion he felt was pity—pity for the hard life his aunt had lived, and the hard death. Sadness would come later, if there was to be a time for sadness.



The caravan reached them then. The first person Steve saw was a girl. She wore the shroud-like desert garment and her face—it would be a pretty face under other circumstances, Steve realized—was etched with lines of fatigue. Steve did not recognize her. "Who is he, Dad?" the girl said.

"Young Cantwell. Remember?"

So this was Mary Whiting, Steve thought. Why, she'd been a moppet ten years ago! How old? Ten years old maybe. The years crowded him suddenly. She was a woman now....

"Steve Cantwell?" Mary said. "Of course I remember. Hello, Steve. I—I'm sorry you had to come back at a time like this. I'm sorry about your aunt. If there's anything I can do...."

Steve shook his head, then shook the hand she offered him. She was a slim, strong girl with a firm handshake. Her concern for him at a time like this was little short of amazing, especially since it was completely genuine.

He appreciated it.

Tobias Whiting said: "Shame of it is, Cantwell, some of us could get along with

the Kumaji. I had a pretty good business here, you know that." He looked with bitterness at the dusty file of refugees. "But I never got a credit out of it. Wherever we wind up, my girl and I will be poor again. We could have been rich."

Steve asked, "What happened to all your profits?"

"Tied up with a Kumaji moneylender, but thanks to what happened I'll never see it again."

Mary winced, as if her father's words and his self-pity were painful to her. Then others came up and a few minutes were spent in back-pounding and hand-shaking as some of the men who had been boys with Steve came up to recognize and be recognized. Their greeting was warm, as Tobias Whiting's had been cool. Despite the knowledge of what lay behind all of them, and what still lay ahead, it was a little like homecoming.

But Steve liked Mary Whiting's warm, friendly smile best of all. It was comforting and reassuring.



Three days later, Tobias Whiting disappeared.

The caravan had been making no more than ten or fifteen miles a day. Their water supply was almost gone but on the fourth day they hoped to reach an oasis in the desert. Two of the older folks had died of fatigue. A third was critically ill and there was little that could be done for him. The food supply was running short, but they could always slaughter their camels for food and make their way to Oasis City, still four hundred and some miles away, with nothing but the clothes on their backs.

And then, during the fourth night, Tobias Whiting disappeared, taking Steve's unicopter. A sentry had heard the low muffled whine of the turbojets during the night and had seen the small craft take off, but had assumed Steve had taken it up for some reason. Each day Steve had done so, reconnoitering for signs of the Kumaji.

"But why?" someone asked. "Why?"

At first there was no answer. Then a woman whose husband had died the day

before said: "It's no secret Whiting has plenty of money—with the Kumaji."

None of them looked at Mary. She stood there defiantly, not saying anything, and Steve squeezed her hand.

"Now, wait a minute," one of Whiting's friends said.

"Wait, nothing." This was Jeremy Gort, who twice had been mayor of the colony. "I know how Whiting's mind works. He slaved all his life for that money, that's the way he'll see it. Cantwell, didn't you say the Kumaji were looking for us, to kill us?"

"That's what I was told," Steve said.

"All right," Gort went on relentlessly. "Then this is what I figure must have happened. Whiting got to brooding over his lost fortune and finally decided he had to have it. So, he went off at night in Cantwell's 'copter, determined to get it. Only catch is, folks, if I know the Kumaji, they won't just give it to him—not by a long sight."

"No?" someone asked.

"No sir. They'll trade. For our location. And if Whiting went off like that without even saying good-bye to his girl here, my guess is he'll make the trade." His voice reflected some bitterness.



Mary went to Gort and slapped his face. The elderly man did not even blink. "Well," he asked her gently, "did your pa tell you he was going?"

"N-no," Mary said. There were tears in her eyes, but she did not cry.

Gort turned to Steve. "Cantwell, can he get far in that 'copter?"

Steve shook his head. "Ten or fifteen miles is all. Almost out of fuel, Mr. Gort. You saw how I took her up for only a quick mile swing each day. He won't get far."

"He'll crash in the desert?"

"Crash or crash-land," Steve said.

Mary sobbed, and bit her lip, and was silent.

"We've got to stop him," Gort said. "And fast. If he gets to the Kumaji, they'll send down a raiding party and we'll be finished. We could never fight them off without the protection of our village. Near as I can figure, there's a Kumaji base fifty miles due north of here. Whiting knows it too, so that's where he'll be going, I figure. Can't spare more than a couple of men to look for him, though, in case the Kumaji find us—or are led to us—and attack."

Steve said, "I should have taken something out of the 'copter every night, so it couldn't start. I'll go."

Mary came forward boldly. "I have to go. He's my father. If he crashed out there, he may be hurt. He may be—dying."

Gort looked at her. "And if he's trying to sell us out to the Kumajis?"

"Then—then I'll do whatever Steve asks me to. I promise."

"That's good enough for me," Steve said.

A few minutes later, armed with atorifles and their share of the food and water that was left, Steve and Mary set out northward across the sand while the caravan continued east. Fear of what they might find mounted.



The first night, they camped in the lee of low sandhills. The second night they found a small spring with brackish but drinkable water. On the third day, having covered half the distance to the Kumaji settlement, they began to encounter Kumaji patrols, on foot or *thlotback*, the six-legged desert animals running so swiftly over the sands and so low to the ground that they almost seemed to be gliding. Steve and Mary hardly spoke. Talk was unnecessary. But slowly a bond grew between them. Steve liked this slim silent girl who had come out here with him risking her life although she must have known deep in her heart that her father had almost certainly decided to turn traitor in order to regain his fortune.

On the fourth day, they spotted the unicopter from a long way off and made their way toward it. It had come much further than Steve had expected. With sinking heart he realized that Tobias Whiting, if he escaped the crash-landing without injury, must surely have reached the Kumaji encampment by now.

"It doesn't seem badly damaged," Mary said.

The platform had buckled slightly, the 'copter was tilted over, one of the rotors twisted, its end buried in sand. Tobias Whiting wasn't there.

"No," Steve said. "It's hardly damaged at all. Your father got out of it all right."

"To go—to them?"

"I think so, Mary. I don't want to pass judgment until we're sure. I'm sorry."

"Oh, Steve! Steve! What will we do? What *can* we do?"

"Find him, if it isn't too late. Come on."

"North?"

"North."

"And if by some miracle we find him?"

Steve said nothing. The answer—capture or death—was obvious. But you couldn't tell that to a traitor's daughter, could you?

As it turned out, they did not find Tobias Whiting through their own efforts. Half an hour after setting out from the unicopter, they were spotted by a roving band of Kumajis, who came streaking toward them on their *thlots*. Mary raised her atorifle, but Steve struck the barrel aside. "They'd kill us," he said. "We can only surrender."

They were hobbled and led painfully across the sand. They were taken that way to a small Kumaji encampment, and thrust within a circular tent.

Tobias Whiting was in there.



"Mary!" he cried. "My God! Mary...."

"We came for you, Dad," she said coldly. "To stop you. To ... to kill you if necessary."

"Mary...."

"Oh, Dad, why did you do it? Why?"

"We couldn't start all over again, could we? You have a right to live the sort of life I planned for you. You...."

"Whiting," Steve said, "did you tell them yet?"

"No. No, I haven't. I have information to trade, sure. But I want to make sure it's going to the right people. I want to get our...."

"Dad! Our money, and all those deaths?"

"It doesn't matter now. I—I had changed my mind, Mary. Truly. But now, now that you're a prisoner, what if I don't talk? Don't you see, they'll torture you. They'll make you talk. And that way—we get nothing. I couldn't stand to see them hurt you."

"They can do—what they think they have to do. I'll tell them nothing."

"You won't have to," Whiting said. "I'll tell them when we reach the larger settlement. They're taking us there tomorrow, they told me."

"Then we've got to get out of here tonight," Steve said.

The low sun cast the shadow of their guard against the *thlotskin* wall of their tent. He was a single man, armed with a long, pike-like weapon. When darkness came, if the guard were not increased....

They were brought a pasty gruel for their supper, and ate in silence and distaste, ate because they needed the strength. Mary said, "Dad, I don't want you to tell them anything. Dad, please. If you thought you were doing it for me...."

"I've made up my mind," Tobias Whiting said.

Mary turned to Steve, in despair. "Steve," she said. "Steve. Do—whatever you have to do. I—I'll understand."

Steve didn't answer her. Wasn't Whiting right now? he thought. If Steve silenced him, wouldn't the Kumaji torture them for the information? Steve could stand up to it perhaps—but he couldn't stand to see them hurt Mary. He'd talk if they did that....

Then silencing Whiting wasn't the answer. But the Kumajis had one willing prisoner and two unwilling ones. They knew that. If the willing one yelled for

help but the yelling was kept to a minimum so only one guard, the man outside, came....

Darkness in the Kumaji encampment.

Far off, a lone tribesman singing a chant old as the desert.

"Are you asleep?" Mary asked.

"No," Steve said.

"Dad is. Listen to the way he's breathing—like a baby. As if—as if he wasn't going to betray all our people. Oh, I hate him, I hate him!"

Steve crawled to where the older man was sleeping. Tobias Whiting's voice surprised him. "I'm not asleep. I was thinking. I—"

"I'm going to kill you," Steve said very softly, and sprang at Whiting. He paused, though. It was a calculated pause, and Whiting cried out as Steve had hoped he would. Then his hands found the older man's throat and closed there—not to kill him but to keep him from crying out again.

Sand stirred, the tentflap lifted, and a bulky figure rushed inside. Steve got up, met him halfway, felt the jarring contact of their bodies. The pike came up dimly in the darkness, the point scraping against Steve's ribs as the guard lunged awkwardly. Steve's fingers sought the thick-muscled neck, clamped there—squeezing.

The guard writhed. His feet drummed the sand. With one hand he stabbed out wildly with the unwieldy pike. There was a cry from Mary and the guard managed a low squawking noise. Outside, the rest of the camp seemed undisturbed. There was death in Steve's strong tightening fingers. There had to be death there. Death for the Kumaji guard—or death for the fleeing Earthmen, who had lost one colony and must seek another.

They fell together on the sand, the guard still struggling. Steve couldn't release

his throat to grab the pike. The guard stabbed out awkwardly, blindly with it, kicking up sand. Then Tobias Whiting moaned, but Steve hardly heard him.

When the guard's legs stopped drumming, Steve released him. The man was either dead or so close to death that he would be out for hours. Steve had never killed a man before, had never in violence and with intent to kill attacked a man....

"Steve!"

It was Mary, calling his name and crying.

"It's Dad. Dad was—hit. The pike, a wild stab. He's hit bad—"

Steve crawled over to them. It was very dark. He could barely make out Tobias Whiting's pain-contorted face.

"My stomach," Whiting said, gasping for breath. "The pain...."

Steve probed with his hands, found the wound. Blood was rushing out. He couldn't stop it and he knew it and he thought Whiting knew it too. He touched Mary's hand, and held it. Mary sobbed against him, crying softly.

"You two ..." Whiting gasped. "You two ... Mary, Mary girl. Is—he—what you want?"

"Yes, Dad. Oh, yes!"

"You can get her out of here, Cantwell?"

"I think so," Steve said.

"Then go. Go while you can. I'll tell them—due south. The Earthmen are heading due south. They'll go—south. They won't find the caravan. You'll—all—get away. If it's—what you want, Mary."

She leaned away from Steve, kissing her father. She asked Steve: "Isn't there anything we can do for him?"

Steve shook his head. "But he's got to live long enough to tell them, to deceive them."

"I'll live long enough," Whiting said, and Steve knew then that he would. "Luck to—all of you. From a—very foolish—man...."

Steve took Mary's hand and pulled her out into the hot, dark, wind-blown night. He carried the dead Kumaji's pike and they slipped across the sand to where the *thlots* were hobbled for the night. He hardly remembered the rest of it. There was violence and death, but necessary death. He killed a man with the pike, and unhobbled one of the *thlots*. The animal screamed and two more Kumajis came sleepily through the night to see what was the matter. With the long edge of the pike's blade he decapitated one of them. He slammed the shaft of the weapon across the other's face, probably breaking his jaw. The camp was in a turmoil. In the darkness he flung Mary on the *thlot's* bare back in front of him, and they glided off across the sand.

Pursuit was disorganized—and unsuccessful. It was too dark for effective pursuit, as Steve had hoped it would be. They rode swiftly all night and continued riding with the dawn. They could have gone in any direction. The wind-driven sand would obliterate their trail.

Two days later they reached the caravan. As they rode up, Mary said, "Steve, do you have to tell them?"

"We can tell them this," Steve said. "Your father died a hero's death, sending the Kumajis off in the wrong direction."

"And not—not what he'd planned to do at first."

"No. We'll tell them that was his intention all the while. A man can make a mistake, can't he?"

"I love you, Steve. I love you."

Then they rode down on the caravan. Somehow Steve knew they would all reach Oasis City in safety.

With Mary he would find a new world out in the vastness of space.

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