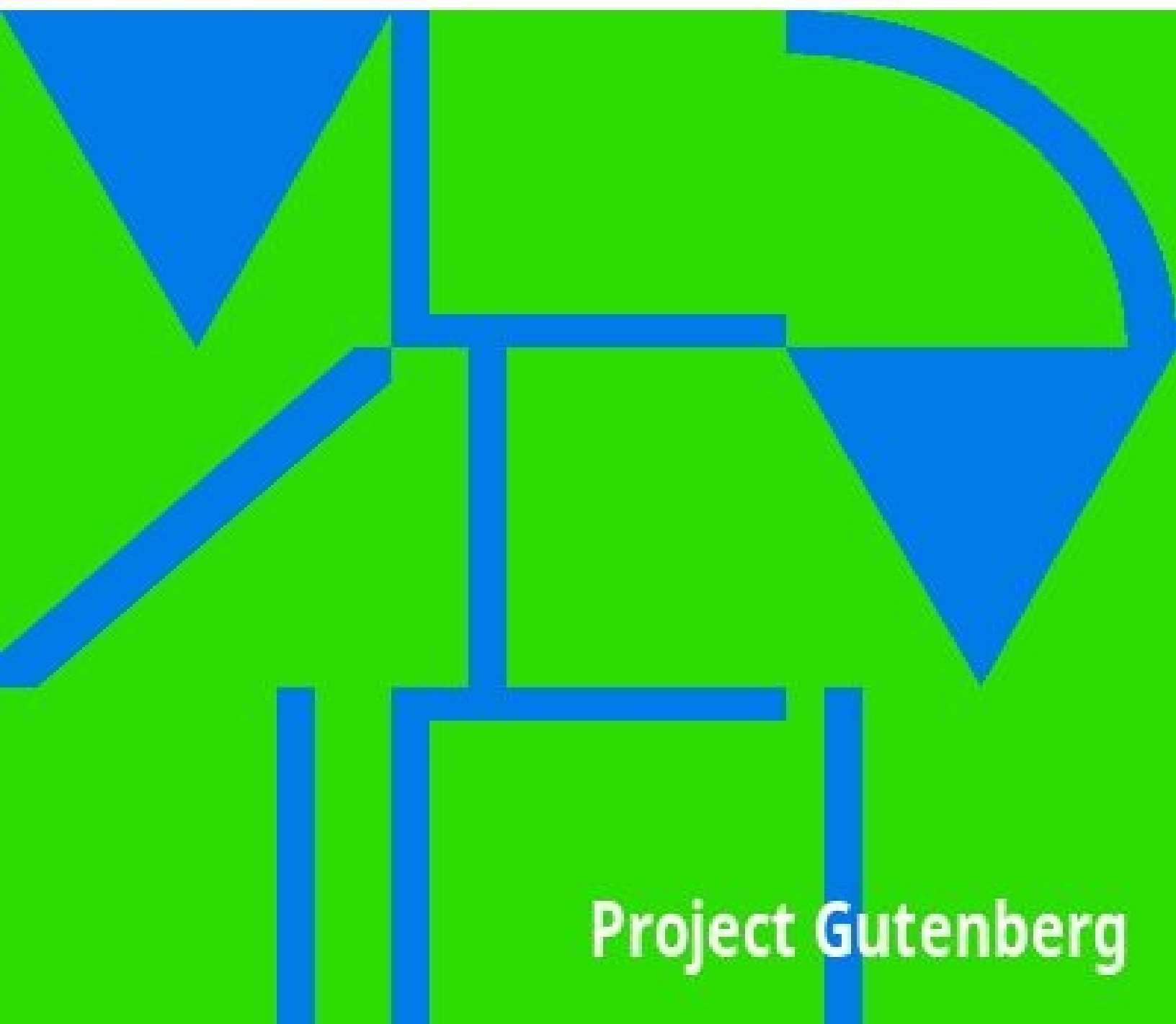


Slingshot

Irving W. Lande



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SLINGSHOT

BY
IRVING W. LANDE

Illustrated by Emsch

The slingshot was, I believe, one of the few weapons of history that wasn't used in the last war. That doesn't mean it won't be used in the next!

"Got a bogey at three o'clock high. Range about six hundred miles." Johnson spoke casually, but his voice in the intercom was thin with tension.

Captain Paul Coulter, commanding Space Fighter 308, 58th Squadron, 33rd Fighter Wing, glanced up out of his canopy in the direction indicated, and smiled to himself at the instinctive reaction. Nothing there but the familiar starry backdrop, the moon far down to the left. If the light wasn't right, a ship might be invisible at half a mile. He squeezed the throttle mike button. "Any IFF?"

"No IFF."

"O.K., let me know as soon as you have his course." Coulter squashed out his cigar and began his cockpit check, grinning without humor as he noticed that his breathing had deepened and his palms were moist on the controls. He looked down to make sure his radio was snug in its pocket on his leg; checked the thigh harness of his emergency rocket, wrapped in its thick belly pad; checked the paired tanks of oxygen behind him, hanging level from his shoulders into their niche in the "cradle." He flipped his helmet closed, locked it, and opened it again. He tossed a sardonic salute at the photograph of a young lady who graced the side of the cockpit. "Wish us luck, sugar." He pressed the mike button again.

"You got anything yet, Johnny?"

"He's going our way, Paul. Have it exact in a minute."

Coulter scanned the full arch of sky visible through the curving panels of the

dome, thinking the turgid thoughts that always came when action was near. His chest was full of the familiar weakness—not fear exactly, but a tight, helpless feeling that grew and grew with the waiting.

His eyes and hands were busy in the familiar procedure, readying the ship for combat, checking and re-checking the details that could mean life and death, but his mind watched disembodied, yearning back to earth.

Sylvia always came back first. Inviting smile and outstretched hands. Nyloned knees, pink sweater, and that clinging, clinging white silk skirt. A whirling montage of laughing, challenging eyes and tossing sky-black hair and soft arms tightening around his neck.

Then Jean, cool and self-possessed and slightly disapproving, with warmth and humor peeping through from underneath when she smiled. A lazy, crinkly kind of smile, like Christmas lights going on one by one. He wished he'd acted more grown up that night they watched the rain dance at the pueblo. For the hundredth time, he went over what he remembered of their last date, seeing the gleam of her shoulder, and the angry disappointment in her eyes; hearing again his awkward apologies. She was a nice kid. Silently his mouth formed the words. "You're a nice kid."

I think she loves me. She was just mad because I got drunk.

The tension of approaching combat suddenly blended with the memory, welling up into a rush of tenderness and affection. He whispered her name, and suddenly he knew that if he got back he was going to ask her to marry him.

He thought of his father, rocking on the porch of the Pennsylvania farm, pipe in his mouth, the weathered old face serene, as he puffed and listened to the radio beside him. He wished he'd written him last night, instead of joining the usual beer and bull session in the wardroom. He wished—. He wished.

"I've got him, Paul. He's got two point seven miles of RV on us. Take thirty degrees high on two point one o'clock for course to IP."

Automatically he turned the control wheel to the right and eased it back. The gyros recorded the turn to course.

"Hold 4 G's for one six five seconds, then coast two minutes for initial point five hundred miles on his tail."

"Right, Johnny. One sixty-five, then two minutes." He set the timer, advanced the throttle to 4 G's, and stepped back an inch as the acceleration took him snugly into the cradle. The Return-To-Station-Fuel and Relative-Velocity-To-Station gauges did their usual double takes on a change of course, as the ship computer recorded the new information. He liked those two gauges—the two old ladies.

Mrs. RSF kept track of how much more fuel they had than they needed to get home. When they were moving away from station, she dropped in alarmed little jumps, but when they were headed home, she inched along in serene contentment, or if they were coasting, sneaked triumphantly back up the dial.

Mrs. RVS started to get jittery at about ten mps away from home, and above fifteen, she was trembling steadily. He didn't blame the old ladies for worrying. With one hour of fuel at 5 G's, you didn't fire a single squirt unless there was a good reason for it. Most of their time on a mission was spent free wheeling, in the anxiety-laden boredom that fighting men have always known.

Wish the Red was coming in across our course. It would have taken less fuel, and the chase wouldn't have taken them so far out. But then they'd probably have been spotted, and lost the precious element of surprise.

He blessed the advantage of better radar. In this crazy "war," so like the dogfights of the first world war, the better than two hundred mile edge of American radar was more often than not the margin of victory. The American crews were a little sharper, a little better trained, but with their stripped down ships, and midget crewmen, with no personal safety equipment, the Reds could accelerate longer and faster, and go farther out. You had to get the jump on them, or it was just too bad.

The second hand hit forty-five in its third cycle, and he stood loose in the cradle as the power died.

Sixty-two combat missions but the government says there's no war. His mind wandered back over eight years in the service. Intelligence tests. Physical tests. Psychological tests. Six months of emotional adjustment in the screech. Primary training. Basic and advanced training. The pride and excitement of being chosen for space fighters. By the time he graduated, the United States and Russia each had several satellite stations operating, but in 1979, the United States had won the race for a permanent station on the Moon. What a grind it had been, bringing

in the supplies.

A year later the Moon station had "blown up." No warning. No survivors. Just a brand-new medium-sized crater. And six months later, the new station, almost completed, went up again. The diplomats had buzzed like hornets, with accusations and threats, but nothing could be proven—there *were* bombs stored at the station. The implication was clear enough. There wasn't going to be any Moon station until one government ruled Earth. Or until the United States and Russia figured out a way to get along with each other. And so far, getting along with Russia was like trying to get along with an octopus.

Of course there were rumors that the psych warfare boys had some gimmick cooked up, to turn the U. S. S. R. upside down in a revolution, the next time power changed hands, but he'd been hearing that one for years. Still, with four new dictators over there in the last eleven years, there was always a chance.

Anyway, he was just a space jockey, doing his job in this screwball fight out here in the empty reaches. Back on Earth, there was no war. The statesmen talked, held conferences, played international chess as ever. Neither side bothered the other's satellites, though naturally they were on permanent alert. There just wasn't going to be any Moon station for a while. Nobody knew what there might be on the Moon, but if one side couldn't have it, then the other side wasn't going to have it either.

And meanwhile, the struggle was growing deadlier, month by month, each side groping for the stranglehold, looking for the edge that would give domination of space, or make all-out war a good risk. They hadn't found it yet, but it was getting bloodier out here all the time. For a while, it had been a supreme achievement just to get a ship out and back, but gradually, as the ships improved, there was a little margin left over for weapons. Back a year ago, the average patrol was nothing but a sightseeing tour. Not that there was much to see, when you'd been out a few times. Now, there were Reds around practically every mission.

Thirteen missions to go, after today. He wondered if he'd quit at seventy-five. Deep inside him, the old pride and excitement were still strong. He still got a kick out of the way the girls looked at the silver rocket on his chest. But he didn't feel as lucky as he used to. Twenty-nine years old, and he was starting to feel like an old man. He pictured himself lecturing to a group of eager kids.

Had a couple of close calls, those last two missions. That Red had looked easy,

the way he was wandering around. He hadn't spotted them until they were well into their run, but when he got started he'd made them look like slow motion, just the same. If he hadn't tried that harebrained sudden deceleration.... Coulter shook his head at the memory. And on the last mission they'd been lucky to get a draw. Those boys were good shots.



"We're crossing his track, Paul. Turn to nine point five o'clock and hold 4 G's for thirty-two seconds, starting on the count ... five—four—three—two—one—go!" He completed the operation in silence, remarking to himself how lucky he was to have Johnson. The boy loved a chase. He navigated like a hungry hawk, though you had to admit his techniques were a bit irregular.

Coulter chuckled at the ad lib way they operated, remembering the courses, the tests, the procedures practiced until they could do them backwards blindfolded. When they tangled with a Red, the Solter co-ordinates went out the hatch. They navigated by the enemy. There were times during a fight when he had no more idea of his position than what the old ladies told him, and what he could see of the Sun, the Earth, and the Moon.

And using "right side up" as a basis for navigation. He chuckled again. Still, the service had had to concede on "right side up," in designing the ships, so there was something to be said for it. They hadn't been able to simulate gravity without fouling up the ships so they had to call the pilot's head "up." There was something comforting about it. He'd driven a couple of the experimental jobs, one with the cockpit set on gimbals, and one where the whole ship rotated, and he hadn't cared for them at all. Felt disoriented, with something nagging at his mind all the time, as though the ships had been sabotaged. A couple of pilots had gone nuts in the "spindizzy," and remembering his own feelings as he watched the sky go by, it was easy to understand.

Anyway, "right side up" tied in perfectly with the old "clock" system Garrity had dug out of those magazines he was always reading. Once they got used to it, it had turned out really handy. Old Doc Hoffman, his astrogation prof, would have turned purple if he'd ever dreamed they'd use such a conglomeration. But it worked. And when you were in a hurry, it worked in a hurry, and that was good enough for Coulter. He'd submitted a report on it to Colonel Silton.

"You've got him, Paul. We're dead on his tail, five hundred miles back, and matching velocity. Turn forty-two degrees right, and you're lined up right on

him." Johnson was pleased with the job he'd done.

Coulter watched the pip move into his sightscreen. It settled less than a degree off dead center. He made the final corrections in course, set the air pressure control to eight pounds, and locked his helmet.

"Nice job, Johnny. Let's button up. You with us, Guns?"

Garrity sounded lazy as a well-fed tiger. "Ah'm with yew, cap'n."

Coulter advanced the throttle to 5 G's. And with the hiss of power, SF 308 began the deadly, intricate, precarious maneuver called a combat pass—a maneuver inherited from the aerial dogfight—though it often turned into something more like the broadside duels of the old sailing ships—as the best and least suicidal method of killing a spaceship. To start on the enemy's tail, just out of his radar range. To come up his track at 2 mps relative velocity, firing six .30 caliber machine guns from fifty miles out. In the last three or four seconds, to break out just enough to clear him, praying that he won't break in the same direction. *And to keep on going.*

Four minutes and thirty-four seconds to the break. Sixty seconds at 5 G's; one hundred ninety-two seconds of free wheeling; and then, if they were lucky, the twenty-two frantic seconds they were out here for—throwing a few pounds of steel slugs out before them in one unbroken burst, groping out fifty miles into the darkness with steel and radar fingers to kill a duplicate of themselves.

This is the worst. These three minutes are the worst. One hundred ninety-two eternal seconds of waiting, of deathly silence and deathly calm, feeling and hearing nothing but the slow pounding of their own heartbeats. Each time he got back, it faded away, and all he remembered was the excitement. But each time he went through it, it was worse. Just standing and waiting in the silence, praying they weren't spotted—staring at the unmoving firmament and knowing he was a projectile hurtling two miles each second straight at a clump of metal and flesh that was the enemy. Knowing the odds were twenty to one against their scoring a kill ... unless they ran into him.

At eighty-five seconds, he corrected slightly to center the pip. The momentary hiss of the rockets was a relief. He heard the muffled yammering as Guns fired a short burst from the .30's standing out of their compartments around the sides of the ship. They were practically recoilless, but the burst drifted him forward

against the cradle harness.

And suddenly the waiting was over. The ship filled with vibration as Guns opened up. *Twenty-five seconds to target.* His eyes flicked from the sightscreen to the sky ahead, looking for the telltale flare of rockets—ready to follow like a ferret.

There he is! At eighteen miles from target, a tiny blue light flickered ahead. He forgot everything but the sightscreen, concentrating on keeping the pip dead center. The guns hammered on. It seemed they'd been firing for centuries. At ten-mile range, the combat radar kicked the automatics in, turning the ship ninety degrees to her course in one and a half seconds. He heard the lee side firing cut out, as Garrity hung on with two, then three guns.

He held it as long as he could. Closer than he ever had before. At four miles he poured 12 G's for two seconds.

They missed ramming by something around a hundred yards. The enemy ship flashed across his tail in a fraction of a second, already turned around and heading up its own track, yet it seemed to Paul he could make out every detail—the bright red star, even the tortured face of the pilot. Was there something lopsided in the shape of that rocket plume, or was he just imagining it in the blur of their passing? And did he hear a *ping* just at that instant, feel the ship vibrate for a second?

He continued the turn in the direction the automatics had started, bringing his nose around to watch the enemy's track. And as the shape of the plume told him the other ship was still heading back toward Earth, he brought the throttle back up to 12 G's, trying to overcome the lead his pass had given away.

Guns spoke quietly to Johnson. "Let me know when we kill his RV. Ah may get another shot at him."

And Johnny answered, hurt, "What do you think I'm doing down here—reading one of your magazines?"

Paul was struggling with hundred-pound arms, trying to focus the telescope that swiveled over the panel. As the field cleared, he could see that the plume was flaring unevenly, flickering red and orange along one side. Quietly and viciously, he was talking to himself. "Blow! Blow!"

And she blew. Like a dirty ragged bit of fireworks, throwing tiny handfuls of sparks into the blackness. Something glowed red for a while, and slowly faded.

There, but for the grace of God.... Paul shuddered in a confused mixture of relief and revulsion.

He cut back to 4 G's, noting that RVS registered about a mile per second away from station, and suddenly became aware that the red light was on for loss of air. The cabin pressure gauge read zero, and his heart throbbed into his throat as he remembered that *pinging* sound, just as they passed the enemy ship. He told Garrity to see if he could locate the loss, and any other damage, and was shortly startled by a low amazed whistle in his earphones.

"If Ah wasn't lookin' at it, Ah wouldn't believe it. Musta been one of his shells went right around the fuel tank and out again, without hittin' it. There's at least three inches of tank on a line between the holes! He musta been throwin' curves at us. Man, cap'n, this is our lucky day!"

Paul felt no surprise, only relief at having the trouble located. The reaction to the close call might not come till hours later. "This kind of luck we can do without. Can you patch the holes?"

"Ah can patch the one where it came in, but it musta been explodin' on the way out. There's a hole Ah could stick mah head through."

"That's a good idea." Johnson was not usually very witty, but this was one he couldn't resist.

"Never mind, Guns. A patch that big wouldn't be safe to hold air."

They were about eighty thousand miles out. He set course for Earth at about five and a half mps, which Johnson calculated to bring them in on the station on the "going away" side of its orbit, and settled back for the tedious two hours of free wheeling. For ten or fifteen minutes, the interphone crackled with the gregariousness born of recent peril, and gradually the ship fell silent as each man returned to his own private thoughts.

Paul was wondering about the men on the other ship—whether any of them were still alive. Eighty thousand miles to fall. That was a little beyond the capacity of an emergency rocket—about 2 G's for sixty seconds—even if they had them. What a way to go home! He wondered what he'd do if it happened to him. Would

he wait out his time, or just unlock his helmet.

Guns' drawl broke into his reverie. "Say, cap'n, Ah've been readin' in this magazine about a trick they used to use, called skip bombin'. They'd hang a bomb on the bottom of one of these airplanes, and fly along the ground, right at what they wanted to hit. Then they'd let the bomb go and get out of there, and the bomb would sail right on into the target. You s'pose we could fix this buggy up with an A bomb or an H bomb we could let go a few hundred miles out? Stick a proximity fuse on it, and a time fuse, too, in case we missed. Just sittin' half a mile apart and tradin' shots like we did on that last mission is kinda hard on mah nerves, and it's startin' to happen too often."

"Nice work if we could get it. I'm not crazy about those broadside battles myself. You'd think they'd have found something better than these thirty caliber popguns by now, but the odds say we've got to throw as many different chunks of iron as we can, to have a chance of hitting anything, and even then it's twenty to one against us. You wouldn't have one chance in a thousand of scoring a hit with a bomb at that distance, even if they didn't spot it and take off. What you'd need would be a rocket that could chase them, with the bomb for a head. And there's no way we could carry that size rocket, or fire it if we could. Some day these crates will come with men's rooms, and we'll have a place to carry something like that."

"How big would a rocket like that be?"

"Five, six feet, by maybe a foot. Weigh at least three hundred pounds."

It was five minutes before Guns spoke again. "Ah been thinkin', cap'n. With a little redecoratin', Ah think Ah could get a rocket that size in here with me. We could weld a rail to one of the gun mounts that would hold it up to five or six G's. Then after we got away from station, Ah could take it outside and mount it on the rail."

"Forget it, lad. If they ever caught us pulling a trick like that, they'd have us on hydroponic duty for the next five years. They just don't want us playing around with bombs, till the experts get all the angles figured out, and build ships to handle them. And besides, who do you think will rig a bomb like that, without anybody finding out? And where do you think we'd get a bomb in the first place? They don't leave those things lying around. Kovacs watches them like a mother hen. I think he counts them twice a day."

"Sorry, cap'n. Ah just figured if you could get hold of a bomb, Ah know a few of the boys who could rig the thing up for us and keep their mouths shut."

"Well, forget about it. It's not a bad idea, but we haven't any bomb."

"Right, cap'n."

But it was Paul who couldn't forget about it. All the rest of the way back to station, he kept seeing visions of a panel sliding aside in the nose of a sleek and gleaming ship, while a small rocket pushed its deadly snout forward, and then streaked off at tremendous acceleration.

Interrogation was brief. The mission had turned up nothing new. Their kill made eight against seven for Doc Miller's crew, and they made sure Miller and the boys heard about it. They were lightheaded with the elation that followed a successful mission, swapping insults with the rest of the squadron, and reveling in the sheer contentment of being back safe.

It wasn't until he got back to his stall, and started to write his father a long overdue letter, that he remembered he had heard Kovacs say he was going on leave.

When he finished the letter, he opened the copy of "Lady Chatterley's Lover" he had borrowed from Rodriguez's limited but colorful library. He couldn't keep his mind on it. He kept thinking of the armament officer.

Kovacs was a quiet, intelligent kid, devoted to his work. Coulter wasn't too intimate with him. He wasn't a spaceman, for one thing. One of those illogical but powerful distinctions that sub-divided the men of the station. And he was a little too polite to be easy company.

Paul remembered the time he had walked into the Muroc Base Officer's Club with Marge Halpern on his arm. The hunger that had lain undisguised on Kovacs' face the moment he first saw them. Marge was a striking blonde with a direct manner, who liked men, especially orbit station men. He hadn't thought about the incident since then, but the look in Kovacs' eyes kept coming back to him as he tried to read.

He wasn't sure how he got there, or why, when he found himself walking into Colonel Silton's office to ask for the leave he'd passed up at his fiftieth mission. He'd considered taking it several times, but the thought of leaving the squadron,

even for a couple of weeks, had made him feel guilty, as though he were quitting.

Once he had his papers, he started to get excited about it. As he cleaned up his paper work and packed his musette, his hands were fumbling, and his mind was full of Sylvia.

The vastness of Muroc Base was as incredible as ever. Row on uncounted row of neat buildings, each resting at the top of its own hundred-yard deep elevator shaft. A pulsing, throbbing city, dedicated to the long slow struggle to get into space and stay there. The service crew eyed them with studied indifference, as they writhed out of the small hatch and stepped to the ground. They drew a helijet at operations, and headed immediately for Los Angeles.

Kovacs had been impressed when Paul asked if he'd care to room together while they were on leave. He was quiet on the flight, as he had been on the way down, listening contentedly, while Paul talked combat and women with Bob Parandes, another pilot going on leave.

They parked the helijet at Municipal Field and headed for the public PV booths, picking up a coterie of two dogs and five assorted children on the way. The kids followed quietly in their wake, ecstatic at the sight of their uniforms.

Paul squared his shoulders, as befitted a hero, and tousled a couple of uncombed heads as they walked. The kids clustered around the booths, as Kovacs entered one to locate a hotel room, and Paul another, to call Sylvia.

"Honey, I've been so scared you weren't coming back. Where are you? When will I see you? Why didn't you write?..." She sputtered to a stop as he held up both hands in defense.

"Whoa, baby. One thing at a time. I'm at the airport. You'll see me tonight, and I'll tell you the rest then. That is, if you're free tonight. And tomorrow. And the day after, and the day after that. Are you free?"

Her hesitation was only momentary. "Well, I was going out—with a girl friend. But she'll understand. What's up?"

He took a deep breath. "I'd like to get out of the city for a few days, where we can take things easy and be away from the crowds. And there is another guy I'd like to bring along."

"We could take my helijet out to my dad's cottage at—*What did you say?*"

It was a ticklish job explaining about Kovacs, but when she understood that he just wanted to do a friend a favor, and she'd still have Paul all to herself, she calmed down. They made their arrangements quickly, and switched off.

He hesitated a minute before he called Marge. She was quite a dish to give up. Once she'd seen him with Sylvia, he'd be strictly *persona non grata*—that was for sure. It was an unhappy thought. Well, maybe it was in a good cause. He shrugged and called her.

She nearly cut him off when she first heard his request, but he did some fast talking. The idea of several days at the cottage intrigued her, and when he described how smitten Kovacs had been, she brightened up and agreed to come. He switched off, adjusted the drape of his genuine silk scarf, and stepped out of the booth.

Kovacs and the kids were waiting. The armament officer had apparently been telling them of Paul's exploits. They glowed with admiration. The oldest boy, about eleven, had true worship in his eyes. He hesitated a moment, then asked gravely: "Would you tell us how you kill a Red, sir?"

Paul eyed the time-honored weapon that dangled from the youngster's hand. He bent over and tapped it with his finger. His voice was warm and confiding, but his eyes were far away.

"I think next we're going to try a slingshot," he said.

THE END

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