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Title: No Hiding Place

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Release Date: June 29, 2009 [EBook #29272]

Language: English

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

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK NO HIDING PLACE ***

Turnabout may not always be fair play in the gulfs between the stars. But so destructive and malicious are the Agronians of this story that we can readily forgive Richard Smith for filling their ship with an unexpected reversal of a victory technique almost too ghastly to contemplate. We have no sympathy for them—and neither has Mr. Smith. Still, we're rather glad he decided to make human heroism the cornerstone of a most exciting tale of conflict in space.

no hiding place

by ... Richard R. Smith

The Earth was enveloped in atomic fire and the ship was a prize of war. But disaster may make victory mandatory.

THE SHIP LEAPED toward the stars, its engines roaring with a desperate burst of energy and its bulkheads audibly protesting the tremendous pressures.

In the control room, Emmett Corbin listened to the screech of tormented metal and shuddered. The heat was suffocating, and acrid fumes assailed his nostrils and burned his eyes until he almost cried out in pain.

Despite the agony, his gaze did not waver from the video set across the room. In the screen, Earth was a rapidly diminishing orb, charred and mottled with glowing atomic fires.

Everything, a far corner of his mind whispered. Everything on Earth is dead!

He was a carpenter and luckily, he had been working inside the barricades of an Army spaceport when the news came that the enemy had broken through the defense ring beyond Pluto. He had continued nailing the cedar siding on the building, knowing that if he stopped his work and waited, he would start screaming.

An MP running by the building several minutes later had shouted at him, urging him to board one of the ships on the landing field. In those last hours, they had loaded the few remaining spaceships as quickly as possible, ignoring the importance of the passengers. He reflected that many millionaires and influential politicians were now dead simply because they hadn't been close enough to the spaceports when the unexpected news came. Watching the pilots as they sat

tense before the controls, he felt overcome with helplessness.

The passenger on his right was a girl—red-haired and undeniably attractive. He remembered her name. It was Gloria White, and she was the daughter of Colonel White who had led the expedition to Venus. Her father had died months before but his friends had used their influence to establish her as a secretary on the spaceport where it was assumed she would be comparatively safe.

He had seen her frequently but almost always at a distance. She had been friendly enough, but she had never exchanged more than a few casual words with him. He had often paused in his work to admire her. But now, aboard one of the last ships to leave Earth, he evaluated her only as another passenger.

The man on his left was dressed expensively. His general appearance radiated prestige although his fleshy face was filled with disbelief as if he were witnessing a fantastic nightmare.

Rinnng! Rinnng! Corbin's thoughts were interrupted by a clamoring alarm bell declaring by its volume and insistence that the danger was still acute. *That bell will ring until the ship is destroyed*, he thought wildly. *It could very well mean that the ship will be destroyed!*

The pilots leaped away from the controls as if they had abruptly become white hot. "Rocket," one of them screamed. "Enemy rocket on our tail!"

Corbin turned suddenly and ran across the room in sudden, blind panic. "We can't shake it! Nobody can shake one!" Mumbling incoherently, he grabbed a spacesuit and began to don it.

The room was suddenly a seething mass of confusion. The pilots distributed spacesuits and helped passengers into them while the cabin continued to sway and lurch. Fear-crazed passengers ran aimlessly in circles. Some fainted and others were shocked into immobility.

Emmett had barely finished securing his helmet when the ship shook violently and he was knocked to the floor. The lights fluttered, then went out.

When the trembling at last subsided, he struggled to his feet and looked about the room. His eyes gradually adjusted to the faint light from the luminous paint on the walls and he was able to make out two shadowy figures moving hesitantly about the wreckage.

He remained motionless as one of the two men approached him, reached out and adjusted the dials on his spacesuit controls. The earphones in his helmet blared with a familiar voice, "Are you all right?"

"Y-Yeah. Just a little shaken."

The man walked toward the third passenger and presently Emmett heard a quick, sobbing breath through the earphones.

"Are you hurt?" the man asked.

"No." Even under the abnormal conditions Gloria White's calm voice came through clearly.

They wandered aimlessly about the room, each engrossed in his private mental turmoil. Finally the pilot broke the silence, "Since we're probably the last ones alive on the ship, we should know each other. My name is George Hartman."

"Emmett Corbin."

"Gloria ... Gloria White."

The pilot said with grim urgency: "We've got to do something. There's no sense in just standing here—waiting for the enemy to come."

"Come?" Emmett inquired. "You mean that the Agronians will actually board our ship?"

"They always examine disabled ships. They are determined to learn as much as they can about us."

"Well, let's get some weapons and be ready. I'm no hero, understand. But I agree with you that there's no sense in just waiting."

The pilot said: "There are no hand weapons on the ship. Our only possible course of action would be to *hide*." His emphasis conveyed to the others how much he disliked the thought.

"But where?" Gloria asked. "If they make a thorough search—"

"We can't hide *in* the ship," George said, with absolute conviction. "Our reports indicate that they examine every square foot inside a bombed vessel. We'll have to conceal ourselves outside."

"*Outside?*"

"We can use the magnetic shoes on our spacesuits to walk on the ship's hull. If luck favors us they may never even think of searching the forward section of the hull."

Emmett shrugged his shoulders, not realizing that in the faint light no one could see the gesture. Gloria said, "It's better than making no attempt at all to save ourselves."

George led the way from the control room, and across a passenger compartment that was filled with the crumpled, lifeless forms of almost a hundred men and women.

"There were no spacesuits in this room," he explained simply.

They operated the air lock by utilizing the emergency manual controls, and were soon standing on the hull of the ship. For several seconds they remained motionless and silent, grimly surveying their awesome surroundings. The billions of stars above were terrifyingly vivid against the dark emptiness of space. The ship's hull was fantastically twisted and pitted, and the enemy ship—it hovered a few miles distant—had been transformed into a brilliantly burning star by the reflected sunlight.

"We've got to find cover," George said quickly. "If they're watching the ship with telescopes we'll stand out like fireflies in a dark room!"

Cautiously sliding their feet across the hull, Gloria and Emmett followed the pilot. Presently he

pointed to a spot where a large section of the hull had been twisted back upon itself, forming a deep pocket. "This should be good enough," he said.

They followed his example as he knelt and crawled through the small opening. To Emmett it was like crawling into a sardine can. The space was barely large enough to accommodate the three of them, and through the spacesuit's tough fabric, he could feel faint, shifting pressures that indicated he was leaning against someone's back and sitting on someone's legs. They shuffled about in the total darkness until they reached a fairly comfortable position and then crouched in silence until light flashed all about them.

"Look!" Gloria whispered. Emmett stared through a narrow gash in the metal near his head and saw a group of Agronians approaching the ship. The starlight, glittering on their strange spacesuits, transformed them into weird apparitions.

Emmett closed his eyes and breathed a silent prayer. When he opened them again he could see only the unwinking stars and the enemy ship, which was still hovering nearby like a huge glaring eye.

"They're inside the ship analyzing our navigational instruments," George said as if he could somehow see through the solid metal. "They're a very thorough race. They probably know far more about us than we know about them."

"What are we going to do?" Gloria asked. "We can't just sit here until breathing becomes a torment—"

"What *can* we do? There's no place to go!" Emmett's heart had begun a furious pounding. His plight reminded him of how, in a recurrent nightmare, he had often found himself standing frozen before an oncoming truck, his legs immobile as he waited for death. He had always awakened with his heart beating furiously and his body bathed in a cold sweat, his mind filled with a sickening fear.

And now it was as if the nightmare had become a reality. He was waiting for death not in the form of a truck, but in the regular *swish* of air that tickled his ears as his oxygen supply was purified and replenished. Eventually the sound would change its timbre as the purifying agents became less efficient. The faint sound was not as impressive as the sight of a truck. But he knew that in a short time it would be just as deadly. And, as in the nightmare, he was powerless ...

A long silence followed—broken only by the *swish* of Emmett's oxygen-rejuvenating machinery. He listened intently and the *swish* grew in volume until it became a roar in his ears—a sound more thunderous than that of a thousand trucks.

"There is a place where we'd be completely safe," Gloria exclaimed, her voice suddenly loud in his ears. "I don't know how we could get there. But if a way could be found—"

"Venus?" George inquired. "The colony your father started?"

"Yes. There are only a few colonists there—not more than twenty-five. The war with the Agronians started just after the settlement was established and the government never had a chance to send out more colonists. Father showed me the approximate location—"

"The Agronians have probably destroyed the base by now," Emmett said. But his senses were tingling with new hope.

Gloria shook her head. "I don't think so. The enemy has studied the remains of our warships but there's a good chance that the information never fell into their hands."

"How do we get there? We haven't got a ship, and *we can't walk!*"

"We haven't got a ship," George agreed. "But we can try to get one."

Emmett felt suddenly cold when he realized what the pilot had in mind. "The enemy ship?" he asked.

George nodded. "During the skirmish at Arcturus, we managed to capture one of their ships and I was a member of a group that studied it. I'm sure I can fly one of their vessels, for the controls are far simpler than ours. Most of the Agronians have left their ship to study ours, and that leaves only a skeleton crew on board. We can use our spacesuit jets to cross the distance. As you can see, it isn't too far."

"And precisely what happens when we reach their ship?"

"Who knows? Maybe we'll get killed. But getting killed in a struggle for survival is better than just waiting to die."

Gloria shuddered. "It looks so cold out there. We'll get separated—hopelessly lost. I don't even know how to operate the spacesuit's rockets!"

"I don't either," Emmett admitted.

"It's simple." George carefully explained the operation of the rockets in detail and ended by instructing them, "We'll get separated on the way. But when we reach the ship, we'll try to meet at the air lock. It resembles the air lock of an Earth ship."

Floating through space toward the enemy ship, Emmett felt overcome with an absurd sensation of freedom. Completely surrounded by billions of motionless, pin-point stars and securely hidden by the vast blackness of space, the aliens and the problem of survival seemed dream-like and unreal.

A sharp pain stabbed at his left arm and he heard a brief hissing sound. Oxygen was escaping from his spacesuit. The sound abruptly stopped when the suit automatically sealed the puncture. And yet the throbbing pain remained and he felt the wetness of blood against his flesh, seeping slowly down his leg.

A meteor! People usually visualized meteors as tons of metal hurtling through space. But there were small ones as well, and perhaps this one had been no larger than a grain of sand. He dismissed it from his mind, and after what seemed an eternity, his feet touched the hull of the enemy ship. Quickly he activated the magnetic boots.

A distant figure gestured as George's voice came loudly over the intercom system, "This way. Here's the air lock!"

You should whisper, he thought. *It would be more fitting.*

He shuffled in the indicated direction. His legs were rubbery beneath him and there was a growing tingling sensation in his left arm. It was just barely possible that he was bleeding to death. And encased as he was in the spacesuit, it would be impossible for him to treat the wound.

If they reached the colony on Venus he would receive medical attention, of course. But they must first overpower the ship's crew, and it would take approximately two hours to reach the colony. Could he hold out that long?

He didn't know.

George knelt and carefully examined the rectangular outline in the metal beneath their feet. "It's only a sort of button," he said. "It could be a device that opens the lock by means of a code sequence—or it could be a signal to notify those inside to open the lock."

"What should we do?" Gloria asked nervously.

Instead of replying, George pushed the button firmly. The section of hull beneath them instantly dropped several feet. Emmett looked up in time to see an outer air-lock panel swiftly blot out the stars.

Brief seconds later, the compartment was filled with a brilliant light and tiny nozzles in the ceiling sprayed a bluish gas about them.

Gloria leapt quickly to one side. "What's that?" she asked, in alarm.

"It's the Agronian atmosphere," George said. "Although their locks are mechanically different, the principle behind them is the same as ours."

"It's a strange-looking atmosphere," Emmett remarked. The pain in his arm and the numbness that was gradually spreading throughout his body had relaxed his mind. He felt so physically detached from his surroundings that he could look at the fog-like gas that swirled about them with interest rather than concern.

"It's poisonous," George said. "We managed to analyze some. One breath is enough to kill a human—"

An inner door abruptly glided to one side and George leaped into the room beyond. Emmett followed as quickly as possible, although he felt sleepy and his every action seemed a study in slow motion.

Except for the level expanse of the floor, the room before them was entirely alien. The thick atmosphere swirled eerily. The control board was recognizable as such, but being adapted for tentacles instead of human hands, it appeared to be a meaningless maze of equipment. Strange, angular devices lined the walls and hung from the low ceiling on thin wires. As Emmett scanned the odd artifacts, he could understand only one—a group of web-like hammocks that were obviously used by the aliens to sleep in.

Two Agronians stood before the large control board at the far side of the room. It was the first time Emmett had seen the enemy other than in pictures and the sight of the thousands of snakelike, wriggling antennae nauseated him.

George hesitated briefly and then ran toward the Agronians. Again Emmett followed the pilot's lead. One of the creatures aimed a weapon before George had crossed half the distance and Gloria's shrill scream of warning brought him up short. But before the weapon could be discharged, the other Agronian viciously flung a tentacle and sent it spinning from his companion's clasp.

George leaped at the nearest Agronian but the creature easily eluded him. He made another attempt and failed again.

The man and the alien cautiously surveyed each other.

"They're too fast for us," George admitted. His voice was filled with the bitterness of defeat and his shoulders sagged visibly.

"*Do something!*" Gloria screamed. "Do something before the others come back!"

Emmett glanced apprehensively at the air lock. She was right. At the moment they outnumbered the enemy, but when the others returned the Agronians could overpower them by sheer weight of number. And they could return without warning, at any instant.

"Why did one prevent the other from killing us?" George asked.

"He may have been afraid the other would miss and damage the ship," Emmett said. "Or possibly —"

"No. They're trained from birth to be soldiers. They're expert marksmen and their weapons are foolproof. They can adjust the blast from a weapon to travel any distance."

"Why should one enemy prevent another from killing us?" Emmett repeated wonderingly. He remembered another question that had nagged at his mind: *Why had the Agronians totally destroyed Earth?* Why hadn't they eliminated Earthmen and preserved the planet for exploitation—as a colony, a military base, any one of a thousand uses?

There was only one possible answer. A race might destroy a planet if it was useless. Earthmen had discovered useless planets, planets with poisonous atmospheres. Was Earth's atmosphere poisonous to the Agronians?

One Agronian had prevented another from killing them with a viciousness and an urgency that indicated it had been a life-and-death necessity.

Why? What would happen if they were to die?

Something clicked in his mind and a startling certainty occurred to him. *Oxygen was poisonous to the Agronians!*

That was why his life had been spared. And the pilot's—and Gloria's. Their spacesuits would have been punctured and their oxygen supply would have spread with deadly rapidity throughout the room.

Without hesitation he removed his helmet and adjusted the controls of his oxygenating machine until it was discharging oxygen at maximum capacity.

With a shrill outcry the two aliens darted toward him. But a thin, ghostly vapor of oxygen spread rapidly through the fog-like atmosphere, and halted them in their tracks.

"You deserve to die," Emmett whispered.

The enemy collapsed at his feet and writhed helplessly on the floor. Their bodies quivered spasmodically and were still.

Gloria's hysterical, joyous laughter rang in his ears like triumphant bells, and through the Agronian atmosphere that burned his face and smarted his eyes he dimly saw George's image as he rushed to the control board. He held his breath but realized that his death was certain. He could never hold his breath long enough to replace the helmet and wait for the purifying agents to cleanse the poison that now filled his spacesuit.

When he could hold his breath no longer, he inhaled quickly and deeply.

It was like inhaling a warm, comforting darkness....

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