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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 leant 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 waggled 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 shrilled.

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 waggled 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 COLLECTIVUM ***

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