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MINDSNAKE

By JIM HARMON



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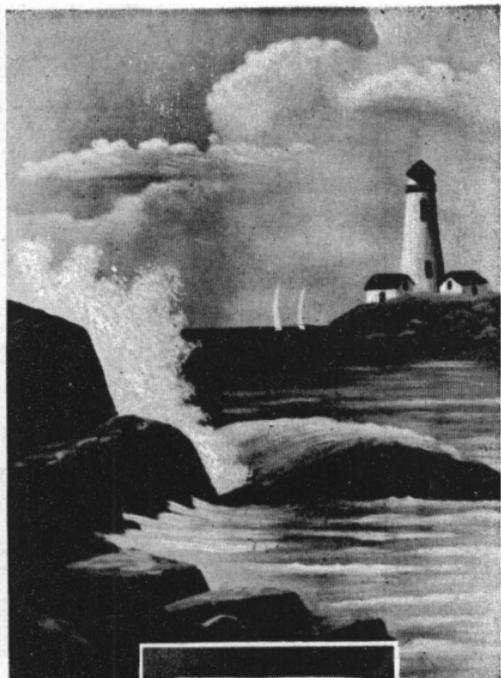
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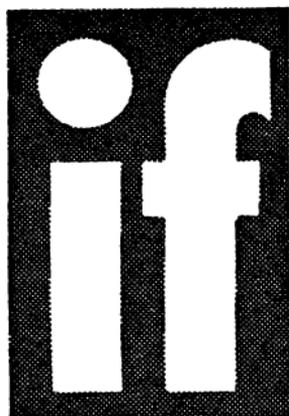
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WORLDS OF SCIENCE FICTION

NOVEMBER 1960

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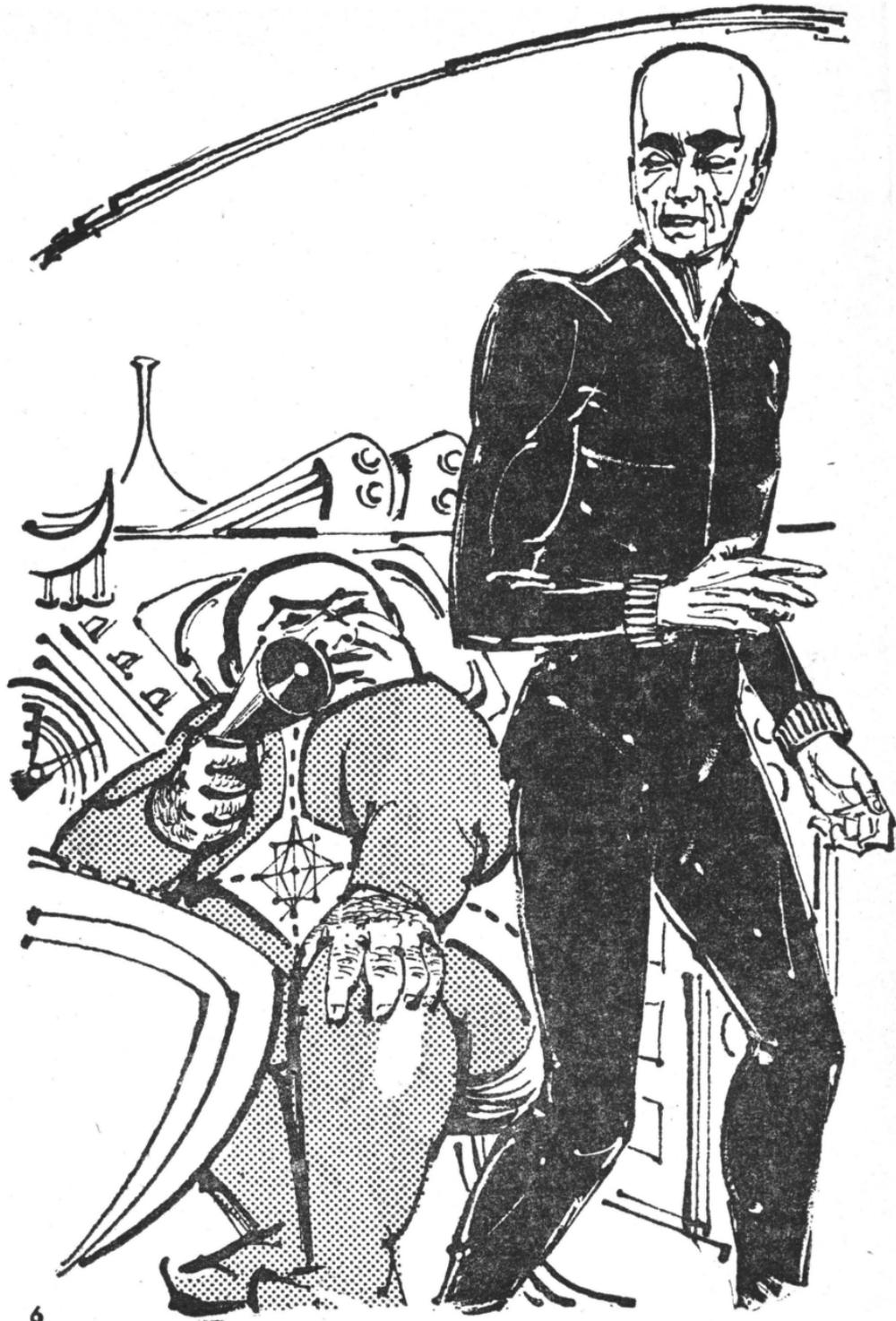
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Let them think anything they wished of him and his dog. All that mattered was the black thought slithering of the . . .

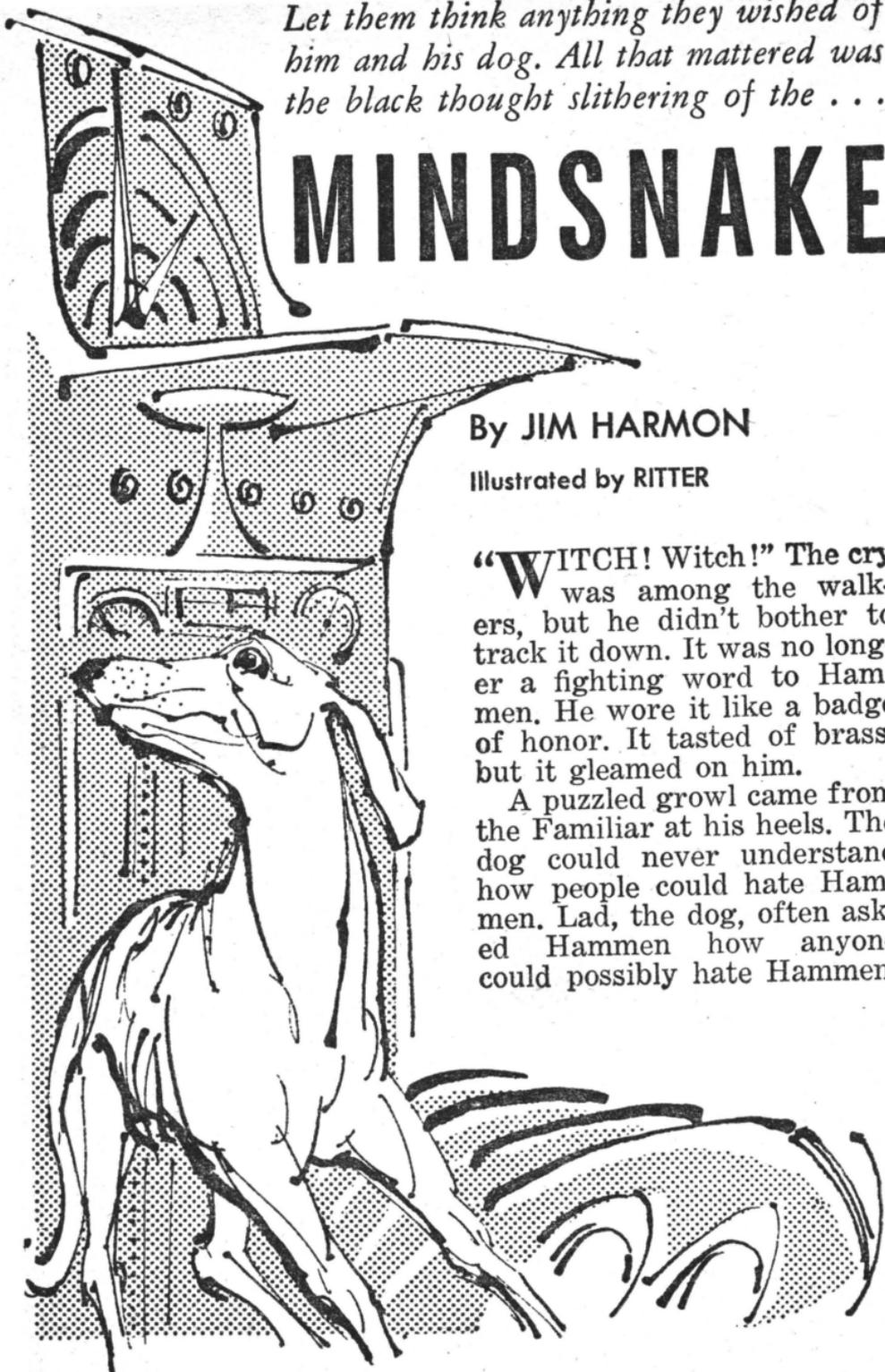
MINDSNAKE

By JIM HARMON

Illustrated by RITTER

“WITCH! Witch!” The cry was among the walkers, but he didn't bother to track it down. It was no longer a fighting word to Hammen. He wore it like a badge of honor. It tasted of brass, but it gleamed on him.

A puzzled growl came from the Familiar at his heels. The dog could never understand how people could hate Hammen. Lad, the dog, often asked Hammen how anyone could possibly hate Hammen,



and Hammen always told him to shut up; he couldn't understand—he was only a dog.

The walk ramp was crowded this afternoon with people fresh from the transmatter stations, eager to tell themselves they were walking on a strange planet. Hammen passed among the nudists, the cavaliers, the zip-suiters, the zoot-suiters, the Ivy-coated, the Moss-covered, walking not for novelty or exercise but because he preferred to go everywhere under his own power. Even to the stars.

Hale and Lora saluted him a few paces away from the entrance to the station. They were a beautiful blond couple, with brightly polished faces. Hammen didn't much like them, but he didn't feel sufficiently pressed to be rude enough to let them become aware of it.

"How goes it, kids?" he asked them.

"Couldn't be better," Hale said.

"Of course not," Lora added.

HAMMEN'S slate eyes moved from the man to the woman. "Are you troubled?"

"This isn't the time to talk about it, not before you and Lad transmit yourself," the girl said quickly.

It wasn't, Hammen admitted to himself. Only now that they had let it slip, he would

rest better knowing the whole truth of it.

"Come on," Hammen urged. "It's not as if I wasn't interested."

Hale looked at his wife. "Lora doesn't like Wagner any more."

"Perdition!" said Hammen. "I *never* liked Wagner. She's growing up."

Lora put a half-closed fist to her lips, and didn't look at either of the men, or at the dog who stood with freshly pointed ears.

"No," she said softly. "I lost something on the last one. Gee, I wonder if the Mind-snake likes Wagner now? Still, it's not as if I had stopped liking music altogether, or books. Not this time."

Hale grabbed her arm roughly. "You're sure doing a great job of getting Hammen ready for the jump."

Lora's eyes clouded. "I'm sorry, Ham." She looked up, smiled warmly, kissed her fingertips and placed them on Hammen's lips. "Companion's Code, huh?"

He took her hand and for the moment liked her. "Okay, honey. I guess even a Witch squeezes in under the wire for that."

The young team was abruptly embarrassed. "Oh, well, Witch," Hale said deprecatingly, "what does cargo know, anyway?"

Hammen laughed and scratched Lad's ears. "They

know I'm a Witch. But it has its advantages. I don't have to worry about Lad losing his taste for Wagner. A dog does not have that much to lose. If it comes to that, he's just gone."

Lora shuddered delicately, the way of a watered flower. "How could you stand to lose a Companion with so little feeling?"

"I've lost three Companions, and got myself and my cargo into port. They were only dogs."

Hale looked at him sharply. "But you were Companionship with them. It must have been," he selected a word, "difficult for you."

"Don't absorb the cargo's superstitions about Witches and their Familiars. They have fogged, even dirty, ideas. They were just dogs to me. Like Lad."

"**A** DOG, that's all he is," Gordus said in a manner designed to explain the thing patiently to Hammen.

"Lad is a dog."

"Why do you emphasize the point now?" Hammen demanded.

The Companion sat on a seat formed from a single S-shaped plastic surface. Hammen studied the bulk of Gordus, Coordinator of Transmatters, who sat hulked in his utility chair in the bubble office overhanging the

City of the Sea, on the world of Lanole. Hammen was comfortable, cooled, relaxed, amused by a light play of sensory electron music, and aggressively unhappy.

Gordus sat in his great chair patting the hair on the back of his left hand with his right palm, as if the fist were a sleeping kitten. At Hammen's feet, Lad's neck muscles quivered uneasily.

"Your record, Hammen," Gordus said at last, "is a good one."

"How could it be better? I've never lost one member of a cargo."

"But you have lost three Companions."

"Familiars. Dogs."

"But it shows weakness."

Hammen's face heated. "I never show weakness."

"Not *your* weakness, my dear, dear boy," Gordus said in exaggeration. "The weakness of the Witch-Familiar relationship, the weakness of Witches as Companions at all. Don't take it personally."

Hammen leaped to his feet. Lad's muzzle gleamed white.

"Not take it personally?" Hammen cried. "How else can I take it? You are questioning the worthiness of my profession, of my way of life. You question the honor of many of my friends—my associates. Witchery is an ancient profession. My grandmother and uncle were Witches before me. Witches have an un-

paralleled record of service to Transmitters and to the human race. How dare you, sir!"

Gordus waved a fat hand in front of him, laughing up and down the scale. "No, no, no. Peace, please. You have no need to plead so strongly for the cause of Witches. You don't have to be a Witch, you know, Hammen. You're good enough to be a regular, full-fledged Companion. The reason you get so many of your cargo through is that you in the most literal sense Companion them all. It would be possible for you to use a fellow Companion on your jumps instead of a Familiar."

HAMMEN sat down, no longer angry, or energetic. "No. No, it wouldn't be possible for me to do that. I can take people on an occasional jump, for high pay. But I couldn't stand the same kind of contact, day in, day out, with another human being. Pay doesn't come that high."

Gordus gave another laugh, and killed it sharply. "And there you were a few moments ago bragging about all the service Witches had been to the human race, and when we get down to it, it turns out you hate the human race."

Hammen tasted the inside of his dry mouth and longed for a way out. "I don't hate it; I just can't stand it. There's a difference."

"If you say so. But tell me, do you like your fellow Companions, or even your fellow Witches, any better than you do your cargo?"

"No," Hammen admitted.

"Good. Then we can stop this foolish talk about the Witches' service to mankind, since you don't give a damn about either Witches or mankind. You care only about one Witch; your interests are entirely self-interests. Correct?"

"Yes."

"Good. Better. Now I suppose you are not entirely satisfied with the benefits you now receive as a Witch? You would like more money, pleasure, power, prestige? You have ambition, greed, hunger, desire?"

"Yes."

"Fine. I didn't think you had altogether ceased to be human. Then I can tell you that the Transmitter Service has to perform its most important mission, and you are thought to be the best man for it."

"Most important mission?" said Hammen. "Best man?"

Gordus became happy. "Those are questions? But I can't tell you the answers. Not yet. First, you must promise us the added protection of taking a human Companion for this assignment."

"Why should I want to do that, Gordus?"

"Because I have promised

that you would, and I never fail."

Hammen stood for the second time. "Sorry. Not a good enough reason for me."

GORDUS' face splintered into confusion. "But as your superior, as your coordinator, I order you to take a human Companion for this assignment."

"Gordus," Hammen said, "you were once a Companion yourself."

"When I was younger, while my wife was alive."

"Then rescind your order or I'll kill you—under the Code, in a duel."

Gordus sneered. "I have never been beaten."

"Obviously," Hammen said. He didn't point out anything about his own status.

"No."

It was a final thing.

"Are you armed at this instant?"

The coordinator shook his heavy head.

"Then I plead grievance and choose weapons. Appeal?"

The other shrugged. "Choose."

Hammen was breathing deeply and regularly, in preparation. "Before this is closed, I want to remind you that the Law and the Code both state that no one can interfere in the relationship between a Team."

"Doesn't apply," Gordus

said. "The act of '97 recognized the Companionship of Witches, but it did not extend the privilege to Familiars. Naturally not. You are a Companion and I could not separate you from a human Companion, but I can order you to break from Lad."

"That isn't just."

"I know. But we're talking about law, not justice."

"Do you wish aid from your fellow Companion?" Hammen asked.

"In later years, I have often wished for it, but my formal reply: No."

"Then," Hammen said, "I name our weapon as the body. The time, this instant. I can kill you easily with my bare hands, and Lad will help with his teeth."

An eyebrow-hedged ridge of fat above Gordus' left eye angled. "Use the dog and you'll get in trouble."

"Not before a Companions' Court. But if you so state your preference, I'll only use my own body."

"Hammen, about this matter," the coordinator said. "I'll think about it."

"An hour," Hammen said, and turned on his heel.

"Hammen," Gordus called out.

Hammen looked back to face a leveled destruction gun.

"You know the Code," Gordus explained. "The Challenge wasn't withdrawn. You

struck the field. A coward may be killed by any weapon."

"You are too modest," Hammen told him.

Gordus smiled and fed the gun to a compartment of his utility chair. "I only wanted to prove a point. I can kill you anytime, anywhere. No one can beat me. Can they? Can they, Hammen?"

The sweat stung Hammen's palms so hard he could almost taste the salt in it with his fingers.

"I'll do it."

"Gratitude is a part of honor. Yes. The Code. You do believe in that. But you haven't asked me yet who your human Companion on the jump will be."

"Who?" Hammen asked.

"As you yourself pointed, I still come under the Code myself."

"I AGREED to take a human Companion, but I did not agree to take Gordus himself," Hammen explained to his wristphone in the alcove outside the coordinator's office.

"I think it's a terrible thing," Lora said. "But why won't you jump with him—Gordus, I mean?"

"I hate him," Hammen explained.

"Oh, sure. I guess I do too. I'd never thought of being a Companion with him. Ugh! Oh, Hale's swimming in

now." Aside: "Over here, darling. Ham's calling."

From afar: "Who?"

Aside: "Hammen. The Witch."

"Why didn't you say so?"

Into the phone: "Hi, fellow. What can we do to you?"

"You can do a lot for me."

"For you, huh? That comes high, you know. What'll it be?"

Hammen retold his story, and finished with, "That's why I called you two. I need a human Companion, anybody other than Gordus."

A slithering of voice, then faint, but distinct, from Lora: "I couldn't do it and I can't let you do it. Afterward, whichever of us, it would be as if I were no better than a dog."

Hammen stared ahead of him at the alcove wall.

"Ham," Hale said, "why did you come to us with this?"

"You were friends of mine," Hammen said.

"No."

"No?"

"We aren't friends of yours, Ham," Hale said patiently. "We're just acquaintances of yours. We'd like to help you out, but not enough to split our team for you. Surely you've got some real friends, people you look better to than us . . . Hell, man, don't you know what a friend is?"

Hammen thought of it. "I suppose not."

"But there must be some-

one," Hale said in embarrassment, "a woman."

"I know a woman Witch on another world. We make love together sometimes. But I know her only well enough to know better than to ask favors of her."

"There are lots of Witches," Hale said in nervous exasperation. "One of them is bound to Companion with you on a thing like this."

Ham touched his fingers to his wrist. "I think not. No other Witch is going to help me set a precedent to put them out of the trade."

"But the Code!" Hale said furiously. "Surely you can count on your fellow Witches under the Code."

"Why? I couldn't count on my fellow Companions under the Code," said Hammen, and pressed his wristphone into silence.

HAMMEN stepped from the alcove back into Gordus' office to find a lovely golden woman groveling at the coordinator's feet. The coordinator was smiling at the pleasure of the thing.

"What's this?" Hammen demanded.

"Cargo," Gordus said.

"Is she ill?"

"Mad."

"Then she can't be transmitted. No one could hold together a disintegrating personality in transmission," Hammen said.

"It will be difficult. Unprecedentedly difficult. That is why it will take the two of us acting as Companions to bring her safely to Earth."

"Why is it so important that she get to Earth?"

"Ask her," Gordus suggested.

Hammen glanced down and saw Lad nosing pointedly at the woman. Often he forgot that the dog was constantly at his side. His eyes lifted up to the woman.

She had fine features, impressive blonde hair, and she was wrapped in a frazzled blanket, indigo rubbed away to white threads here and there.

"What's your name, woman?" Hammen asked.

"I know what it is."

"Of course you do," he said sharply, "but I don't."

"I know you don't."

"There isn't much that you don't know, is there?"

"I know everything," she confessed humbly, honey eyes down.

Hammen whirled to Gordus. "What do they want with her on Earth?"

The coordinator gestured eloquently. "She knows everything. Do you think they know everything on Earth? Don't believe propaganda. There are things she can tell them."

Hammen looked again to the creature huddled on the floor. "What could she tell anyone?"

"There are words buried in

any conglomeration of letters. Confusion is the basis of all codes. There is always a cipher for any code."

Hammen exhaled. "Never mind. What do I care what they want with her? All right, I'll try to take her through. You don't want me to use the dog?"

"No. It won't do."

"Then let me take her alone. I could do it this once."

"Negative. Besides, need I remind you that you have already graciously agreed to take a human Companion?"

"And," Hammen said ponderously, "I can't get any Companion other than you to go with me."

"You can't? Sad. But why wouldn't I be acceptable?"

"I hate your soul."

"No doubt," Gordus sighed. "But I believe you said you hated all people."

"I can't stand people, only some people especially do I hate."

"I see. But surely it is only a small difference in degree, not kind, between the contempt and aversion you hold for humanity at large and that which you hold for me. Surely that difference is too small to cause you to break your word, given under the Code."

"I suppose it is." The words tasted bad in his mouth. "Very well. I'll transmit with you."

"Of course you will," the coordinator said smoothly.

"ARE you ready to transmit now?"

"Of course we are."

Hammen stood within the platform diagram with Gordus and the woman. Beyond the boundaries stood the technicians, one at the control mosaic, the other holding to the neck of Lad, who suffered it under orders.

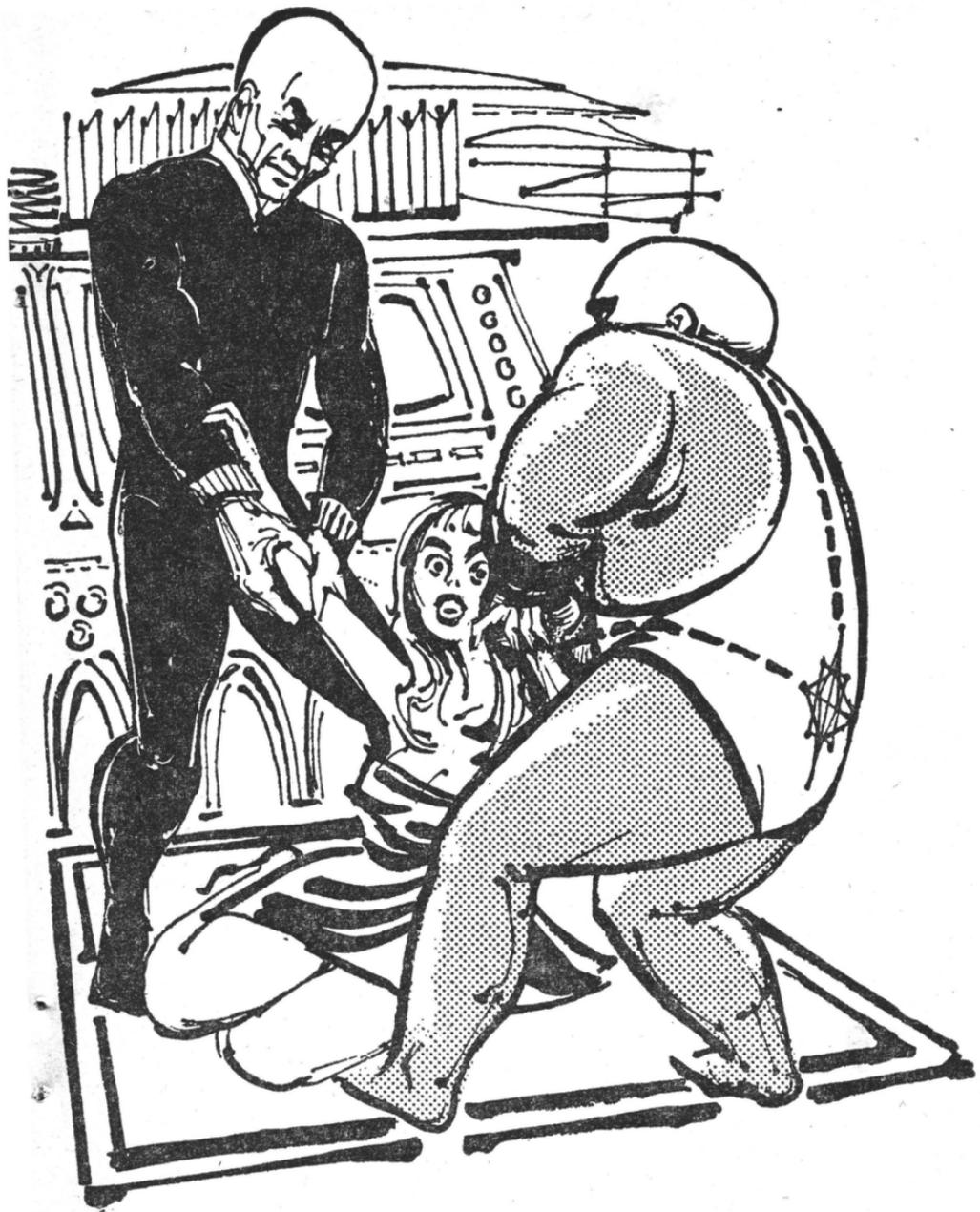
"Wiggle away from the Mindsnake, citizens," a technician called.

A native, Hammen thought. He had never been in transmission himself. No one who had ever joked about the Mindsnake, or rarely even spoke of him.

Hammen looked around him, slate eyes chalking the outline of the diagram in which they stood. It was only a rectangle, but shouldn't it be rather a pentagram?

From the time of Aristotle, the populace equated science with magic. Wasn't the diagram only a sign to conjure the demon, Spatium, to do the boon of transporting his servants across the void without decay of time?

No. Instantaneous transmission of matter wasn't magic. It had always been a part of folklore as teleportation, but just as machines had been made to duplicate the legendary feats of human extrasensory perception, machines made to let men speak over great distances to duplicate the strange voices of



mystics, and machines made that would indeed show strange visions over vast expanses, science had made the Transmatter for null-time object displacement.

Transmatters were a logical, progressive theoretical implementation. If electrical impulses could recreate patterns first in sound, then in light, it followed relentlessly that someday some form of impulses would be found to recreate matter. Energy and matter were only different forms of one unity.

Fortunately, matter duplication had come before matter transmission. As the researches of Phillips established, an exact duplicate is *not* the original.

A duplication of a man is only a duplicate, not the original, unless the *elan vital*, the spirit, the soul, is transmitted, for it cannot be duplicated. A duplicated man is a perfect robot, capable of memory and learning, and developing into a human being in time. But it is not a human being immediately, and it can *never* become the original of the duplicate. Every human viewpoint is unique and irreplaceable.

Duplication of matter was uneconomical. The power outlay was too great, the equipment too costly to build and operate. So transportation by transmission was investigated. Again, it was too expensive except for very great

distances, trips of light-years to worlds established over the generations by the spaceships which had reached virtual light-speed and could not go beyond it.

PERSONALITIES of transmitters got lost among the stars.

Transmitted poets arrived with a dim itch for a brutal fight, due to some residue of glandular acid from a parting insult affecting their birth trauma on the new world.

Great conductors solidified, hating music.

Competent engineers were imported with an infantile urge toward lyric verse.

And the Companions came into being as a profession.

Men with will power, psionic abilities, strength of character. You could call it what you liked, depending on your profession, your politics, your religion. At any rate, men (and women) who could hold human personalities together on the long, instantaneous voyage through null-space.

But still some personalities drifted away.

Or, some darkly superstitious people suggested. were they sucked away?

They were.

Personalities in transmission were being captured by an intelligent entity, unimaginably vast in size, which some believed used the movements

of galaxies as the synapse responses of its brain.

It was a vast entity, but not a very intelligent one, due to the square of signal decay and noise over light-years. Moreover, it was psychopathic. From contact with human minds, it had decided it was, or would become (it was obviously confused on the point) the god of the humans.

It proposed to do this by eventually incorporating all intelligence into itself. But, seemingly, only intelligences in transmission were soft enough for the Mindsnake to get a hold on.

The Companions were harder-shelled.

But the Mindsnake grew stronger.

And Companions began traveling with other Companions, as teams, to resist the Mindsnake.

And there came a class of Companions who did not need the help of any other man or woman, but only a touchstone of reality, something familiar of Earth—the mind of a dog or a cat or some other animal. Familiars. So was born the Corps of Witches.

And here, Hammen wondered, was this where the Witches came to an end?

He looked at the bulging head of Gordus. He couldn't see inside it. Maybe there would ultimately be men who could, but he could only contact other minds when they

were taken off the level of matter and energy, and placed in null-space. Where there is no space, there can be no barriers.

There was nothing but confusion in the woman's mind if he could touch it. Nothing but boredom and routine in the minds of the technicians.

Hammen's eyes moved to the dog. He suddenly decided Lad looked sad. But dogs have human facial muscles, and it would be impossible between a man and a dog for one to look into the other's mind, while they weren't in transmission.

Uselessly, he permitted himself to wish Lad was going with him. . . .

The heavy shoulder muscles of the dog ripped him free from the technician's grasp and Lad threw himself across the diagram line as the co-ordinants of the transmatter phased.

TRANSMISSION. No time. No space. Hammen felt an overblown wave of force.

"How's that for power?" Gordus demanded.

It came as words to him, as communication between people had come to him all of his life. Deaf-mute Companions had told him communication in transmission came to them as hands and fingers feeling of words.

"You've never had a *real* Companion before, have you?"

Gordus asked. "You've never felt *real* power like this before?"

"Power? I've heard members of the cargo scream as loud from terror and horror. We don't scream in transmission, Coordinator. Let the Snake sleep."

"Power," the coordinator repeated. "I always held my cargo together with power."

"When you were a Companion, the Snake wasn't as strong as it is now. Quiet, please."

Hammen felt out for his Familiar. A tail wagged somewhere. A head cocked to one side in puzzlement, concern. What wasn't a hand petted that which wasn't a head.

"Just us—just the two of us—to see after the woman," Gordus said with a leer in his voice.

DIDN'T he know about Lad crossing the diagram? Hadn't he seen?

"You sound as if you were about to suggest we team up and rape her. It's hardly practicable here."

"But that's it, Hammen! That's it! I want to rape her mind!"

"Go away, Gordus. I don't believe in you. Nobody really makes a career out of being that swinish."

"My profession is power, Hammen. I find your attitude unprofessional."

Hammen reached out for

the girl. "What do you want from her?"

"She knows everything, Hammen. Don't you want to know everything?"

"No," Hammen said. "I'd never be able to remember it."

The girl was retreating from them. Had she been snagged by the Mindsnake? No. Only drift. Hammen threw an anchor into her, braced himself against his Familiar, and pulled. She came apart at the seams and flew off in all directions, gibbering.

He raced after all the pieces of the woman at a practiced, steady trot and gathered them all in. He made a rough boundary and compartmentalized her.

For an instant, he looked through the jumble that was her mind. Sensuality, sloth, greed, hate, envy, pride, hunger, death wish—it was the usual human pattern well enough, but they were letters that spelled out no words. It would be impossible to find any information in that psychic junk heap.

Deftly, Hammen turned Gordus back on.

". . . must know. You'll have to help me, Hammen."

"Why must I?"

"Simplicity. You must. We stay here until you do. You can't close the transmission without me, and I will not do it until you help me pick the woman's mind. We can wait

forever until you decide to do as I order. There is no time here."

Gordus was a blind old man stumbling in the dark. He hadn't seen Lad join them inside the diagram. He probably wasn't even aware that Hammen had the woman under tow.

"Listen to me, Gordus. That about there being 'no time' here is a mathematical abstraction. *Practically*, it has its limitations. There is some flow of some kind of duration here, otherwise our questions and answers would come at the same time."

"What are you trying to teach me?" Gordus demanded. "I was a Companion before you were born."

"But then the Mindsnake wasn't so active or so powerful. If the 'duration' of our transmission is too long, he'll get a clear fix on us—and that will be that."

"I'll risk that. *Will you?*"

"No," Hammen said. "You're a fool out here in transmission. You don't know what you're doing. What do you expect of me?"

"Link with me, Companion, as you should. Help me gain her knowledge."

HAMMEN knew that he was being asked to help gain access to information intended for the Federation authorities on Earth. But he rarely thought of himself as a Fed-

eral, and he knew very few worlds would allow extradition of him on a Federal charge. At the moment, he was mainly concerned with saving himself and his cargo from the Mindsnake. As distasteful as it was, Gordus was a part of his cargo, and a man had to have a few ideals. Gordus was not qualified to be a Companion after the generations of growth of the Mindsnake. He was only a pitiful fool now. (How long before the Snake gets so big I will not be qualified? How long before *no one* is qualified? How long before the Snake comes out of null-space and stalks the planets?)

Hammen shrugged and joined Gordus.

They struck for the mind of the woman.

Her name, they warned, Isodel.

They found that out, and incredibly, more.

In some way Gordus' mind paralleled the girl's. There was much of a kind about them, and Gordus could piece together the fragments of her identity. But then he was reaching down for something, and he prestidigitated it up and out of sight.

Hammen realized that Gordus had succeeded in getting what he wanted and in keeping it from him. He was less of a doddering old fool than he appeared.

"What was that?" Hammen

demanded. "What did you take?"

He tried to shake it loose from the coordinator.

"Let go of me!" Gordus cried out in immaterial indignity.

Hammen released him.

Completely.

Gordus screamed soundlessly as he retreated toward infinity.

"Shall I catch you?" Hammen asked.

The scream changed in pitch.

The Witch brought him back.

"You stayed," Gordus said. "Somehow you stayed. That dog. Somehow you've got your damned Familiar with you, haven't you, Witch?"

"No," Hammen lied fluently. "Only feeble minds like yours require a contact. Shall I tell you something about Witches? The Familiars are a deception. We don't need them at all. We are lone wolves."

"Wolves, are you? So now I know what your grandmother before you was."

Hammen laughed.

And sobered.

"What did you take, Gordus?" he demanded.

"What do you know about her?" asked Gordus.

"Her name is Isodel."

"Isodel Van Der Lies."

"I've heard of her. Somewhere," Hammen said hesitantly.

"A GREAT theoretician," the coordinator explained sullenly. "Probably the first authentic female genius of the race of man. On a par with Plato, Shakespeare, Newton, Einstein."

"What theory of hers were you after?" Hammen pursued.

"A method of destroying the Mindsnake."

"You want to take the credit from her."

"I want only to take the theory from her, Hammen."

"You mean you don't want the Mindsnake to be destroyed. You are afraid its destruction would mean the end of the Companion Corps which you head."

"Not at all. I only want the theory so I can reverse it. Once you know how to destroy the Mindsnake, you also know how to create one. You see, I intend to become another Mindsnake, one who knows too much of destruction to ever be destroyed."

"Listen carefully, Gordus," Hammen said with infinite care. "You're ill. You don't know what you're talking about. It can't be done."

"The ultimate dream—ultimate power."

"That's pure psychosis, Gordus!"

"Is it? Watch how easily I begin to grow. I have the woman's mind now."

It was true.

The poor, mad genius woman was gone.

"Stop it, Coordinator. You don't know what you're doing!"

Hammen tried to reach him.

"That's it, that's it. Come ahead, my boy. I'm becoming a Mindsnake. Now I am a Mindsnake. Come ahead. Let me swallow you next."

"You fool," Hammen broadcast. "You are *the* Mindsnake now. Don't you think anyone's ever wanted power before? Won't you let yourself remember how it was when you were a Companion? This is how it *always* happens. You've let yourself be swallowed by the Snake. You ran right into its jaws."

"No." Gordus thought furiously. "I—"

And the Snake digested the tiny egg in its gullet and "I" blurred and was washed over by "All."

Hammen struck at it in anger and humiliation and terror and it retreated with frictionless speed.

The Snake took something with it.

It took Gordus, and it left that part of the woman, Isodel, that he had been able to capture. But the part of Isodel matched by Gordus' mind was jerked free.

She was freed of hate, anger, lust . . .

She was left an impossibly ideal woman—all Mother, Sister, Lover . . .

Against his will, by immutable laws of nature, Ham-

men fell monstrously in love with her.

HAMMEN was among the first of Companions or Witches to join the Suicide Squadron.

He did it to protect Isodel and her descendants for all time to come, and he did it in impotent fury at his reason for doing it.

The Companions transmitted in droves to abolish their profession. They transmitted against the Mindsnake.

The Federation on Earth had made use of Isodel's theories. They were only a formal mathematical statement of what had always been known—destruction reaches a critical mass and destroys itself by turning against itself.

Where Hammen had refused to join one human mind, he joined countless ones in a huge drive against the Snake.

They became one with each other and they became one with the Snake, and the Snake turned on itself and destroyed itself and them, and they turned on themselves—and stopped.

They hung together for an unmeasurable time—and broke apart.

They were a super-entity like the Snake. But where the Snake had been mad, they were sane.

They drifted through the

haze of twilight and broke apart, their hands gliding away into the shadows.

Hammen was gloriously happy. He had never been happy before and he was not at all sure he liked it.

"Jobs are so hard to find these days," Isodel said, her lovely face brightly sane. "What will you take up, darling?"

"There's still need for Companions—and Witches," he explained. "There seems more of a tendency for members of the cargo to drift away than ever. The Mindsnake at least gave them something to resist, a foothold of friction. Now there is nothing—nothing to do but drift, drift, drift. People in transmission will need Companions for a long time to come."

"I need a Companion," lovely Isodel said.

His heart leaped ridiculously.

"But not a Witch," said gorgeous Isodel.

Pain, very great physical pain.

"I love you," priceless Isodel went on. "How could I help it? I am a woman and I love the father image. You are my father—symbolically, fortunately, not biologically. You held the sane part of me while Gordus dragged off the unsane part. You gave me—*this* me—birth. I love you. But I don't love your dog."

"My dog?" said Hammen.

"No woman can marry a man *and* his dog."

"I see," said Hammen, seeing it all, and living.

YOU could see everything about yourself and live. It wasn't easy, but you could do it. Especially if you had the training and experience of being a Companion. Or a Witch.

"It would kill Lad to separate him from me for long, you know," Hammen said.

Isodel's beautiful eyes misted. And she said in all her infuriating gentleness, "Then it is impossible for us, if we have to destroy a living—"

"He's just a dog," he pointed out. "I would wring his neck cheerfully if it would do any good. But it wouldn't."

Isodel looked sad, and brave, and wonderful.

"Don't you see, Isodel? It's *impossible* for me to do the *right* thing. If it wasn't Lad, it would be another dog, and if it wasn't a Familiar to make me a Witch, it would be something else to make me different, because I am different. I have to live with that. Among the right people, I am the left man."

So he left her, and walked out of the Floating Gardens onto the walkway and Lad fell in at his side, and he listened without anger to the hushings and keenings of the crowd.

"Witch! Witch!"

END

JIM HARMON