

*The game of life hadn't quite
been played out — it still had
that last little catch in it.*

AUTO -

DA -

By **DAMON KNIGHT**

Illustrated by **RITTER**

FE

THE king of the world sat on a balcony, listening to the wind blow around his tower. He was drunk. He would get drunker still, and then he would be sick, and the dogs would take care of him. By tomorrow afternoon, he would be drunk and sick again.

The dog Roland lay near his feet — not quite near enough for a kick. The man felt his patient gaze like an itch, like the scab of an ill-healed wound that he could not scratch.

He glanced down at the dog, and saw the grizzled fur above the great bloodshot eyes, the

hanging dewlaps, the yellow teeth. You're old too, my lad, he thought with bitter satisfaction. You won't last another century.

Dogs and men, they all died eventually. The dogs lived five hundred years at most; all the art of their masters had not been able to give them more. But the race of dogs was not finished yet; the race of man was.

There were fifty-nine dogs left, fifty-eight females, one male.

There was one man, who could call himself the king of the world, or the Dalai Lama, or anything he liked, because there was no one left to dispute the honor with him. No one to talk to; no one to remember.

He was nine thousand and some odd hundreds of years old. Long ago, in the first fraction of that life-span, he had been given the organic catalysts that slowed down the process of maturity and decay almost to zero . . . not quite. At the age of one thousand, he had been a man of thirty, at two thousand, not quite forty. The golden years of full maturity, full powers, were multiplied until it had seemed they would never end.

But the years of decay were multiplied too. He had been a very old man for over a millennium. For a thousand years he had been dying.

The dogs kept him alive. They

tended the machines, served him, did the work he was too feeble to do. The clever dogs, the faithful dogs, who would still be alive when he was dead.

He thought with bitter regret of his mother. He barely remembered her; she had died four thousand years ago. She could have had a daughter, he told himself. She needn't have left me to finish it all alone!

Perhaps she had tried. He thought he remembered that she had, that there had been miscarriages. The human strain was grown thin and sickly with too much care. He himself might have been incapable of fathering a child, even in his years of strength: now it was too late to wonder.

Not like the dogs, he told himself somberly. Bred for use, not for their own pleasure. *I* never wanted a child when *I* was young. *They* think of nothing else.

He glanced again at Roland, and the dog's tail thumped against the paved floor.

A knot of pain gathered abruptly in the man's chest. He could well imagine the big-skulled whelps gathered around a fire in the evening, listening and looking while the older dogs told them of Man. He imagined their howls of dismay when they

learned there were no more men in the world.

Century after century . . . perhaps in time they would forget there had ever been a race of masters. Perhaps their sorrow and their loss would turn to a vague sadness, a restless urge that would drive them as Man's restless seeking had driven him. In time they might be great.

And then all the works of Man would be forgotten, lost to eternity — merely the unimportant prelude to the reign of Dog.

The thought sharpened his pain intolerably. He picked up the cool tube of the tankard that lay on the table beside him and drew a long draft. The liquor lay heavily in him now. He was going to be sick soon.

He drank again and sucked air. He threw the tankard petulantly over the balustrade. "The tankard's empty," he said. "Fetch me another."

Roland was up instantly, wagging his foolish tail. "Yes, master," and he was away, the tankard clutched in his clumsy fingers.

ROLAND hurried, ignoring the tight band of pain at the base of his spine, the complaining twinges in his legs. However altered and bred, the canine body was not designed to walk erect. You took the gift and you gloried

in it, but you paid for it. That was where old age first struck: very old dogs could not stand at all, but crept miserably on all fours, and the shame of it, Roland thought, shortened their lives.

The real agony came when duty pointed two ways at once; all else was of little account. For it was one thing to know what was best for the master — even to understand, in a dim corner of the mind, that the master was foolish, bitter, jealous, cruel. It was another thing to do what was best when the master ordered otherwise. To obey was joy and utter necessity; if the master commanded, "Kill me!"—though the heart burst with remorse, a dog would obey.

Thus it was joy to fill the tankard, to serve, and it was pain, for the liquor was a slow poison. And even this was nothing. There was the question of breeding, which must be settled soon now.

Roland was the last male of his line. He knew how the others had died, one for clumsiness, one for a tail too big, others for a habit of drooling or for the wrong pattern of spots, or simply because the master was in a rage.

But Roland was coming to the end of his potent term, and still the order to breed had not been given. The food machine was still dropping, into every morsel of

food the dogs ate, the chemical agent that kept them sterile.

The youngest bitch now living could not survive more than another three hundred years. The master, if he were well served, could live another thousand.

As it had many times before, Roland's mind skirted around the unvoiced thought of the death that would be the master's — the lonely, miserable death of an outcast cur . . .

The dogs must breed. The master must give the order.

He filled the tankard and climbed the ramp, panting as the strain told on his tired legs. Near the doorway stood one of the females, waiting for him. She did not speak, but there was a question in her anxious eyes.

Roland shook his head sorrowfully and passed on.

He put the tankard on the little table, laid the drinking tube near the master's hand. The master did not appear to see him. Slumped among the cushions that filled the ebon and argent throne, he was gazing out into the sky. His bitter face was relaxed, almost peaceful.

PERHAPS he was thinking of the days of his youth, when he had roamed the whole world and made it his. Perhaps he was musing on the greatness his ancestors had known — the globe-

girdling engines, the mighty cities, the depth and daring of intellect that had plumbed the last secrets of the universe.

It was a good time; Roland dared delay no longer. His heart was thudding painfully and his throat was dry as he said, "Master, may I speak?"

The man turned his head slowly and his red-rimmed eyes focused with surprise on Roland's face. "You back?" he asked heavily. "Where's the tankard?"

"Here, master," said Roland, moving it forward. He waited while the man picked up the tube and drank. Then he said again, "Master, may I speak?"

The man belched and wiped his crusted lips with his hand. "All right, what is it?"

The words tumbled out in confusion. "Master, I am the last male dog. I am near the end of my breeding time. If we do not breed, you will be left unattended when this generation is gone."

The man looked at him with open hostility in his narrow eyes. "Well, breed, then," he said. "Don't come to me for permission to play your dirty little games."

Roland's throat was hot with shame. "Master, to breed, I must stop the chemical in the food."

"Stop it."

They were playing a game, Roland knew. The master's memory was bad, but not this bad.

His spirits lifted a little, even though he had little hope. If it was a game, then it gave the master pleasure. He said, "Master, that is done by an automatic machine. The control cylinder is under your seal."

The man stared at him silently for a moment, and scrubbed the bristles on his chin with one splotched and bony hand. "So that's it, is it?" he said. "You want me to unlock the cylinder so you can make another generation of whining, dirty pups."

"Yes, master."

"You want your whelps to outlive me."

"No, master!"

Volumes of unutterable things contended in Roland's mind. He felt shame, and horror, and a bottomless despair; and at the same time he knew that these were the things he was intended to feel, and he was glad. For a dog, however fine, is a dog; a man, however base, is a man.

The master said slowly, "What do you want then, Roland?"

"I want you to live," said the dog, and his voice broke. The slow, seldom tears of his race coursed down his cheeks.

The man was silent for a moment; then he turned away. "All right, bring it here to me," he said.

THE FEMALE was waiting

halfway down the ramp; two more were behind her. They shrank timidly at his approach, but their eagerness held them. He had no heart to reprimand them as they deserved.

"Did he — ?"

"Yes!" said Roland. He hurried down the ramp, and the females followed him. More of them appeared at each stage of the descent, some racing ahead of him, some clustering behind. The corridor was filled with their involuntary yelps and whimpers of delight.

In the food room, a dozen of them were waiting for him, grouped around a cabinet against the far wall. They made a lane for him as he approached, and carefully, with ceremony, he unlocked the case and drew out the long cylinder, bound around with the wire and wax of the master's seal.

IN his throne of ebony and silver, the king of the world sat and stared at the blank, meaningless face of the sky. Behind him, down the ramp that always smelled of dog no matter how it was disinfected, he heard the faint far echo of canine glee.

Roland had told them all about it, he thought, and paused. He felt hurried, cheated of his chance of decision. It was necessary to give them renewed life,

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he knew; he would suffer, otherwise; he would die painfully and alone.

But he could not prolong his life without sparing them also;

and that was bitter as gall. Better to end all at once, dog and man . . .

Roland came in, breathless, joy in his eyes, holding the cylinder

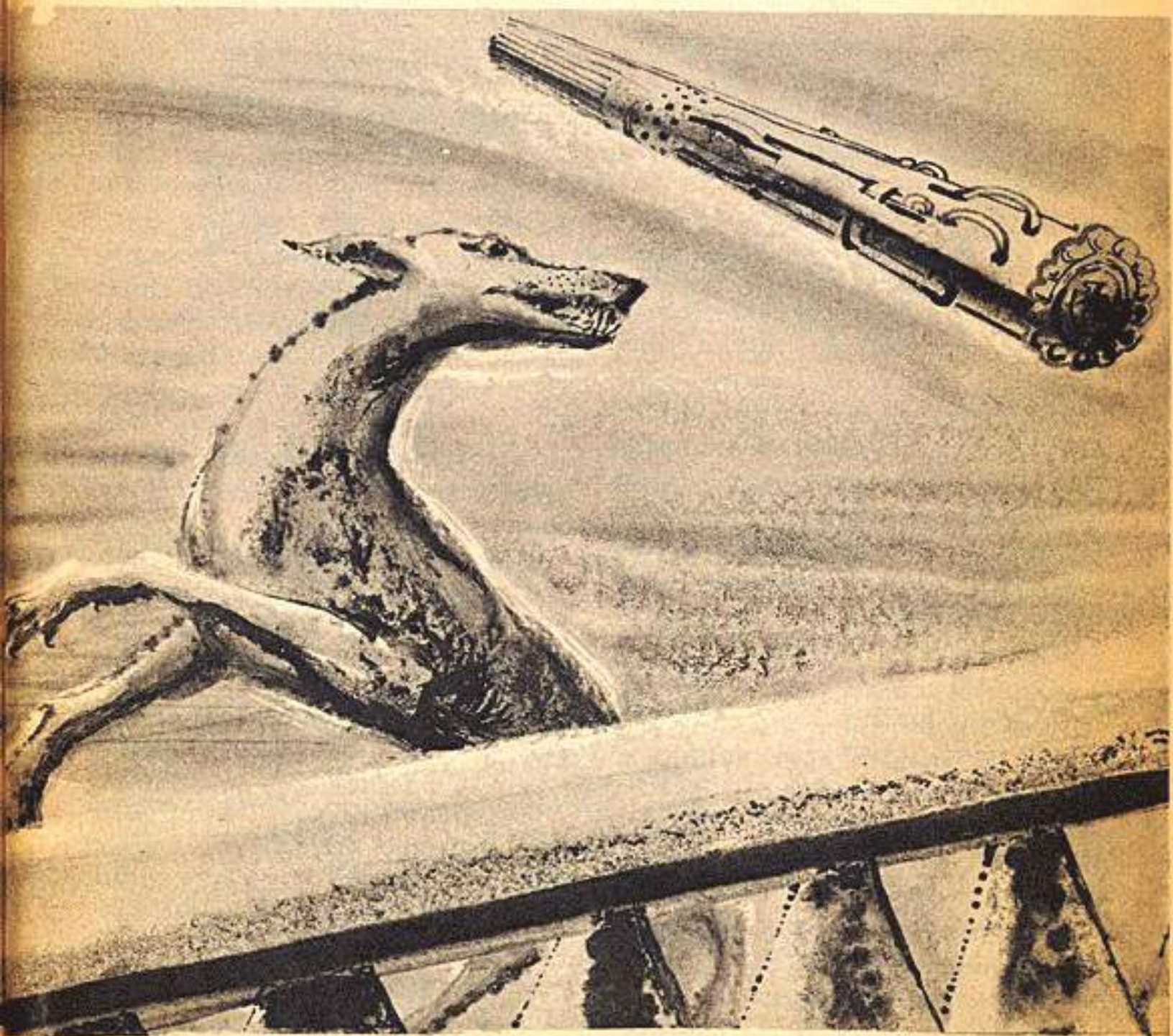


carefully in his hands. Wordless, he held it out.

The man took it — a slender tube of silvery metal, dotted with line-up slots and the sockets of

other components, and laced about with wire and the red wax of his own seal.

How long ago had he done that? A hundred, two hundred



years — he had known even then that this day must come.

He glanced at the waiting dog — and remembered to his astonishment that in the days of his youth, this dog's ancestor and image had been his dear friend. They had been closer than brothers. He had mourned for years after that dog's death.

How was it possible that things had so changed? He looked at Roland again, saw the broad, crinkled brow, the worshipful eyes. There had been no change here. It was incredible, to think how faithful that race had been. Millennium upon millennium, from the dawn of history until this day — all the thrown sticks retrieved, the households guarded, the blows accepted without anger. The weight of that loyalty seemed to him abruptly a crushing thing. What had his kind done to deserve it? And how could they ever repay?

The dogs were worthier . . .
And would survive.

In an instant that vision of the dog world that had forgotten Man came back to him, and his guilt receded, twisted upon itself, became a slow, bitter wrath.

He clutched the control cylinder in his hands, as if their feeble strength could break it.

"Master —" said Roland falteringly. "Is anything wrong?"

"Wrong?" he said. "Not for you. Your whelps will inherit the Earth. A bunch of dirty, flea-bitten, mangy dogs."

THE words were not enough; they came out in the quavering, impotent whine of an old man. He raised the cylinder, perhaps to strike; he did not know what he meant to do.

"Master? You will unseal the cylinder?"

Tears of rage leaked from the man's eye-corners. He said thickly, "Here's your damned cylinder. Catch it and you can have it!" And then the thing was done: he had flung out his arm with all its waning strength, and the cylinder was turning in the air, beyond the parapet.

Roland acted without thought. His hands and feet scrabbled on the flagstones, his muscles bunched in a pattern as old as the race; then he felt the smooth ivory of the balustrade for an instant under his feet.

He snapped once, vainly, at the cylinder as its arc passed him. Then there was nothing but the rushing wind around him.

The king of the world sat on his throne and listened to the bitches howl.

— DAMON KNIGHT

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