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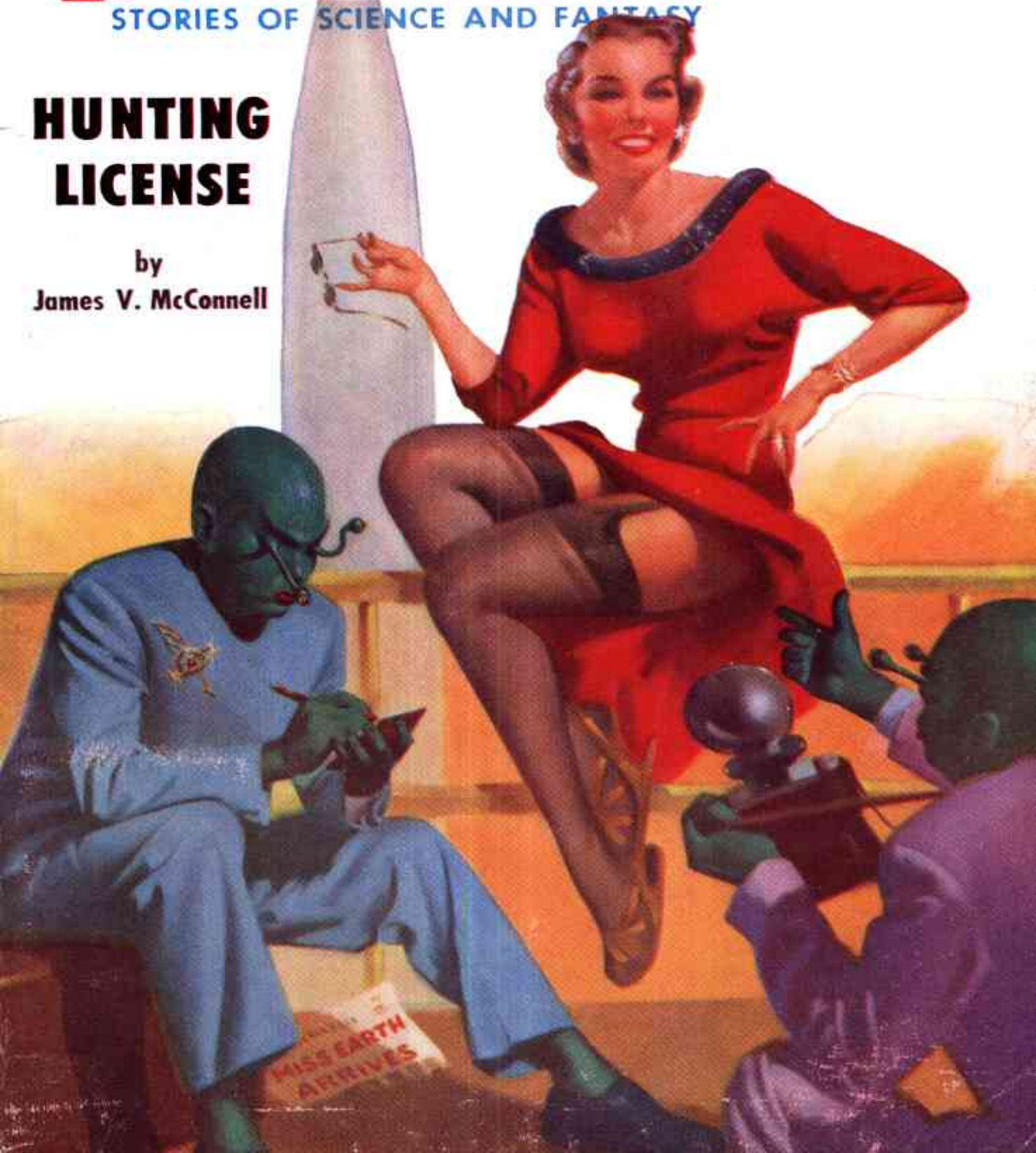
APRIL, 1955

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**HUNTING
LICENSE**

by

James V. McConnell



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Title: Hunting License

Author: James V. McConnell

Illustrator: W. E. Terry

Release date: October 19, 2021 [eBook #66570]

Most recently updated: October 18, 2024

Language: English

Other information and formats: www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/66570

Credits: Greg Weeks, Mary Meehan and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net>

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HUNTING LICENSE

By James V. McConnell

**Trophies from a big game hunt were highly
prized. So naturally Karsten and Thurman wanted
their guide to find a really choice criminal....**

**[Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from
Imagination Stories of Science and Fantasy
April 1955**

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The helicopters buzzed lazily overhead like fat flies in a warm May wind.

"There they go. Right on time," said William Karsten III. His hunting jacket shone bright red in the early morning sun as he moved out into the open to watch the planes.

"I do hope that they don't get airsick," replied Thomas Thurman from his comfortable chair in front of the fire. He took a long stick and began poking the embers closer to the coffee container.

William Karsten turned around and looked at his companion. "Why in heaven's name should you be so concerned about *them*?" he asked. The early morning light on his brown-and-gray hair gave it a more youthful appearance than it usually had.

"They don't hunt very well when they're sick," said Thurman. "And that of course, is my only concern for them." He smiled at his hunting partner, then motioned him over to the fire. "Have a cup of coffee while we're waiting."

Karsten walked over to the center of the little forest clearing where they had built the fire. "Might as well have a cup, I guess," he said. His face, furrowed with deep lines that had taken half a life-time to create, wore a slight frown. "But I wish that Emmett would get back. What's the sense of hiring a hunting guide if he's not around to take care of things for you? I'm getting hungry."

Thurman laughed at him. "If you'd worry more about where we're going to hunt instead of spending all your time thinking about your stomach, we'd probably have better luck," he said. He poured a cup of sweet brown coffee for both of them, then passed one of the cups to Karsten. "Emmett probably couldn't get the Warden on the phone right away." Thurman, who had once been something of an athlete, began to laugh, his heavy-set body shaking gently with the expressed mirth. "If the worst comes to the worst, Bill, we *could* fix our own breakfast, you know."

Karsten uttered a sigh. "Hunting just isn't what it used to be. Sometimes I wonder why I bother to come out at all." He settled down comfortably on a collapsible chair and looked around him. He could just see the top of a tall

metal fence a few hundred yards away—the stout circle of steel that engirdled the Game Preserve, cutting it off from the rest of the world.

"You come hunting for the same reason that I do, Bill Karsten. Because you love the thrill of the sport," Thurman told him. "Because there's nothing like it in the world—the bright open air, the smell of a green forest, and the pleasure of pitting yourself against the hunted. That's why you come hunting."

Karsten shrugged. "I suppose you're right, but—" He stopped in mid-sentence, interrupted by the sound of trampled underbrush. "Oh, here's Emmett back."

Emmett Packer, registered hunting guide, came from behind a clump of bushes into the little clearing in the woods. His bright yellow hunting jacket reflected a dazzling pattern of sunlight and shadows in striking contrast to the man's weathered complexion and dark black hair. He waved a muscular arm at his employers.

"Sorry I took so long, boys," he said, walking towards them. "But I had trouble getting the Warden on the car telephone. The line was busy." Emmett poured himself a cup of coffee. "But I finally got ahold of him, and he'll be along in a little while. And the horses are all lined up for us at the Gate. So we shouldn't have any trouble at all."

"Good," said Thurman.

Emmett smiled, "And now, I suppose you boys would like a little breakfast?" Emmett said it not quite as a question, but more as an assertion of a known fact.

"Of course, of course," said Karsten. "I'm starving. Got to have energy to hunt, you know." He smiled jovially.

Emmett set about opening canisters and boxes in preparation of the meal. Thurman and Karsten leaned back in their comfortable chairs and stared at the scenery. Overhead one last helicopter droned by. In the tall forest grass a cricket chirped angrily.

"How would you like your steaks?" asked Emmett.

"Medium," said Thurman.

"A little on the rare side, if you can manage it," said Karsten. "And no onions for me. They give me indigestion." He glanced nervously at his watch. "I wonder if I'll have time to call the office before the Warden gets here?"

Tom Thurman smiled. "Relax," he said. "Your office can take care of itself for a change."

"Well, I guess it can, but—"

"Then why worry about it," said Thurman. "Forget it. Make the most of your vacation. After all, it isn't every day in the year that you come hunting humans, you know."

Shrugging his shoulders for an answer, William Karsten relaxed again. The aroma of the cooking meat permeated the morning breeze, mingling with the subtler smells of pine and warm rich earth. In the nearby trees birds sang out loud.

"Wonder how many we'll get this year?" asked Thurman after a while.

Emmett looked up from his chores. "If you boys will just follow my directions, you'll get the limit." He smiled proudly. "My hunters *always* come back with the limit. You know that."

Karsten harrumphed. "I saw some of the sorry specimens you dug up for the Kilpatricks last year. And I must say," he continued, "they were the poorest excuses for human beings I've ever seen."

Emmett frowned and started to answer, but Thurman spoke first. "That reminds me, Bill. If we bring back any bodies this year, Martha says we'll have to wrap them up first."

"What's the matter with Martha?" asked Karsten. "She doesn't really object to the sight of naked bodies lashed to the front fenders of your car, does she?"

With a laugh, Thomas Thurman said, "No. Martha doesn't object to our displaying the spoils of the hunt. But she says that last year the blood

spoiled the finish of the car. And I don't want to have it repainted again this year." He sighed softly. "Just one of her whims, I guess."

"Breakfast is ready," said Emmett.

The high-pitched whine of rotor blades interrupted their meal. The three men watched the bright blue helicopter drop slowly out of the sky and come to a gentle landing at one edge of the clearing. Once the plane's engine had stopped and the blades were no longer twirling, the door to the air-craft opened and out stepped a rotund figure dressed in a uniform the same sky-blue color as that of the plane. He bounced, more than walked, towards the seated trio.

"Good day! Good day, gentlemen!" the Warden called out as soon as he was within earshot. "Oh, please don't get up on my account."

Thurman motioned with one hand. "Have a seat, Warden. We're glad to see you."

The Warden plopped his pudgy body down in one of the chairs. "Thank you," he said, his voice as round and as jolly as his appearance. "Having breakfast, I see." He waved a hand "Oh, please don't offer me anything to eat. I'm on a diet again." He sighed.

Emmett rose to get the papers that the officer would want to see. "How's the crop this year, Warden?" he asked.

A frown crossed the fat man's face. "Fair. Just fair," he said. "I can't understand it, really. A few years ago there were so many of them." His face brightened a bit. "But, then, there's still enough to go around, and that's the important thing. And, on the other hand, I suppose that we ought to be happy—from the sociological point of view, of course—that there just aren't as many criminals in our society today as there used to be. It speaks well for us, don't you think?"

William Karsten III made a slight noise with his tongue. "But it ruins the hunting. You can't have a hunt unless you've got criminals to hunt for." He

turned to his companion. "You see, Tom," he said. "I told you that it wouldn't be too good this year."

"I wonder what's wrong with things nowadays that there just aren't enough criminals?" mused Thurman.

Emmett returned with the proper papers and handed them to the Warden. The fat little man looked them over carefully, then handed them back to the guide with a wave of his hand. "They look in excellent order," he told Emmett. He turned to the hunters. "You have a good man here in Emmett," he told them. Emmett favored the officer with a smile.

Reaching inside his jacket, the Warden extracted a little box and handed it to Emmett. "Here are the supersonic whistles, gentlemen, and the crystals for your ear plugs so that you can hear them. Just be sure to use them. Remember the first time you sight a quarry, give one long toot on the whistle. If you hear nothing in your ear plugs, he's yours to track down. But if you hear three short toots in answer, that means that someone else beat you to him." The officer wagged a finger at the two hunters. "And let's have no mistakes and no arguments, like we have had in the past. Just follow the rules—blow your whistles correctly—and everyone will have a fair chance at the game."

Emmett fitted the slim crystals into the ear plugs. "They look a little different this year," he said.

"Oh, yes," the Warden told him. "We had to go much higher up on the supersonic scale this time since we discovered that one of the quarries last year could hear up to 22,000 cycles." He smiled jovially. "Can't have the hunted hearing the whistles when they're being tracked down, you know."

Karsten wiped his lips with a napkin and then handed his empty plate to the guide. "Any new rules this year, Warden?" he asked.

"No, I think the only new thing we have this year is that hunting jacket of yours, Mr. Karsten. It *is* new, isn't it?"

Karsten beamed. "Why, yes it is. Latest style, I think." He raised his arms to display the brilliant red garment the better. "It's a new kind of material. Guaranteed to be seen for half a mile, even at night." He lowered his arms, then patted one of the chest pockets. "But the best thing is that it's got a

self-contained heating-cooling system built right in. All you have to do is to turn the dial and you get whatever weather you want."

The Warden looked impressed. "My," he said. "What won't they think of next." He smiled again. "I imagine that the people you're going to be hunting would give a pretty penny for one of those today. The weather man says it's going to be a bit chilly tonight."

Thurman lit a cigarette. "I guess it is rather hard on them, being dumped in the middle of the Preserve completely naked, so to speak." He sighed. "But then, they're criminals, after all."

"That's right," said Karsten. "And remember, they've got their paint to keep them warm," he added, laughing.

The Warden snapped his fingers. "I'm glad you reminded me, Mr. Karsten. The paint is a little different this year."

Karsten looked surprised. "They haven't changed the signals, have they?" he demanded.

"Oh, no," said the Warden. "Black stripes painted all around the body still mean he's an ordinary criminal, black and red alternating stripes mean crimes of passion, and all red stripes used for the subversives, of course. Just like always."

Coughing discretely, the Warden continued. "What I meant was that after the complaints we got last year we decided to use a *really* indelible paint so that not even a skilled surgeon could get it off."

"Complaints?" asked Thurman.

The warden gave a gigantic sigh. "That's right. It seems that some of the hunters—not people like you, mind—but some of them have been altering the color of the stripes after they've bagged their game." He smiled. "And we can't have that, you know. It just isn't sporting. When you display your trophies, you want all the glory that's coming to you. *But* no more than you actually deserve."

Putting his hands on the arms of the chair, the Warden made a valiant effort and managed, just barely, to remove his body from the comforting confines of the chair. "Well," he said, "I must be off. Have a lot of other hunters to see before the season opens." The two hunters rose and shook hands with him.

"Now, let's synchronize our watches before I leave," the officer said. He peered closely at his timepiece. "It's now 7:23:05 by my official clock. I got word on my plane radio just as I was landing that the criminals were dropped in the center of the Preserve at 7:03 exactly." He looked up. "The season opens at ten sharp. I'll see you at the Gate before then, of course." He turned around and bounced towards the plane. Before shutting the door to the air-craft, he gave them a final wave of his hand.

"Good hunting," he called.

A little past ten the three men were riding their horses across the gentle plain that led to the mountains in the center of the Preserve. They had passed through the gates with scores of other hunters the moment the season was officially opened.

"Emmett," said Thurman, jogging along on his large horse. "Are you still going to insist on taking us down to that little pass first of all?"

Emmett reined his horse in between the mounts ridden by the two hunters. "Well, I don't want to seem pig-headed about it, boys," he told them. "But that's where I think the hunting will be best this time of day."

"Nonsense," Karsten told him. "I was talking to Morris Overman about it just last week. And he said he had his best luck over by that big waterfall—you know the one, Emmett. It has lots of trees around it."

Emmett raised his eyebrows, as if in disdain, "Oh, I know the one, all right. And Mr. Overman is a pretty lucky hunter, too. But I think—"

Thurman interrupted him. "If you want *my* opinion," he said, "We'll do well to try it down in that little valley just the other side of the Leaning Stone." He waved a magazine at them. "There's an article on the criminal mind in

the latest issue of *Hunter's Scientific Monthly* by E. C. Stewart. He says that criminals always favor depressions, and that ought to mean valleys too."

Frowning, Emmett replied, "Well, Stewart ought to know. He's a psychologist, after all. But I must remind you that my services are guaranteed only if you follow my directions. If you do like I tell you, I promise that both of you boys will come back with at least one trophy. Why, I even signed a contract to that effect with you."

"We know all that," Karsten told him.

"But if you insist on striking off on your own, the guarantee doesn't hold." Emmett paused a moment, as if for effect, then continued.

"Now, look, boys," he said. "Doesn't it make sense, really, that since hunting is my job, I'd know where the big ones are? I don't mean to knock anyone else, but this *is* my business, you know, and I've been at it for a good many years now. So you boys just stick with me, and you won't come back empty-handed."

The two hunters made no reply, but Emmett could see that they weren't entirely satisfied. They rode along in silence for several moments. Then Emmett said to them in a confidential tone of voice, "Frankly, boys, I didn't want to tell you this, because we guides like to keep our trade secrets to ourselves. But last year, the man I was guiding and I went to this little pass I'm taking you to, see, and we came up with a whopper."

"Really?" said Thurman, showing some interest.

"He must have weighed two hundred and fifty pounds—at least. One of the biggest criminals I've ever seen. A magnificent creature," Emmett told them.

"You don't say," said Karsten. "Who got him?"

Emmett smiled. "A Mr. Thompson, down from the northern part of the district. The body was so big that Thompson had it skinned and tanned, and made a really nice-looking rug out of it. He sent me a picture to show me."

Thurman's eyes were wide with delight. "Amazing," he said.

"As for myself," commented Karsten. "I don't hold with this rug business. They're all right, I guess, for those who like them. But they get torn up so

easily. Human beings just aren't thick skinned enough, I suppose."

"Two hundred and fifty pounds," mused Thurman out loud.

"If he weighed, an ounce," Emmett said. "You don't get many that size, you know." He looked at the two hunters, then smiled securely. "So shall we just follow my lead and head for the pass first thing?"

"All right with me," Thurman said.

"Me, too," said Karsten. He belched loudly, then rubbed his stomach gently. "I think I ate too much for breakfast," he said.

The way to the little pass led up over the crest of one of the smaller mountains. The three men jogged along at an even pace over the level ground, but traveled more slowly up the steep facing of the mountainside. The two hunters often complained about the heat and the terrain as they rode. Emmett said little except when he urged them to hurry along.

The sun was high in the sky, just past the zenith, when the trio came down the side of a small cliff and out through a little pass onto an open space of ground.

Emmett pulled up his horse and dismounted. "Well, boys," he said. "Let's get off here for a while." The other two dismounted and handed their animals over to the guide.

"Looks like a fairly good spot," said Thurman. Emmett tethered the horses quickly and then began unpacking some of the equipment. He put up the collapsible chairs in the cooling shade of a single tree that stood near the center of the little clearing. Then he placed some of the boxes containing food around the chairs and handed the two hunters their guns.

"If you boys will make yourselves comfortable, I'll go out and scout around for something to shoot at," he told them.

Karsten settled down into one of the chairs with an audible sigh of relief. Thurman gave his gun a casual inspection. "All right," he said to the guide. "Go ahead. And see if you can find something worth while."

Emmett tucked his rifle under his arm and headed off into the dense underbrush.

"Have something to eat," Karsten said, passing an open box to his companion.

Thurman helped himself to the food, then leaned back in his chair. "I don't mind saying that I hope Emmett will come up with a good-sized one right off," he said.

"You know what I'd like?" Karsten said through a mouthful of food. "I wish he'd find me a real red-head. That's all I really need to give my collection balance." He waved a chicken leg at Thurman. "If it were a good-sized head, I'd hang it right in the center over the mantelpiece. I could surround it with heads that have dark hair and make quite an attractive pattern. My wife goes in for color schemes, you know."

Tom Thurman sighed. The day was dry and he could feel the drowsy heat of the sun even in the pleasant shade of the large tree. He began to fan himself with his hand. "I understand the latest fad is to have the whole body stuffed and mounted on a plaque before you hang it up on the wall," he said. He shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe I'm just old fashioned," he continued, "but it seems to me that they would take up an awful lot of room if you did that."

A tiny gnat began to pester Karsten as he ate. He brushed it aside several times, but it always returned to whine annoyingly around his face. "Well," Karsten said, "there's precedent for it. Remember how excited old Morrie was the first time he bagged a two hundred pounder?" Karsten guffawed. "He was so damn proud he kept the whole body and tucked it away in his freezer. Used to pull it out to show to people when he gave a party." Sighing in reminiscence, he continued. "Had to give it up after a while, though. He thawed it out so many times that it began to spoil." He slapped violently at the gnat.

Thurman opened his canteen and began sipping at the cool liquid inside. He was about to light a cigarette when he saw Emmett returning.

"Here comes Emmett," he said excitedly to Karsten. "Maybe he's made contact!"

Karsten got up from his chair heavily, "He's smiling; I'll bet he found us a good one!" He reached for his gun.

Emmett walked up to the two hunters quickly. "Well, boys, you're in," he said, grinning broadly. "I found one, just like I told you I would."

"Where?" asked Thurman quickly.

"Down this little path here, about a quarter of a mile. He's hiding in a kind of thicket, but you won't have any trouble spotting him. The sun's bright there, and you can see the white of his body clearly." He paused to give them a superior grin. "And I don't think he knew that I'd spotted him."

"You stay here and look after the horses," Thurman told the guide. "We'll signal you at the kill."

The two hunters walked quickly down the path under the refreshing shade of the forest. Both of them were excited and they tended occasionally to stumble over tree roots and dead branches as they went.

"He must be just down the way there," Karsten whispered hoarsely after they had gone for some distance into the woods.

"Shush," whispered Thurman, attempting to quiet his companion.

The path made a slight turn just beyond them, and when they had rounded it, they saw a thick clump of bushes ahead. Through the green-and-brown pattern of the leaves they could see brief patches of pale white.

"That's it," whispered Karsten. Thurman nodded and pulled out his whistle. He gave a long, silent blast on it that he could hear only as a sharp rasping noise from the tiny plug he wore in one ear.

The two hunters stood quietly, waiting, their faces filled with expectation. After a few brief moments, Thurman turned to his hunting partner. "No answer. We must have spotted him first."

"Good," said Karsten. "Let's go get him."

They had no more than started towards their quarry when they saw a sudden movement in the bushes. The white patches disappeared, and they could hear the sound of running feet.

"Damn!" said Karsten loudly. "He must have heard us."

Thurman smiled. "It's better this way, Bill. I rather like tracking them down. Don't you?"

"Well, its kind of a bother, as far as I'm concerned. Especially so soon after eating," Karsten said. But he followed quickly behind as Thurman set off in pursuit.

The forest was too thick for a man to run with any real speed, so the hunters managed to stay close behind their quarry without expending too much energy.

"I wonder what he looked like," Karsten said they pushed their way through the thick underbrush. "I didn't get a good look at him."

"Neither did I," Thurman replied, grabbing hold of a vine to pull himself over a dead tree that stood in their path. "I hope he isn't just an ordinary criminal. I've got enough black stripes at home as it is."

"Look out!" Karsten cried suddenly. "He's doubling back on us!"

The two men turned rapidly and set off in a new direction, attempting to head off their quarry before he could make his way to open ground. They managed to get in between him and the edge of the woods and were rewarded by seeing a brief ripple of white as the naked man turned and started back towards the center of the little forest.

"Good work," said Thurman.

Most of the time they tracked him simply by listening to the directions the noise of his running came from. Often they were close enough at his heels to get a quick glimpse of flesh in the distance—an arm, a leg, or part of his back. They got their first good look at him when they came out from behind a rock into a little clearing. The quarry was just disappearing into the forest on the other side of the open space.

"Red stripes!" cried Karsten as they rushed across the clearing. "He's a subversive. Now, that is luck."

"Looks awfully small to me," said Thurman, "whatever he is."

"Damn. You don't suppose it could be a woman, do you?" Karsten asked somewhat breathlessly. "We only got a glimpse of it."

"I hope not. Supposed to be bad luck to shoot a woman first thing on a hunt, you know," Thurman replied as they reached the far side of the clearing. "Anyway, we'll soon know."

They plunged into the heavy forest only a few hundred yards behind their game. Following rapidly along behind him, they left a wake of broken branches and torn limbs as they went. The forest rang with the sounds of the chase.

Soon, sloshing across a little stream, they came up over a grassy knoll and down into a shallow glade on the other side of it.

"He's heading for the rocks, over that way," Thurman said, turning off in pursuit. "He won't be able to go much farther."

"I don't know if *I'll* be able to go much farther," said Karsten, the perspiration beading out across his heavy face. "I'm not used to this."

"Neither is he," Thurman reminded him. "Remember, he's had nothing to eat for almost a week, and they probably didn't let him sleep for three or four days back. He can't last much longer."

"I hope not," said Karsten.

They passed across a narrow strip of marsh land, carefully avoiding most of the bog holes as they went. Just on the other side, as they came around a series of heavy berry bushes, they heard a long, shrill buzz from their ear plugs.

Thurman stopped quickly. "Somebody else has spotted him!" he said, and took out his whistle. He gave it three lusty blasts and then stuck it back in his pocket. "That should fix them," he told his partner. They set off again in pursuit.

Soon it became obvious to the two hunters that they were gaining rapidly on their quarry. They increased their pace just a trifle to take advantage of their lead.

It was perhaps five minutes later when they tracked their man down and for the first time got a good look at him. They were very close to the outcroppings of a rather steep foothill when they came over a little rise and saw him scarcely a thousand yards in front of them.

"There he goes!" cried Karsten. "Into that little pass between those two rocks!" Rapidly they closed in upon the narrow pass.

The opening between the big rocks was not much more than ten feet wide. It led like a narrow corridor through the sides of the hill and then opened up beyond into a little canyon. The two hunters paused just on the other side of the pass.

"I think he's trapped," said Thurman. "I can't tell for sure, because there are too many bushes in the way. But I think this is a little box canyon, and that this pass is the only way out."

William Karsten looked around him. "Seems that way to me," he told his companion. "Let's move on in slowly."

They took their time as they walked through the narrow canyon, checking behind each bush and rock as they went. The little valley was only a hundred yards wide but several hundred yards in length. On all sides rose a sheer cliff some fifty feet in height.

When they were about two hundred yards from the end of the canyon, they stopped. The cliff walls had narrowed so that there was scarcely a twenty-five yard distance from one side to the other. Only one last row of bushes separated the hunters from their quarry.

"I can see him from here," Karsten said. "He's up against the back of the canyon there, trying to hide."

"Well, this is it," Thurman said. "It's a pity he's such a small-sized one."

"Well," asked Karsten. "Shall we flip a coin?"

"Why not?" said Thurman. He reached in his pocket. "Call it," he said.

"Heads," Karsten answered. Thomas Thurman tossed the coin high into the air. Its silver sides caught brightly at the sunlight as it mounted in a smooth arc, then danced back to earth. The two men leaned over to inspect it.

"Heads it is," Karsten said, grinning. "I win."

"This is your day, I guess," Thurman told him.

Karsten moved forward to the clump of bushes, Thurman following close behind. They could see the quarry clearly now, the whiteness of his body in bold contrast with the thick red stripes.

"He has gray hair," Thurman said.

The criminal inched back along the rocky wall, seeking desperately for some exit. He tried to climb up the side of the cliff, but could do no more than to stir up a small shower of loose stones as he lost his footing. Suddenly he picked up a rock, twirled, and threw it at the hunters. It scarcely covered a third of the ground between them.

"Well, I like that," said Karsten. "He's got his nerve." He raised his rifle to his shoulder and looked carefully through the telescopic sight. For several moments he held his stance. Then slowly he lowered the gun back to his side.



"I'm sorry, Tom," he said. "But I think I'll let you have this one after all."

Thurman looked surprised. "What's the matter, Bill?" he asked.

William Karsten sighed. "I think I used to know him."

"Oh," Thurman said. And then he frowned. "You're sure it's not just because he's so small that you're giving him up?" he questioned.

"No. Quite sure. I think he was one of my professors back in college."

"Oh, well, then," Thurman said. He put his gun to his shoulder and took careful aim.

"Shoot for the body, Tom," Karsten whispered to him. "Don't want to spoil the head."

Thurman pulled the trigger. The explosion split the quiet air apart and cast the pieces of silence as echoes up and down the little canyon.

"Good shot!" Karsten told his companion. "Nice and clean."

Thurman smiled. "Thank you," he said. And then, "Too bad you had to give him up."

Shrugging his shoulders, Karsten said, "Well, that's the way of things. I don't remember him too well, but I think he taught me anthropology. Old Mac something-or-other. I forget his name."

The two men started walking back towards the entrance to the canyon. "I suppose that I could have taken him anyway," Karsten said as they walked. "But I've never considered it good taste to shoot someone whom I've known."

"I know how you feel," Thurman told him.

"It sort of ... well ... ruins the sport, if you know what I mean," Karsten said.

"Sure," replied Thurman.

They went quietly through the narrow little pass, stopping on the other side. Thurman lit a cigarette and leaned back against a rock to rest. Karsten put a star shell into his rifle, pointed it towards the sky, and fired. They both watched as it burst into a gaudy blossom of fire and smoke far above them.

"That ought to bring Emmett on the run," Karsten said. "He can clean things up and leave a marker. The plane will pick up the body later today."

Thurman took a deep breath. The air had a tangy smell to it of springtime grass and early flowers. The warmth of the sun gave the forest a hazy sort of glow. In the nearby trees small animals chattered loudly.

"Nice day, isn't it, Bill?"

"It certainly is," Karsten answered, gazing thoughtfully at the pleasant landscape. "But look at those clouds. It might rain tonight."

"It might at that," Thurman told him. He gave another sigh and then smiled, dropping his cigar to the ground and crushing it out beneath his boot.

"Well, shall we go?" he asked. "I'm getting hungry."

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