

E.G.WALD

WORLD

WITHOUT WAR

E. Wald

World Without War

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Cooperation was all right back in the dark ages but this was an era of super culture and hi-psi intelligence. And love was no laughing matter. People who cooperated, even biologically, were unlawful and....

Mark knew he shouldn't stop. He was already late for Jennette's birthday party, but the sight of three people out in the open like this was too much.

He pulled around and hovered over the undulating flow of glassy magma, frozen on its way to the long, dry Potomac river bed, with its shallow caverns and fascinating mile-wide potholes. Just under an overhanging cliff of half-vitrified soil were two cars, obviously damaged. The three men were standing beside them.

Mark laughed out loud. It was not often that one found three people at once. And so close to each other. The scene there, with the long, slanting rays of milky sunlight glancing off the ribbing of the flats and sparkling through the million brittle shards of collapsed debris, filled him with a certain poetic exultation.

"By the stars," he murmured to himself happily.

Bubbling with good humor, he slipped down a little closer to the hole, staying up hard against the overhanging cliff. He was feeling too cheerful to use his rightful advantage over them, and decided to use a handgun, since they had nothing better.

This was a mistake, of course. He was only moving along at a hundred miles an hour now. Too slow for safe shooting, particularly with the bumpy air in the hole. But he happily disregarded this, as he pushed open a view port and blazed away with a zuzz pistol.

Almost immediately the ship lurched in the uneven air, and he could see the tiny thin trace of violet as it swept up and away off the targets. One of the men went down, sliced cleanly in two. But the others had seen him.

Mark cursed mildly, some of his high good humor gone, and pulled the car about for another run. The chronometer pinged warningly at him, notifying him that he was now a full hour late for Jennette's birthday party, but the code required the second try.

There was nothing that required handweapons for this, however, and he slipped his strong young hands around the main gun control. A single burst of violet, and one of the men vanished in a puff of steam. Good and clean, he told himself with satisfaction. But the last man opened his pistol onto broad-beam, burning a red flare of general destruction at him.

Mark veered around and bore down sharply for the last burst. He had to get it over with and on to Jennette. But the deadly broad beam swept below the car, evacuating the air and throwing the vehicle momentarily out of control. Close behind, the cliff became suddenly alive as the beam engaged it, bubbling and spewing out huge gouts of molten rock. The aircar burst into a brief, brilliant, sodium-colored fire and fell, with Mark burning inside of it, yelling and screaming in pain.

It took almost five seconds before the charred brain of Mark's body stopped functioning. Then it released him.

He was conscious of the humming of his transmitter. Almost immediately the remembered pain brought perspiration running down inside the helmet into his eyes. He reached up and removed the headpiece with unsteady hands, groaning softly.

It had been some decades since he had last been involved in trouble like this. Killed, yes—but in a painless, fair fight. Being burned to death was no joke. And that body had been one of his best, with the finest reflex sensory system manufactured.

The machine purred softly beside him. He thought suddenly and emptily of Jennette, and stood up.

"Damn," he muttered, crossing the floor, feeling the pleasant warmth of the soft plastic under his feet. "Damn, damn, damn." He stopped before the transparent cover of a storage cabinet, gazing sourly at its contents.

Eleven humanoid forms were stiffly erect behind the cover, all broadly resembling him in feature, and differing only in such minor things as height, hair, perhaps the color of the eyes. Each bore the scars of some past clumsiness or accident.

"Damn," Mark said again. "That was the only decent body I had to wear. Now what do I do?"

He went into the next room and bathed himself in the tepid perfumed mist that fell perpetually from its domed ceiling. If it were anybody but Jennette, there would be no problem. He just would have to shoot off a quick RT, explaining the situation and excusing himself. Nobody would have minded, least of all himself. Particularly a no-fight affair like this one was supposed to be.

But not Jennette. Ohhh, Jennette.

Mark grinned and rubbed the pleasant fluid over his well-cared-for skin. Oh yes, Jennette. There was something about Jennette that he could not quite put his finger on, but it was good. It was wonderously good. Like the bodies she wore. No matter what it was, it was always perfect. She just had the knack of dressing well.

Idly he wondered what her protobody was like. There must be some resemblance, of course. That was the law. Identification was very important, and few manufacturers would violate that, even as a simple matter of good taste. But there still would be considerable difference.

As he thought about it, he got a strange wistful feeling that he did not quite understand. There was a sort of sadness about it. Jennette seemed oddly different from other people. He liked her much too much.

Guiltily he brushed the thoughts aside. Anyway, it didn't matter, he told himself. Due to his carelessness in that last fight, he probably wouldn't even see her tonight, since he had nothing to wear.

He stalked out of the shower and gazed again at the bodies in the store room. The only halfway decent one there was that six foot black fellow with the little ears. It used to be his favorite, until he got it smashed one night during a party at his nearest neighbor's. A half smile tugged at Mark's lips as he recalled the incident. That had been a no-fight party, too; but he had managed to smuggle in a small bomb, and set it off right in the middle of the main bedroom. There were at least ten couples there, since it was a big party, and none of them lived. The trouble was, Mark had been pretty badly smashed up himself, and just managed to get away without losing his body.

Now the thing was all scarred up and practically useless for anything except manual labor.

Mark shook his head disgustedly. There was nothing to do but send off the RT to Jennette.

But this was her birthday—

He caught a glimpse of himself in the reflection from his transmitter housing and automatically straightened his shoulders a little, then laughed at his image.

Then he stopped and contemplated himself further. There was one thing he could do. Many years before, he had an exact duplicate of himself produced, when the vogue for copper colored bodies was at its height. Since then the fashion had changed back to the pink, but that old job must still be around somewhere.

He hated to do it, though. He had never liked that body. It had been just too accurate, and every time he wore it, it embarrassed him. It had been almost as if he were going outside in his protobody. Which, of course, nobody did. People used their own bodies hundreds of years ago, but it was most uncivilized. Besides, it was tiring, and dangerous, too. Yet—was it more fun? He wondered.

He simply had to make Jennette's party. Otherwise he wouldn't see her for months at least, and the thought of that made him feel funny in his stomach.

Mark grinned again, admiring her image in his mind, and set about his catalogue to find the fundamental frequency of that old copy of himself. Fuse it, he told himself resolutely. Nobody would know it was an exact duplicate.

He located the data and set it up in the transmitter. He had no idea where the body was, but that would take care of itself if it were still in good shape. Placing the helmet on his head, he punched the controls and relaxed back on the table.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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