

THE GREEN CHILDREN

#6

by Stanley Lieber

Dawn, but not down here. No windows in the silo. Tommy switched off his daylight lamp and slipped under the covers. It was time for bed.

Dreams, obscuring like an anti-glare filter, mediating the sensor intake. Who needed it?

Up again at dusk.

Hm. What's for breakfast?

Nobody wanted to be in the silo, he realized. Life down here had become a necessity if you wanted to stay alive at all. Dad had said so, and it was clear everyone believed him, because their ignorance of the world above was near total. Haha, it almost seemed wrong to take advantage of their frustrated curiosity.

Tommy didn't believe a word of it, of course. It had become obvious early on that the threat up top had been wildly overblown. Sure, there were bombs, but he knew which streets to avoid. If the enemy wasn't working off the same intelligence then Tommy was clairvoyant.

And Tommy wasn't clairvoyant.

Well, much.

Dad mostly turned a blind eye towards Tommy's "wheeling and dealing," and in turn the profits kept rolling in, mostly unchecked. Peter found he was happiest in these moments when the traps were getting money, and Peter was happy a lot these days. That left Tommy to his own devices, which were many and various deployed throughout the silo. Even his dresses were selling.

Still, it would never be enough. Tommy would never settle for mere silo supremacy.

He wanted out of the silo for good.

Bear was still trying to find a way in. The green children weren't the only morsels on the menu. But getting in was easier said than done. He'd been saying so all year.

What's this?

The father was vulnerable.

"Fired? For what?"

Sounded like Dad was in trouble.

"For letting your son in and out of the silo as if this were some damn revolving door, minimum security prison!" Dad's boss screamed, boldly pronouncing sentence into the inadequately concealed room mic.

Ah, a new assignment!

Raccoon would survive. No matter what they did to the tree he'd lately managed to scramble up into. Chop it down, see if he cared. These bloodhounds didn't frighten him. Push him much further and he'd jump right into the river.

All right, he was pumping himself up. The river was poison, much like his home environment, from which he'd just egressed. And just like home, he wouldn't be able to stand it for long.

Well, if he could escape *that* shithole...

Raccoon closed his eyes and jumped.

Dad's comics were almost loaded up. His work gear and a few personal effects were pretty much all that remained in the family's quarters. Tommy blanched as his father rested a big hand on his bony knee.

"Son, I'd like to tell you a story."

Aw, no.

"Sixty years ago, none of this could have happened. Religious authorities wouldn't have permitted it. But the war we're in now... It's not what any of us signed up for. I don't want to bleed for copyright."

"Dad, I know," Tommy said, not wanting to get into it.

"With that in mind, I'd like you to have this."

From a small metal box that Tommy hadn't noticed before the monologue began, Dad produced a worn leather belt, married to a large brass belt buckle that read *BORN AGAIN* in bold print. Intricate leatherwork reproduced scenes from the classic tale.

"Back when I was first in the Service," his father began, but then trailed off, neglecting to complete the by now familiar introduction.

Tommy prayed to a non-existent God for leniency. What had he done to deserve this? But the absent God didn't hear him, or was otherwise unable to respond.

"Let me tell you about a man named David Mazzucchelli..."

And so it began, again.

Raccoon was less experienced than he let on. In and out of trees, in and out of the river—that just about covered it. But he read a lot, which, in his estimation, counted for something. The green children were more than enough to keep him busy, to give him a sense of what might lay beyond his narrow field of vision.

Bear had spotted him more than once. That was a concern. But time and time again Raccoon had bet everything on his so far infallible ability to evade capture. He'd lost track of the odds.

Raccoon crossed the meadow in broad daylight.

So Dad left. It happened. A month or so later, on his first visit back to the silo to retrieve scant personal belongings he'd left behind, Tommy saw fit to brag, "...And I haven't cried at all since you left." His father was duly impressed.

This trip, Tommy was awarded a medium-sized, gold lamé box filled with half-empty bottles of Testors model paint.

It would keep him busy for a while.