



Library podcast

Virtual Thrilling Tales: *This World is Taboo* Chapter 4

[00:00:00] Hello and welcome to Thrilling Tales: Seattle Public Library's Story Time for Grownups. I am your librarian reader, David Wright. Thrilling Tales has been going on for, gosh, over a decade at the downtown Library. It's a regular lunch hour program where every other Monday at noon, we present, we being myself and other librarians, thrilling and exciting stories for a lunch hour crowd. Of course, we are not open right now so we thought we start doing these virtually and we've started with a eight part science fiction pulp serial called *This World is Taboo*. We may continue this after this with some short stories and perhaps keep this as an ongoing thing. Today we have the fourth chapter, the fourth episode, of *This World is Taboo* by Murray Leinster.

[00:00:53] Five minutes later Calhoun had located one would-be killer behind a mass of splintered planking that once had been a wall. He set the wood afire by a blaster-bolt and then viciously sent other bolts all around the man it had sheltered when he fled from the flames. He could have killed him ten times over, but it was more desirable to open communication. So he missed intentionally.

[00:01:18] Maril had cried out that she came from Dara and had word for them, but they did not answer. There were three men with heavy-duty blast-rifles. One was the one Calhoun had burned out of his hiding place. That man's rifle exploded when the flames hit it. Two remained.

[00:01:35] One, so Calhoun presently discovered—was working his way behind underbrush to a shelf from which he could shoot down at Calhoun. Calhoun had dropped into a hollow and pulled Maril to cover at the first shot. The second man happily planned to get to a point where he could shoot him like a fish in a barrel.

[00:01:55] The third man had fired half a dozen times and then disappeared. Calhoun estimated that he intended to get around to the rear, hoping there was no protection from that direction for Calhoun. It would take some time for him to manage it.

[00:02:08] So Calhoun industriously concentrated his fire on the man trying to get above him. He was behind a boulder, not too dissimilar to Calhoun's breastwork. Calhoun set fire to the brush at the point at which the other man aimed. That, then, made his effort useless.

[00:02:24] Then Calhoun sent a dozen bolts at the other man's rocky shield. It heated up. Steam rose in a whitish mass and blew directly away from Calhoun. He saw that antagonist flee. He saw him so

clearly that he was positive that there was a patch of blue pigment on the right-hand side of the back of his neck.

[00:02:47] He grunted and swung to find the third. That man moved through thick undergrowth, and Calhoun set it on fire in a neat pattern of spreading flames. Evidently, these men had had no training in battle tactics with blast-rifles. The third man also had to get away. He did. But something from him arched through the smoke. It fell to the ground directly upwind from Calhoun. White smoke puffed up violently.

[00:03:16] It was instinct that made Calhoun react as he did. He jerked the girl Maril to her feet and rushed her toward the Med Ship. Smoke from the flung bomb upwind barely swirled around him and missed Maril altogether. Calhoun, though, got a whiff of something strange, not scorched or burning vegetation at all. He ceased to breathe and plunged onward. In clear air he emptied his lungs and refilled them. They were then halfway to the ship, with Murgatroyd prancing on ahead.

[00:03:49] But then Calhoun's heart began to pound furiously. His muscles twitched and tensed. He felt extraordinary symptoms like an extreme of agitation. He swore, but a Med Ship man would not react to such symptoms as a non-medically-trained man would have done. Calhoun was familiar enough with tear gas, used by police on some planets.

[00:04:13] But this was different and worse. Even as he helped and urged Maril onward, he automatically considered his sensations, and had it—panic gas. Police did not use it because panic is worse than rioting. Calhoun felt all the physical symptoms of fear and of gibbering terror.

[00:04:37] A man whose mind yields to terror experiences certain physical sensations: wildly beating heart, tensed and twitching muscles, and a frantic impulse to convulsive action. A man in whom those physical sensations are induced by other means will, ordinarily, find his mind yielding to terror.

[00:04:59] Calhoun couldn't combat his feelings, but his clinical attitude enabled him to act despite them. The three from Weald reached the base of the Med Ship. One of their enemies had lost his rifle and need not be counted. Another had fled from flames and might be ignored for some moments, anyhow. But a blast-bolt struck the ship's metal hull only feet from Calhoun, and he whipped around to the other side and let loose a staccato rat-tat-tat of fire which emptied the rifle of all its charges. Then he opened the airlock door, hating the fact that he shook and trembled. He urged the girl and Murgatroyd in. He slammed the outer airlock door just as another blast-bolt hit.

[00:05:41] "They—they don't realize," said Maril desperately. "If they only knew...."

[00:05:47] "Talk to them, if you like," said Calhoun. His teeth chattered and he raged, because the symptom was of terror he denied.

[00:05:55] He pushed a button on the control board. He pointed to a microphone. He got at an oxygen bottle and inhaled deeply. Oxygen, obviously, should be an antidote for panic, since the symptoms of

terror act to increase the oxygenation of the bloodstream and muscles, and to make superhuman exertion possible if necessary.

[00:06:15] Breathing ninety-five percent oxygen produced the effect the terror-inspiring gas strove for, so his heart slowed nearly to normal and his body relaxed. He held out his hand and it did not tremble. He'd been affronted to see it shake uncontrollably when he pushed the microphone button for Maril.

[00:06:37] He turned to her. She hadn't spoken into the mike.

[00:06:41] "They may not be from Dara!" she said shakily. "I just thought! They could be somebody else, maybe criminals who planned to raid the mine for a shipload of its ore."

[00:06:52] "Nonsense," said Calhoun. "I saw one of them clearly enough to be sure. But they're skeptical characters. I'm afraid there may be more on the way here from wherever they keep themselves. Anyhow, now we know some of them are in hearing! I'll take advantage of that and we'll go on."

[00:07:09] He took the microphone. An instant later his voice boomed in the stillness outside the ship, cutting through the thin shrill whirring of invisible small creatures.

[00:07:20] "This is the Med Ship Aesclypus Twenty," said Calhoun's voice, amplified to a shout. "I left Weald four days ago, one day after the cargo ship from here arrived with everybody on board dead. On Weald they don't know how it happened, but they suspect blueskins. Sooner or later they'll search here.

[00:07:45] "Get away! Cover up your tracks! Hide all signs that you've ever been here! Get the hell away, fast! One more warning! There's talk of fusion-bombing Dara. They're scared! If they find your traces, they'll be still more scared! So cover up your tracks and get away from here!"

[00:08:08] The many-times-multiplied voice rolled and echoed among the hills. But it was very clear. Where it could be heard it could be understood, and it could be heard for miles.

[00:08:21] But there was no response to it. Calhoun waited a reasonable time. Then he shrugged and seated himself at the control board.

[00:08:31] "It isn't easy," he observed, "to persuade desperate men that they've outsmarted themselves! Hold hard, Murgatroyd!"

[00:08:40] The rockets bellowed. Then there was a tremendous noise to end all noises, and the ship began to climb. It sped up and up and up. By the time it was out of atmosphere it had velocity enough to coast to clear space and Calhoun cut the rockets altogether.

[00:08:58] He busied himself with those astrogational chores which began with orienting oneself to galactic directions after leaving a planet which rotates at its own individual speed. Then one computes the overdrive course to another planet, from the respecting coordinates of the world one is leaving and the one one aims for.

[00:09:19] Then, in this case at any rate, there was the very finicky task of picking out a fourth-magnitude star of whose planets one was his destination. He aimed for it with ultra-fine precision.

[00:09:33] "Overdrive coming," he said presently. "Hold on!"

[00:09:37] Space reeled. There was nausea and giddiness and a horrible sensation of falling in a wildly unlikely spiral. Then stillness, and solidity, and the blackness outside the Med Ship. The little craft was in overdrive again.

[00:09:58] After a long while, the girl Maril said uneasily, "I don't know what you plan now—"

[00:10:06] "I'm going to Dara," said Calhoun. "On Orede I tried to get the blueskins there to get going, fast. Maybe I succeeded. I don't know. But this thing's been mishandled! Even if there's a famine people shouldn't do things out of desperation! Being desperate jogs the brain off-center. One doesn't think straight!"

[00:10:27] "I know now that I was ... very foolish."

[00:10:31] "Forget it," commanded Calhoun. "I wasn't talking about you. Here I run into a situation that the Med Service should have caught and cleaned up generations ago! But it's not only a Med Service obligation; it's a current mess! Before I could begin to get at the basic problem, those idiots on Orede—it'd happened before I reached Weald! An emotional explosion triggered by a ship full of dead men that nobody intended to kill."

[00:11:01] Maril shook her head.

[00:11:03] "Those Darian characters," said Calhoun, annoyed, "shouldn't have gone to Orede in the first place. If they went there, they should at least have stayed on a continent where there were no people from Weald digging a mine and hunting cattle for sport on their off days! They could be spotted! I believe they were.

[00:11:21] "And again, if it had been a long way from the mine installation, they could probably have wiped out the people who sighted them before they could get back with the news! But it looks like miners saw men hunting, and got close enough to see they were blueskins, and then got back to the mine with the news!"

[00:11:41] She waited for him to explain.

[00:11:43] "I know I'm guessing, but it fits!" he said distastefully. "So something had to be done. Either the mining settlement had to be wiped out or the story that blueskins were on Orede had to be discredited. The blueskins tried for both. They used panic gas on a herd of cattle and it made them crazy and they charged the settlement like the four-footed lunatics they are!

[00:12:11] "And the blueskins used panic gas on the settlement itself as the cattle went through. It should have settled the whole business nicely. After it was over every man in the settlement would believe he'd been out of his head for a while, and he'd have the crazy state of the settlement to think about.

[00:12:30] "He wouldn't be sure of what he'd seen or heard before-hand. They might try to verify the blueskin story later, but they wouldn't believe anything with certainty. It should have worked!"
Again she waited.

[00:12:45] "Unfortunately, when the miners panicked, they stampeded into the ship. Also unfortunately, panic gas got into the ship with them. So they stayed panicked while the astrogator—in panic!—took off. They headed for Weald and threw on the overdrive—which would be set for Weald anyhow—because that would be the fastest way to run away from whatever he imagined he feared. But he and all the men on the ship were still crazy with panic from the gas they kept breathing until they died!"

[00:13:22] Silence. After a long interval, Maril asked, "You don't think the Darrians intended to kill?"

[00:13:31] "I think they were stupid!" said Calhoun angrily. "Somebody's always urging the police to use panic gas in case of public tumult. But it's too dangerous. Nobody knows what one man will do in a panic. Take a hundred or two or three and panic them all, and there's no limit to their craziness! The whole thing was handled wrong!"

[00:13:53] "But you don't blame them?"

[00:13:56] "For being stupid, yes," said Calhoun fretfully. "But if I'd been in their place, perhaps—"

[00:14:02] "Where were you born?" asked Maril suddenly.

[00:14:08] Calhoun jerked his head around. "No! Not where you're guessing, or hoping. Not on Dara. Just because I act as if Darrians were human doesn't mean I have to be one! I'm a Med Service man, and I'm acting as I think I should." His tone became exasperated.

[00:14:25] "Dammit, I'm supposed to deal with health situations, actual, and possible causes of human deaths! And if Weald thinks it finds proof that blueskins are in space again and caused the death of Wealdians, it won't be healthy! They're halfway set anyhow to drop fusion-bombs on Dara to wipe it out!"

[00:14:46] Maril said fiercely, "They might as well drop bombs. It'll be quicker than starvation, at least!"

[00:14:54] Calhoun looked at her, more exasperated than before.

[00:14:58] "It is a crop failure again?" he demanded. When she nodded he said bitterly, "Famine conditions already?" When she nodded again he said drearily, "And of course famine is the great-grandfather of health problems! And that's right in my lap with all the rest!"

[00:15:20] He stood up. Then he sat down again.

[00:15:24] "I'm tired!" he said flatly. "I'd like to get some sleep. Would you mind taking a book or something and going into the other cabin? Murgatroyd and I would like a little relaxation from reality. With luck, if I go to sleep, I may only have a nightmare. It'll be a terrific improvement on what I'm in now!"

[00:15:47] Alone in the control compartment, he tried to relax, but it was not possible. He flung himself into a comfortable chair and brooded. There is brooding and brooding. It can be a form of wallowing in self-pity, engaged in for emotional satisfaction. But it can be, also, a way of bringing out unfavorable factors in a situation. A man in optimistic mood can ignore them. But no awkward situation is likely to be remedied while any of its elements are neglected.

[00:16:22] Calhoun dourly considered the situation of the people of the planet Dara, which it was his job as a Med Service man to remedy or at least improve. Those people were marked by patches of blue pigment as an inherited consequence of a plague of three generations past. Because of the marking, which it was easy to believe a sign of continuing infection, they were hated and dreaded by their neighbors. Dara was a planet of pariahs—excluded from the human race by those who feared them.

[00:16:58] And now there was famine on Dara for the second time, and they were of no mind to starve quietly. There was food on the planet Orede, monstrous herds of cattle without owners. It was natural enough for Darians to build a ship or ships and try to bring food back to its starving people. But that desperately necessary enterprise had now roused Weald to a frenzy of apprehension.

[00:17:27] Weald was, if possible, more hysterically afraid of blueskins than ever before, and even more implacably the enemy of the starving planet's population. Weald itself prospered. Ironically, it had such an excess of foodstuffs that it stored them in unneeded spaceships in orbits about itself. Hundreds of thousands of tons of grain circled Weald in sealed-tight hulks, while the people of Dara starved and only dared try to steal—if it could be called stealing—some of the innumerable wild cattle of Orede.

[00:18:06] The blueskins on Orede could not trust Calhoun, so they pretended not to hear. Or maybe that didn't hear. They'd been abandoned and betrayed by all of humanity off their world. They'd been

threatened and oppressed by guardships in orbit about them, ready to shoot down any spacecraft they might send aloft....

[00:18:27] So Calhoun brooded, while Murgatroyd presently yawned and climbed to his cubbyhole and curled up to sleep with his furry tail carefully adjusted over his nose.

[00:18:42] A long time later Calhoun heard small sounds which were not normal on a Med Ship in overdrive. They were not part of the random noises carefully generated to keep the silence of the ship enduring. Calhoun raised his head. He listened sharply. No sound could come from outside.

[00:19:02] He knocked on the door of the sleeping cabin. The noises stopped instantly.

[00:19:09] "Come out," he commanded through the door.

[00:19:12] "I'm—I'm all right," said Maril's voice. But it was not quite steady. She paused. "Did I make a noise? I was having a bad dream."

[00:19:23] "I wish," said Calhoun, "that you'd tell me the truth just occasionally! Come out, please!"

[00:19:31] There were stirrings. After a little it opened and Maril appeared. She looked as if she'd been crying. She said, quickly, "I probably look queer, but it's because I was asleep."

[00:19:43] "To the contrary," said Calhoun, fuming. "You've been lying awake crying. I don't know why. I've been out here wishing I could, because I'm frustrated. But since you aren't asleep maybe you can help me with my job. I've figured some things out. For some others I need facts. Will you give them to me?"

[00:20:04] She swallowed. "I'll try."

[00:20:08] "Coffee?" he asked.

[00:20:10] Murgatroyd popped his head out of his miniature sleeping cabin.

[00:20:14] "Chee?" he asked interestedly.

[00:20:17] "Go back to sleep!" snapped Calhoun.

[00:20:20] He began to pace back and forth.

[00:20:23] "I need to know something about the pigment patches," he said jerkily. "Maybe it sounds crazy to think of such things now—first things first, you know. But this is a first thing! So long as Darrians don't look like the people of other worlds, they'll be believed to be different. If they look repulsive, they'll be believed to be evil."

[00:20:44] "Tell me about those patches. They're different sizes and different shapes and they appear in different places. You've none on your face or hands, anyhow."

[00:20:55] "I haven't any at all," said the girl reservedly.

[00:20:59] "I thought—"

[00:21:01] "Not everybody," she said defensively. "Nearly, yes. But not all. Some people don't have them. Some people are born with bluish splotches on their skin, but they fade out while they're children. When they grow up they're just like the people of Weald or any other world. And their children never have them."

[00:21:21] Calhoun stared.

[00:21:23] "You couldn't possibly be proved to be a Darian, then?"

[00:21:27] She shook her head. Calhoun remembered, and started the coffee.

[00:21:33] "When you left Dara," he said, "you were carried a long, long way, to some planet where they'd practically never heard of Dara, and where the name meant nothing. You could have settled there, or anywhere else and forgotten about Dara. But you didn't. Why not, since you're not a blueskin?"

[00:21:55] "But I am!" she said fiercely. "My parents, my brothers and sisters, and Korvan—"

[00:22:03] Then she bit her lip. Calhoun took note but did not comment on the name she'd mentioned.

[00:22:10] "Then your parents had the splotches fade, so you never had them," he said absorbedly. "Something like that happened on Tralee, once! There's a virus, a whole group of virus particles! Normally we humans are immune to them. One has to be in terrifically bad physical condition for them to take hold and produce whatever effects they do. But once they're established they're passed on from mother to child. And when they die out it's during childhood, too!"

[00:22:41] He poured coffee for the two of them. Murgatroyd swung down to the floor and said, impatiently, "Chee! Chee! Chee!"

[00:22:49] Calhoun absently filled Murgatroyd's tiny cup and handed it to him.

[00:22:54] "But this is marvellous!" he said exuberantly. "The blue patches appeared after the plague, didn't they? After people recovered—when they recovered?"

[00:23:03] Maril stared at him. His mind was filled with strictly professional considerations. He was not talking to her as a person. She was purely a source of information.

[00:23:15] "So I'm told," said Maril reservedly. "Are there any more humiliating questions you want to ask?"

[00:23:23] He gaped at her. Then he said ruefully, "I'm stupid, Maril, but you're touchy. There's nothing personal—"

[00:23:32] "There is to me!" she said fiercely. "I was born among blueskins, and they're of my blood, and they're hated and I'd have been killed on Weald if I'd been known as ... what I am! And there's Korvan, who arranged for me to be sent away as a spy and advised me to do just what you said: abandon my home world and everybody I care about! Including him! It's personal to me!"

[00:24:02] Calhoun wrinkled his forehead helplessly.

[00:24:05] "I'm sorry," he repeated. "Drink your coffee!"

[00:24:09] "I don't want it," she said bitterly. "I'd like to die!"

[00:24:15] "If you stay around where I am," Calhoun told her, "you may get your wish. All right, there'll be no more questions."

[00:24:23] She turned and moved toward the door to the cabin. Calhoun looked after her.

[00:24:29] "Maril."

[00:24:30] "What?"

[00:24:31] "Why were you crying?"

[00:24:34] "You wouldn't understand," she said evenly.

[00:24:39] Calhoun shrugged his shoulders almost up to his ears. He had to let fate or chance or disaster take care of Maril's personal problems. He had larger matters to cope with.

[00:24:53] But he had something to work on, now. He hunted busily in the reference tapes. He came up with an explicit collection of information on exactly the subject he needed. He left the control room to go down into the storage areas of the Med Ship's hull. He found an ultra frigid storage box, whose contents were kept at the temperature of liquid air.

[00:25:16] He donned thick gloves, used a special set of tongs, and extracted a tiny block of plastic in which a sealed-tight phial of glass was embedded. It frosted instantly he took it out, and when the

storage box was closed again the block was covered with a thick and opaque coating of frozen moisture.

[00:25:36] He went back to the control room and pulled down the panel which made available a small-scale but surprisingly adequate biological laboratory. He set the plastic block in a container which would raise it very, very gradually to a specific temperature and hold it there. It was, obviously, a living culture from which any imaginable quantity of the same culture could be bred. Calhoun set the apparatus with great exactitude.

[00:26:06] "This," he told Murgatroyd, "may be a good day's work. Now I think I can rest."

[00:26:14] Then, for a long while, there was no sound or movement in the Med Ship. The girl may have slept, or maybe not. Calhoun lay relaxed in a chair which at the touch of a button became the most comfortable of sleeping places. Murgatroyd remained in his cubbyhole, his tail curled over his nose.

[00:26:34] There were comforting, unheard, easily dismissable murmurings now and again. They kept the feeling of life alive in the ship. But for such infinitesimal stirrings of sound, carefully recorded for this exact purpose, the feel of the ship would have been that of a tomb.

[00:26:52] But it was quite otherwise when another ship-day began with the taped sounds of morning activities as faint as echoes but nevertheless establishing an atmosphere of their own.

[00:27:03] Calhoun examined the plastic block and its contents. He read the instruments which had cared for it while he slept. He put the block—no longer frosted—in the culture microscope and saw its enclosed, infinitesimal particles of life in the process of multiplying on the food that had been frozen with them when they were reduced to the spore condition. He beamed. He replaced the block in the incubation oven and faced the day cheerfully.

[00:27:33] Maril greeted him with great reserve. They breakfasted, with Murgatroyd eating from his own platter on the floor, a tiny cup of coffee alongside.

[00:27:45] "I've been thinking," said Maril evenly. "I think I can get you a hearing for whatever ideas you may have to help Dara."

[00:27:56] "Kind of you," murmured Calhoun.

[00:27:59] In theory, a Med Service man had all the authority needed for this or any other emergency. The power to declare a planet in quarantine, so cutting it off from all interstellar commerce, should be enough to force cooperation from any world's government. But in practice Calhoun had exactly as much power as he could exercise.

[00:28:19] And Weald could not think straight where blueskins were concerned, and certainly the authorities on Dara could not be expected to be levelheaded. They had a history of isolation and outlawry, and long experience of being regarded as less than human. In cold fact, Calhoun had no power at all.

[00:28:40] "May I ask whose influence you'll exert?" asked Calhoun.

[00:28:45] "There's a man," said Maril reservedly, "who thinks a great deal of me. I don't know his present official position, but he was certain to become prominent. I'll tell him how you've acted up to now, and your attitude, and of course that you're Med Service. He'll be glad to help you, I'm sure."

[00:29:06] "Splendid!" said Calhoun, nodding. "That will be Korvan."

[00:29:11] She started. "How did you know?"

[00:29:15] "Intuition," said Calhoun dryly. "All right. I'll count on him."

[00:29:21] But he did not. He worked in the tiny biological lab all that ship-day and all the next. The girl was very quiet. Murgatroyd tried to enter into pretended conversation with her, but she was not able to match his pretense.

[00:29:37] On the ship-day after, the time for breakout approached. While the ship was practically a world all by itself, it was easy to look forward with confidence to the future. But when contact and, in a fashion, conflict with other and larger worlds loomed nearer, prospects seemed less bright. Calhoun had definite plans, now, but there were so many ways in which they could be frustrated.

[00:30:04] Calhoun sat down at the control board and watched the clock.

[00:30:08] "I've got things lined up," he told Maril, "if only they work out. If I can make somebody on Dara listen, which is unlikely, and follow my advice, which they probably won't; and if Weald doesn't get the ideas it probably will get; and isn't doing what I suspect it is—why, maybe something can be done."

[00:30:31] "I'm sure you'll do your best," said Maril politely.

[00:30:35] Calhoun managed to grin. He watched the clock. There was no sensation attached to overdrive travel except at the beginning and the end. It was now time for the end. He might find most anything having happened. His plans might immediately be seen to be hopeless. Weald could have sent ships to Dara, or Dara might be in such a state of desperation....

[00:31:01] As it turned out, Dara was desperate. The Med Ship came out nearly a light-month from the sun about which the planet Dara revolved. Calhoun went into a short hop toward it. Then Dara was on the other side of the blazing yellow star. It took time to reach it.

[00:31:19] He called down, identifying himself and the ship and asking for coordinates so his ship could be brought to ground. There was confusion, as if the request were so unusual that the answers were not ready. The grid, too, was on the planet's night side. Presently the ship was locked onto by the grid's force-fields. It went downward.

[00:31:43] Calhoun saw that Maril sat tensely, twisting her fingers within each other, until the ship actually touched ground.

[00:32:00] Then he opened the exit port—and faced armed men in the darkness, with blast-rifles trained on him. There was a portable cannon trained on the Med Ship itself.

[00:32:07] "Come out!" rasped a voice. "If you try anything you get blasted! Your ship and its contents are seized by the planetary government!"

[00:32:20] Thus ends chapter four of *This World Is Taboo* by Murray Leinster. Join us next time for the next exciting chapter.