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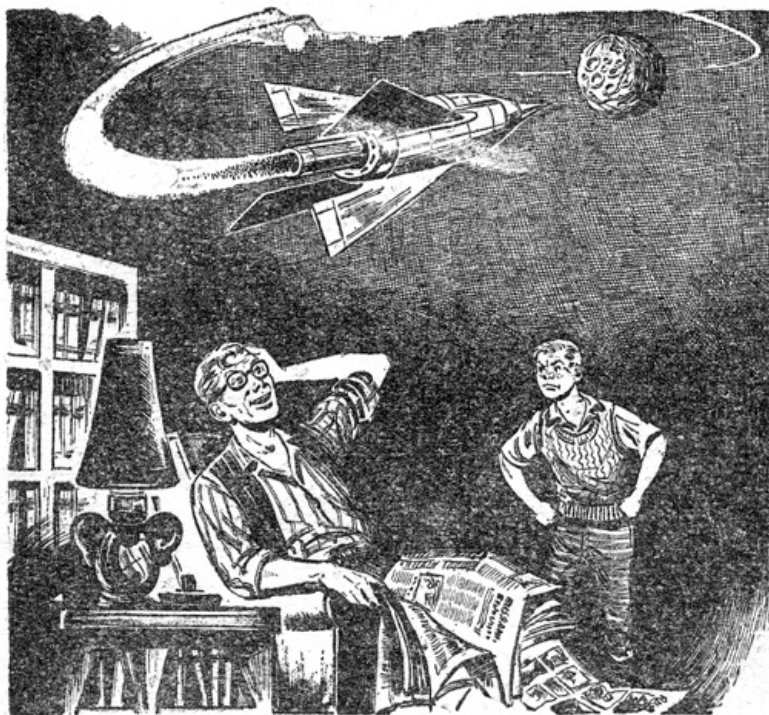
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\*\*\* START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK DESIRE NO MORE \*\*\*

He had but one ambition, one desire: to pilot the first manned rocket to the moon. And he was prepared as no man had ever prepared himself before....



## DESIRE NO MORE

by Algis Budrys

(illustrated by Milton Luros)

*"Desire no more than to thy lot may fall...."*

—Chaucer

THE SMALL young man looked at his father, and shook his head.

"But you've *got* to learn a trade," his father said, exasperated. "I can't afford to send you to college; you know that."

"I've got a trade," he answered.

His father smiled thinly. "What?" he asked patronizingly.

"I'm a rocket pilot," the boy said, his thin jaw stretching the skin of his cheeks.

His father laughed in the way the boy had learned to anticipate and hate. "Yeah," he said. He leaned back in his chair and laughed so hard that the Sunday paper slipped off his wide lap and fell to the floor with an unnoticed stiff rustle.

"A *rocket* pilot!" His father's derision hooted through the quiet parlor. "A ro—*oh, no!*—a rocket *pilot!*"

The boy stared silently at the convulsed figure in the chair. His lips fell into a set white bar, and the corners of his jaws bulged with the tension in their muscles. Suddenly, he turned on his heel and stalked out of the parlor, through the hall, out the front door, to the porch. He stopped there, hesitating a little.

"*Marty!*" His father's shout followed him out of the parlor. It seemed to act like a hand between the shoulder-blades, because the boy almost ran as he got down the porch stairs.

"What is it, Howard?" Marty's mother asked in a worried voice as she came in from the kitchen, her damp hands rubbing themselves dry against the sides of her housedress.

"Crazy kid," Howard Isherwood muttered. He stared at the figure of his son as the boy reached the end of the walk and turned off into the street. "*Come back here!*" he shouted. "A *rocket* pilot," he cursed under his breath. "What's the kid been reading? Claiming he's a rocket pilot!"

Margaret Isherwood's brow furrowed into a faint, bewildered frown. "But—*isn't* he a little young? I know they're teaching some very odd things in high schools these days, but it seems to me...."

"Oh, for Pete's sake, Marge, there aren't even any rockets yet! *Come back here, you idiot!*" Howard Isherwood was standing on his porch, his clenched fists trembling at the ends of his stiffly-held arms.

"Are you sure, Howard?" his wife asked faintly.

"Yes, I'm *sure!*"

"But, where's he going?"

"*Stop that! Get off that bus! YOU hear me? Marty?*"

"*Howard!* Stop acting like a child and *talk* to me! Where is that boy going?"

Howard Isherwood, stocky, red-faced, forty-seven, and defeated, turned away from the retreating bus and looked at his wife. "I don't know," he told her bitterly, between rushes of air into his jerkily heaving lungs. "Maybe, the moon," he told her sarcastically.

Martin Isherwood, rocket pilot, weight 102, height 4', 11", had come of age at seventeen.

THE SMALL man looked at his faculty advisor. "No," he said. "I am not interested in working for a degree."

"But—" The faculty advisor unconsciously tapped the point of a yellow pencil against the fresh green of his desk blotter, leaving a rough arc of black flecks. "Look, Ish, you've got to either deliver or get off the basket. This program is just like the others you've followed for nine semesters; nothing but math and engineering. You've taken just about every undergrad course there is in those fields. How long are you going to keep this up?"

"I'm signed up for Astronomy 101," Isherwood pointed out.

The faculty advisor snorted. "A snap course. A breather, after you've studied the same stuff in Celestial Navigation. What's the matter, Ish? Scared of liberal arts?"

Isherwood shook his head. "Uh-unh. Not interested. No time. And that Astronomy course isn't a breather. Different slant from Cee Nav—they won't be talking about stars as check points, but as things in themselves." Something seemed to flicker across his face as he said it.

The advisor missed it; he was too engrossed in his argument. "Still a snap. What's the difference, how you look at a star?"

Isherwood almost winced. "Call it a hobby," he said. He looked down at his watch. "Come on, Dave. You're not going to convince me. You haven't convinced me any of the other times, either, so you might as well give up, don't you think? I've got a half hour before I go on the job. Let's go get some beer."

The advisor, not much older than Isherwood, shrugged, defeated. "Crazy," he muttered. But it was a hot day, and he was as thirsty as the next man.

The bar was air conditioned. The advisor shivered, half grinned, and softly quoted:

"Though I go bare, take ye no care,

I am nothing a-cold;  
I stuff my skin so full within  
Of jolly good ale and old."

"Huh?" Ish was wearing the look with which he always reacted to the unfamiliar.

The advisor lifted two fingers to the bartender and shrugged. "It's a poem; about four hundred years old, as a matter of fact."

"Oh."

"Don't you give a damn?" the advisor asked, with some peevishness.

Ish laughed shortly, without embarrassment. "Sorry, Dave, but no. It's not my racket."

The advisor cramped his hand a little too tightly around his glass. "Strictly a specialist, huh?"

Ish nodded. "Call it that."

"But *what*, for Pete's sake? What *is* this crazy specialty that blinds you to all the fine things that man has done?"

Ish took a swallow of his beer. "Well, now, if I was a poet, I'd say it was the finest thing that man has ever done."

The advisor's lips twisted in derision. "That's pretty fanatical, isn't it?"

"Uh-huh." Ish waved to the bartender for refills.

THE *NAVION* took a boiling thermal under its right wing and bucked upward suddenly, tilting at the same time, so that the pretty brunette girl in the other half of the side-by-side was thrown against him. Ish laughed, a sound that came out of his throat as turbulently as that sudden gust of heated air had shot up out of the Everglades, and corrected with a tilt of the wheel.

"Relax, Nan," he said, his words colored by the lingering laughter. "It's only air; nasty old air."

The girl patted her short hair back into place. "I wish you wouldn't fly this low," she said, half-frightened.

"*Low?* Call *this* low?" Ish teased. "Here. Let's drop it a little, and you'll *really* get an idea of how fast we're going." He nudged the wheel forward, and the *Navion* dipped its nose in a shallow dive, flattening out thirty feet above the mangrove. The swamp howled with the chug of the dancing pistons and the claw of the propeller at the protesting air, and, from the cockpit, the Everglades resolved into a dirty-green blur that rocketed backward into the slipstream.

"Marty!"

Ish chuckled again. He couldn't have held the ship down much longer, anyway. He tugged back on the wheel suddenly, targeting a cumulous bank with his spinner. His lips peeled back from his teeth, and his jaw set. The *Navion* went up at the clouds, her engine turning over as fast as it could, her wings cushioned on the rising thrust of another thermal.

And, suddenly, it was as if there were no girl beside him, to be teased, and no air to rock the wings—there were no wings. His face lost all expression. Faint beads of sweat broke out above his eyes and under his nose. "Up," he grunted through his clenched teeth. His fists locked on the wheel. "Up!"

The *Navion* broke through the cloud, kept going. "Up." If he listened closely, in just the right way, he could almost hear ...

"Marty!"

... the rumble of a louder, prouder engine than the Earth had ever known. He sighed, the breath whispering through his parting teeth, and the aircraft leveled off as he pushed at the wheel with suddenly lax hands. Still half-lost, he turned and looked at the white-faced girl. "Scare you—?" he asked gently.

She nodded. Her fingertips were trembling on his forearm.

"Me too," he said. "Lost my head. Sorry."

"LOOK," HE told the girl, "You got any idea of what it costs to maintain a racing-plane? Everything I own is tied up in the Foo, my ground crew, my trailer, and that scrummy old Ryan that should have been salvaged ten years ago. I *can't* get married. Suppose I crack the Foo next week? You're dead broke, a widow, and with a funeral to pay for. The only smart thing to do is wait a while."

Nan's eyes clouded, and her lips trembled. "That's what I've been trying to say. *Why* do you have to win the Vandenberg Cup next week? Why can't you sell the Foo and go into some kind of

business? You're a trained pilot."

He had been standing in front of her with his body unconsciously tense from the strain of trying to make her understand. Now he relaxed—more—he slumped—and something began to die in his face, and the first faint lines crept in to show that after it had died, it would not return to life, but would fossilize, leaving his features in the almost unreadable mask that the newspapers would come to know.

"I'm a good bit more than a trained pilot," he said quietly. "The Foo Is a means to an end. After I win the Vandenberg Cup, I can walk into any plant in the States—Douglas, North American, Boeing—*any* of them—and pick up the Chief Test Pilot's job for the asking. A few of them have as good as said so. After that—" His voice had regained some of its former animation from this new source. Now he broke off, and shrugged. "I've told you all this before."

The girl reached up, as if the physical touch could bring him back to her, and put her fingers around his wrist. "Darling!" she said. "If it's that *rocket* pilot business again...."

Somehow, his wrist was out of her encircling fingers. "It's always 'that *rocket* pilot business,'" he said, mimicking her voice. "Damn it, I'm the only trained rocket pilot in the world! I weigh a hundred and fifteen pounds, I'm five feet tall, and I know more navigation and math than anybody the Air Force or Navy have! I can use words like *brennschluss* and *mass-ratio* without running over to a copy of *Colliers*, and I—" He stopped himself, half-smiled, and shrugged again.

"I guess I was kidding myself. After the Cup, there'll be the test job, and after that, there'll be the rockets. You would have had to wait a long time."

All she could think of to say was, "But, Darling, there *aren't* any man-carrying rockets."

"That's not my fault," he said, and walked away from her.

A week later, he took his stripped-down F-110 across the last line with a scream like that of a hawk that brings its prey safely to its nest.

HE BROUGHT the Mark VII out of her orbit after two days of running rings around the spinning Earth, and the world loved him. He climbed out of the crackling, pinging ship, bearded and dirty, with oil on his face and in his hair, with food stains all over his whipcord, red-eyed, and huskily quiet as he said his few words into the network microphones. And he was not satisfied. There was no peace in his eyes, and his hands moved even more sharply in their expressive gestures as he gave an impromptu report to the technicians who were walking back to the personnel bunker with him.

Nan could see that. Four years ago, he had been different. Four years ago, if she had only known the right words, he wouldn't be so intent now on throwing himself away to the sky.

She was a woman scorned. She had to lie to herself. She broke out of the press section and ran over to him. "Marty!" She brushed past a technician.

He looked at her with faint surprise on his face. "Well, Nan!" he mumbled. But he did not put his hand over her own where it touched his shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Marty," she said in a rush. "I didn't understand. I couldn't see how much it all meant." Her face was flushed, and she spoke as rapidly as she could, not noticing that Ish had already gestured away the guards she was afraid would interrupt her.

"But it's all right, now. You got your rockets. You've done it. You trained yourself for it, and now it's over. You've flown your rocket!"

He looked up at her face and shook his head in quiet pity. One of the shocked technicians was trying to pull her away, and Ish made no move to stop him.

Suddenly, he was tired, there was something in him that was trying to break out against his will, and his reaction was that of a child whose candy is being taken away from him after only one bite.

"Rocket!" he shouted into her terrified face. "*Rocket!* Call that pile of tin a rocket?" He pointed at the weary Mark VII with a trembling arm. "Who cares about the bloody *machines!* If I thought roller-skating would get me there, I would have gone to work in a *rink* when I was seventeen! It's *getting there* that counts! Who gives a good goddam *how* it's done, or what with!"

And he stood there, shaking like a leaf, outraged, while the guards came and got her.

"SIT DOWN, Ish," the Flight Surgeon said.

*They always begin that way,* Isherwood thought. The standard medical opening. Sit down. What for? Did somebody really believe that anything he might hear would make him faint? He smiled with as much expression as he ever did, and chose a comfortable chair, rolling the white cylinder of a cigarette between his fingers. He glanced at his watch. Fourteen hours, thirty-six

minutes, and four days to go.

"How's it?" the FS asked.

Ish grinned and shrugged. "All right." But he didn't usually grin. The realization disquieted him a little.

"Think you'll make it?"

Deliberately, rather than automatically, he fell back into his usual response-pattern. "Don't know. That's what I'm being paid to find out."

"Uh-huh." The FS tapped the eraser of his pencil against his teeth. "Look—you want to talk to a man for a while?"

"What man?" It didn't really matter. He had a feeling that anything he said or did now would have a bearing, somehow, on the trip. If they wanted him to do something for them, he was bloody well going to do it.

"Fellow named MacKenzie. Big gun in the head-thumping racket." The Flight Surgeon was trying to be as casual as he could. "Air Force insisted on it, as a matter of fact," he said. "Can't really blame them. After all, it's *their* beast."

"Don't want any hole-heads denting it up on them, huh?" Ish lit the cigarette and flipped his lighter shut with a snap of the lid. "Sure. Bring him on."

The FS smiled. "Good. He's—uh—he's in the next room. Okay to ask him in right now?"

"Sure." Something flickered in Isherwood's eyes. Amusement at the Flight Surgeon's discomfort was part of it. Worry was some of the rest.

MacKENZIE didn't seem to be taking any notes, or paying any special attention to the answers Ish was giving to his casual questions. But the questions fell into a pattern that was far from casual, and Ish could see the small button-mike of a portable tape-recorder nestling under the man's lapel.

"Been working your own way for the last seventeen years, haven't you?" MacKenzie seemed to mumble in a perfectly clear voice.

Ish nodded.

"How's that?"

The corners of Isherwood's mouth twitched, and he said "Yes" for the recorder's benefit.

"Odd jobs, first of all?"

"Something like that. Anything I could get, the first few months. After I was halfway set up, I stuck to garages and repair shops."

"Out at the airports around Miami, mostly, wasn't it?"

"Ahuh."

"Took some of your pay in flying lessons."

"Right."

MacKenzie's face passed no judgements—he simply hunched in his chair, seemingly dwarfed by the shoulders of his perfectly tailored suit, his stubby fingers twiddling a Phi Beta Kappa key. He was a spare man—only a step or two away from emaciation. Occasionally, he pushed a tired strand of washed-out hair away from his forehead.

Ish answered him truthfully, without more than ordinary reservations. This was the man who could ground him. He was dangerous—red-letter dangerous—because of it.

"No family."

Ish shrugged. "Not that I know of. Cut out at seventeen. My father was making good money. He had a pension plan, insurance policies. No need to worry about them."

Ish knew the normal reaction a statement like that should have brought. MacKenzie's face did not go into a blank of repression—but it still passed no judgements.

"How's things between you and the opposite sex?"

"About normal."

"No wife—no steady girl."

"Not a very good idea, in my racket."

MacKenzie grunted. Suddenly, he sat bolt upright in his chair, and swung toward Ish. His lean arm shot out, and his index finger was aimed between Isherwood's eyes. "You can't go!"

Ish was on his feet, his fists clenched, the blood throbbing in his temple veins. "What!" he roared.

MacKenzie seemed to collapse in his chair. The brief commanding burst was over, and his face was apologetic, "Sorry," he said. He seemed genuinely abashed. "Shotgun therapy. Works best, sometimes. You can go, all right; I just wanted to get a fast check on your reactions and drives."

Ish could feel the anger that still ran through him—anger, and more fear than he wanted to admit. "I'm due at a briefing," he said tautly. "You through with me?"

MacKenzie nodded, still embarrassed. "Sorry."

Ish ignored the man's obvious feelings. He stopped at the door to send a parting stroke at the thing that had frightened him. "Big gun in the psychiatry racket, huh? Well, your professional lingo's slipping, Doc. They did put *some* learning in my head at college, you know. Therapy, hell! Testing maybe, but you sure didn't do anything to help me!"

"I don't know," MacKenzie said softly. "I wish I did."

Ish slammed the door behind him. He stood in the corridor, jamming a fresh cigarette in his mouth. He threw a glance at his watch. Twelve hours, twenty-two minutes, and four days to go.

Damn! He was late for the briefing. Odd—that fool psychiatrist hadn't seemed to take up that much of his time.

He shrugged. What difference did it make? As he strode down the hall, he lost his momentary puzzlement under the flood of realization that nothing could stop him now, that the last hurdle was beaten. He was going. He was going, and if there were faint echoes of "Marty!" ringing in the dark background of his mind, they only served to push him faster, as they always had. Nothing but death could stop him now.

I SH LOOKED up bitterly at the Receptionist. "No," he said.

"But *everybody* fills out an application," she protested.

"No. I've *got* a job," he said as he had been saying for the last half hour.

The Receptionist sighed. "If you'll *only* read the literature I've given you, you'll understand that all your previous commitments have been cancelled."

"Look, Honey, I've seen company poop sheets before. Now, let's cut this nonsense. I've got to get back."

"But *nobody* goes back."

"Goddam it, I don't know what kind of place this is, but—" He stopped at the Receptionist's wince, and looked around, his mouth open. The reception desk was solid enough. There were IN and OUT and HOLD baskets on the desk, and the Receptionist seemed to see nothing extraordinary about it. But the room—a big room, he realized—seemed to fade out at the edges, rather than stop at walls. The lighting, too....

"Let's see your back!" he rapped out, his voice high.

She sighed in exasperation. "If you'd read the *literature* ..." She swiveled her chair slowly.

"No wings," he said.

"Of course not!" she snapped. She brushed her hair away from her forehead without his telling her to. "No horns, either."

"Streamlined, huh?" he said bitterly.

"It's a little different for everybody," she said with unexpected gentleness. "It would have to be, wouldn't it?"

"Yeah, I guess so," he admitted slowly. Then he lost his momentary awe, and his posture grew tense again. He glanced down at his wrist. Six hours, forty-seven minutes, and no days to go.

"Who do I see?"

She stared at him, bewildered at the sudden change in his voice. "See?"

"About getting out of here! Come on, come on," he barked, snapping his fingers impatiently. "I haven't got much time."

She smiled sweetly. "Oh, but you do."

"Can it! Who's your Section boss? Get him down here. On the double. Come on!" His face was streaming with perspiration but his voice was firm with the purpose that drove him.

Her lips closed into an angry line, and she jabbed a finger at a desk button. "I'll call the Personnel Manager."

"Thanks," he said sarcastically, and waited impatiently. Odd, the way the Receptionist looked a little like Nan.

THE PERSONNEL Manager wore a perfectly-tailored suit. He strode across the lobby floor toward Ish, his hand outstretched.

"Martin Isherwood!" he exclaimed enthusiastically. "I'm *very* glad to meet you!"

"I'll bet," Ish said dryly, giving the Personnel Manager's hand a short shake. "I've got other ideas. I want out."

"That's all he's been saying for the past forty-five minutes, Sir," the Receptionist said from behind her desk.

The Personnel Manager frowned. "Um. Yes. Well, that's not unprecedented."

"But hardly usual," he added.

Ish found himself liking the man. He had a job to do, and after the preliminary formality of the greeting had been passed, he was ready to buckle down to it. Oh, he—shucks?—the Receptionist wasn't such a bad girl, either. He smiled at her. "Sorry I lost my head," he said.

She smiled back. "It happens."

He took time to give her one more smile and a half-wink, and swung back to the Personnel Manager.

"Now. Let's get this thing straightened out. I've got—" He stopped to look at his watch. "Six hours and a few minutes. They're fueling the beast right now."

"Do you know how much red tape you'd have to cut?"

Ish shook his head. "I don't want to sound nasty, but that's your problem."

The Personnel Manager hesitated. "Look—you feel you've got a job unfinished. Or, anyway, that's the way you'd put it. But, let's face it—that's not really what's galling you. It's not really the job, is it? It's just that you think you've been cheated out of what you devoted your life to."

Ish could feel his jaw muscles bunching. "Don't put words in my mouth!" he snapped. "Just get me back, and we'll split hairs about it when I get around this way again." Suddenly, he found himself pleading. "All I need is a week," he said. "It'll be a rough week—no picnic, no pleasures of the flesh. No smoking, no liquor. I certainly won't be breaking any laws. One week. Get there, putter around for two days, and back again. Then, you can do anything you want to—as long as it doesn't look like the trip's responsible, of course."

The Personnel Manager hesitated. "Suppose—" he began, but Ish interrupted him.

"Look, they need it, down there. They've got to have a target, someplace to go. We're built for it. People have to have—but what am I telling *you* for. If you don't know, who does?"

The Personnel Manager smiled. "I was about to say something."

Ish stopped, abashed. "Sorry."

He waved the apology away with a short movement of his hand. "You've got to understand that what you've been saying isn't a valid claim. If it were, human history would be very different, wouldn't it?"

"Suppose I showed you something, first? Then, you could decide whether you want to stay, after all."

"How long's it going to take?" Ish flushed under the memory of having actually begged for something.

"Not long," the Personnel Manager said. He half-turned and pointed up at the Earth, hanging just beyond the wall of the crater in which they were suddenly standing.

"Earth," the Personnel Manager said.

Somehow, Ish was not astonished. He looked up at the Earth, touched by cloud and sunlight, marked with ocean and continent, crowned with ice. The unblinking stars filled the night.

He looked around him. The Moon was silent—quiet, patient, waiting. Somewhere, a metal glint against the planet above, if it were only large enough to be seen, was the Station, and the ship for which the Moon had waited.

Ish walked a short distance. He was leaving no tracks in the pumice the ages had sown. But it was the way he had thought of it, nevertheless. It was the way the image had slowly built up in his mind, through the years, through the training, through the work. It was what he had aimed the *Navion* at, that day over the Everglades.

"It's not the same," he said.

The Personnel Manager sighed.

"Don't you see," Ish said, "It *can't* be the same. I didn't push the beast up here. There wasn't any

*feel* to it. There wasn't any sound of rockets."

The Personnel Manager sighed again. "There wouldn't be, you know. Taking off from the Station, landing here—vacuum."

Ish shook his head. "There'd still be a sound. Maybe not for anybody else to hear—and, maybe, maybe there *would* be. There'd be people, back on Earth, who'd hear it."

"All right," the Personnel Manager said. His face was grave, but his eyes were shining a little.

"**I**SH! HEY, Ish, wake up, will you!" There was a hand on his shoulder. "Will you get a *load* of this guy!" the voice said to someone else. "An hour to go, and he's sleeping like the dead."

Ish willed his eyes to open. He felt his heart begin to move again, felt the blood sluggishly beginning to surge into his veins. His hands and feet were very cold.

"Come on, Ish," the Crew Chief said.

"All right," he mumbled. "Okay. I'm up." He sat on the edge of his bunk looking down at his hands. They were blue under the fingernails. He sighed, feeling the air moving down into his lungs.

Stiffly, he got to his feet and began to climb into his G suit.

The Moon opened its face to him. From where he lay, strapped into the control seat in the forward bubble, he looked at it emotionlessly, and began to brake for a landing.

He looked for footprints in the crater, though he knew he hadn't left any. Earth was a familiar sight over his right shoulder.

He brought the twin-bubble beast back to the station. They threw spotlights on it, for the TV pickups, and thrust microphones at him. He could see broad grins behind the faceplates of the suits the docking crew wore, and they were pounding his back. The interior of the Station was a babbling of voices, a tumult of congratulations. He looked at it all, dead-faced, his eyes empty.

"It was easy," he said over a world-wide network, and pushed the press representatives out of his way.

**M**acKENZIE was waiting for him in the crew section. Ish flicked his stolid eyes at him, shrugged, and stripped out of his clothes. He pulled a coverall out of a locker and climbed into it, then went over to his bunk and lay down on his side, facing the bulkhead.

"Ish."

It was MacKenzie, bending over him.

Ish grunted.

"It wasn't any good was it? You'd done it all before; you'd been there."

He was past emotions. "Yeah?"

"We couldn't take the chance." MacKenzie was trying desperately to explain. "You were the best there was—but you'd done something to yourself by becoming the best. You shut yourself off from your family. You had no close friends, no women. You had no other interests. You were a rocket pilot—nothing else. You've never read an adult book that wasn't a text; you've never listened to a symphony except by accident. You don't know Rembrandt from Norman Rockwell. Nothing. No ties, no props, nothing to sustain you if something went wrong. *We couldn't take the chance, Ish!*"

"So?"

"There was too much at stake. If we let you go, you might have forgotten to come back. You might have just kept going."

He remembered the time with the *Navion*, and nodded. "I might have."

"I hypnotized you," MacKenzie said. "You were never dead. I don't know what the details of your hallucination were, but the important part came through, all right. You thought you'd been to the Moon before. It took all the adventure out of the actual flight; it was just a workaday trip."

"I said it was easy," Ish said.

"There was no other way to do it! I had to cancel out the thrill that comes from challenging the unknown. You knew what death was like, and you knew what the Moon was like. Can you understand why I had to do it?"

"Yeah. *Now get out before I kill you.*"



He didn't live too long after that. He never entered a rocket again—he died on the Station, and was buried in space, while a grateful world mourned him. I wonder what it was like, in his mind, when he really died. But he spent the days he had, after the trip, just sitting at an observatory port, cursing the traitor stars with his dead and purposeless eyes.

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## TRANSCRIBER'S NOTES:

Obvious typographical errors have been corrected without note.

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