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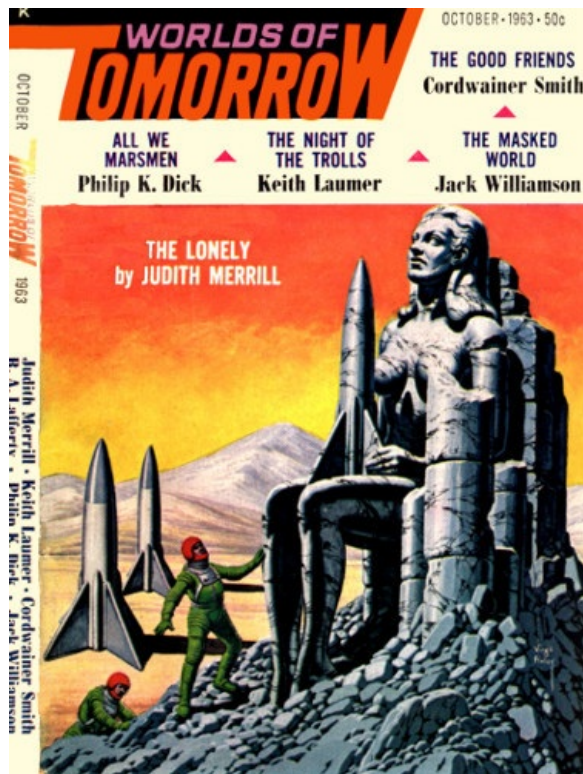
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK TO SAVE EARTH ***



TO SAVE EARTH

BY EDWARD W. LUDWIG

ILLUSTRATED BY VAN DOGEN

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The life of everyone on Earth depended on their sanity ... which they had long ago lost!

For more than six years the silver rocket was like a tomb buried at the Earth's center. It wore the blackness of interstellar space for a shroud, and ten thousand gleaming stars were as the eyes of hungry, waiting worms.

Five of the inhabitants of the rocket moved like zombies, stone-faced and dull-eyed, numb even to their loneliness.

The sixth inhabitant did not move at all. He sat silent and unseeing. The sixth inhabitant was mad.

There had been times when all of them—mad and near-mad—had forgotten that they hurtled through space, that they were men and that they were growing old. Occasionally they had even forgotten that the destiny of mankind might lie in their hands like a fragile flower to be preserved or crushed.

But now came a moment six years one month and five days after their departure from Earth. The sole planet of Sirius loomed green and blue in the ship's magni-screen. The sight of the shining planet was like a heavenly trumpet call, a signal for resurrection.

The inhabitants stirred, rubbed their eyes, and tried to exhume forgotten hopes and memories from the lethargy of their minds....

"What do you think?" asked Lieutenant Washington.

Captain Jeffrey Torkel, gaunt-faced and gray, stiffened his lean body. At this moment all memory had left him, like a wind-tossed balloon leaping out of his skull.

It's happened again, he thought. I've forgotten. Oh God, why must I keep forgetting?

"Tell me what you think, Captain," said a balding, dark-skinned man clad in khakis.

Captain Torkel stared at the blue-green, cloud-mottled image in the screen. Where was he? Certainly not in South Dakota. Certainly not on a field of golden, bristling wheat. No, he had the feeling that much time had passed since those boyhood days on the Dakota farm.

He glanced at the strange man who had spoken to him. The balloon snapped back into his skull. Memory returned.

At least it wasn't gone for a week this time, he thought. Thank you, God.

"You must be thinking *something*," persisted the man who had become Lieutenant Washington.

The captain rubbed his gray stubble of beard. "I guess I'm thinking that we're afraid and bewildered. We're not as full of strength and hope as saviors of the race should be. Sure, what we find here today will mean either life or death for the race. But the concept has been with us for too long. It's already made us half-mad. And the same part of our minds is afraid to hope lest it be disappointed. After all, the planet might be radioactive or uninhabitable, or—"

"But, Lord, Captain! Even with the sub-spatial drive it's taken us six years to get here. If there's a God who answers prayers, it's *got* to be a good planet. Sirius has only one planet. This is the last chance left for the race. And look at it, Captain! The blue places must be water and the green must be land. It's bigger than Earth, but it looks almost like it!"

Captain Torkel nodded. "Whether it's good or bad, we still can't win, really. If it's bad, humanity dies and we stay on the ship for the rest of our lives. If it's good, we'll still be on it for twelve more years—six years back to Earth and another six to return here."

Lieutenant Washington began to shake. "I don't know if I could take twelve more years in space. Twelve years of eating and sleeping and playing chess in the silence and nothing but darkness outside, and trying to find a micro-movie we haven't seen a hundred times—all that, over and over—" He closed his eyes. "I don't think the others could take it either. They'd probably become like Kelly."

Kelly was the mad one.

"We have no other choice, Lieutenant. If the planet's habitable, we have to take the news back."

The lieutenant shuddered. "I—I need a drink," he faltered. "I know. I said I wasn't going to drink today. I'm not either. Not much. I want to be on my feet when we hit that planet. But—excuse me, Captain."

Captain Torkel watched the gaunt officer stride to the aft compartment. He suddenly realized that the lieutenant was bald. The top of his Negroid skull shone like a dark egg. When had *that* happened? Only a short time ago, it seemed, the lieutenant had been a young man with soft thick

hair. *Those six years did it*, thought Captain Torkel, *those six dark, silent, crazy years.*

The lieutenant returned a few seconds later, calmer now, reeking with the stench of laboratory alcohol spilled on his jacket.

Captain Torkel, as always, pretended not to notice the stench.

"Captain," said Lieutenant Washington deeply.

"Yes?"

"Suppose the astrophysicists back on Earth were wrong. They said the sun would blow up in exactly twelve years, two months and fifteen days. How could they get it that close? Suppose this planet *is* habitable, suppose it *could* be a new home for humanity. And suppose we start back home with the news, and then the sun turns into a nova ahead of schedule—say, in twelve years, two months and *three* days, when we're still a week away."

Captain Torkel swallowed hard. "We have to allow a margin for error, of course. But I don't think those predictions will be off by more than a day or two. After all, they've been corroborated in all the broadcasts we've been able to pick up."

He smiled grimly. "So if the planet's habitable, we have to start back to Earth almost at once. We can't allow ourselves more than a day to rest and try to get the madness out of our systems."

"Oh, God," murmured Lieutenant Washington, closing his eyes.

"If we only had our transmitter," Captain Torkel mused, "we could stay here. We wouldn't have to —"

"Damn him," interrupted the lieutenant, opening his eyes and clenching his fists. "*Damn* him!"

"Kelly?"

"Kelly. Why did he do it, Captain? Why did he throw every piece of transmitting equipment overboard?"

"Maybe a part of his mind hated Earth. Maybe unconsciously he didn't want to save humanity. Kelly's crazy. You can't account for the actions of a crazy man."

Lieutenant Washington was shaking again. "And so we can't radio Earth about what we find. If the planet's good, we have to tell Earth the hard way—by traveling through space for six more years. Captain, I—I think I'm going to have to get a dr—"

Footsteps sounded on the deck behind them. Van Gundy, the lean, hawk-nosed jetman, rushed up to them. He was breathing heavily and trembling.

"Captain, Fox stole my harmonica!"

Captain Torkel scowled. For a moment he forgot Van Gundy's name and who the lean man was. Then he remembered.

"Stole your harmonica. Why?"

"He won't tell me. He's a thief, Captain. He's always stealing things. You ought to—"

"Tell him I said for him to give it back to you. Tell him I said that."

"Yes, sir." Van Gundy clasped his trembling hands. "But that isn't all, Captain. Garcia said if I got my harmonica back and kept playing it, he'd kill me."

"Oh, God. Tell Garcia I said he couldn't."

"Yes, sir." Van Gundy turned toward the aft compartment, then spun back, eyes blazing. "I won't let 'em scare me, Captain. If they don't leave me alone. I'll kill *them*."

"The men are like rotting trees," said Captain Torkel a few moments later, "and you can't tell which way they'll fall. Fox steals. Van Gundy is afraid of everything and everybody. Garcia keeps breaking things and threatening violence. Someday he'll break a port, and that'll be *it*. Finis."

Lieutenant Washington said, with a hiccough, "Too bad we didn't insist on having a psychiatrist in the crew. Fox probably thinks he's been cheated out of his youth, and unconsciously he's trying to steal it back. Van Gundy has been knocked around so much that everything in the universe is a source of terror to him. Garcia breaks things."

He laughed sourly, blowing hot alcoholic breath into the captain's face. "And me, I'm a dipso who's no good to himself or anyone. You, Captain ... sometimes I suspect that your memory isn't quite what it use to be."

Captain Torkel scratched his stubbled chin. "Six psycho-specimens trying to save humanity. How did we become so detestable? Are all Earthmen like us?"

"Don't you remember?"

"Remember?"

"Yes. How when the U. N. announced about the blowup every interstellar rocket and spaceman in

the System was commissioned to discover new worlds. Each ship was given a destination and an interstellar ether-radio to send back its findings. Mechanics and technicians still on Earth were put to work building new rockets to carry the race to its future home—if one were found. We and the *Star Queen* were at the bottom of the barrel. The oldest ship; the crew that ordinarily would have been grounded."

Captain Torkel murmured, "I remember. There were fourteen interstellar ships then. Six cracked up smashing through the Einstein Barrier, according to what we picked up on the ether receiver. The others reached their destinations and not one found a habitable world. And newer ships sent out later had no better luck. Now, all the nearest star systems have been reached, and there isn't time for the ships to go on to other systems. By an ugly little prank of Fate, we're Earth's last chance."

He straightened. He pressed the warning buzzer and flicked on the rocket's intercom.

"All hands to their crash-chairs," he intoned.

II

The crewmen appeared in the rear of the control room. Hesitantly, they approached the massive, semicircular control panel with its hundred flashing red and blue lights.

Fox was in the lead.

"Captain," the small-boned, brown-bearded radarman said solemnly, "can we take a look before we belt down?"

"A short one."

The men looked.

Fox seemed ready to kiss the image of the planet. Van Gundy, wide-eyed, trembled before it as if at any instant it might destroy him. Garcia, the swarthy engineer, glowered at it as though threatening to crush it like an eggshell.

"I want Kelly to see this," said Fox. He hurried aft, nervously stroking his beard.

An instant later he returned, leading the former radioman by the hand. Kelly's soft blue eyes stared vacantly out of a pink, cherubic face. He was as plump as a dumpling, and his hair was as red as prairie fire. His short body moved woodenly.

"Come on, Kelly," said Fox. "You got to see this. Nobody's going to stop you from seeing this, by God."

The fire-haired man stood before the magni-screen.

Fox pointed. "See it?"

Kelly stared.

"He can't see it," rumbled Garcia. "He's crazy."

"Not too crazy to see this," Fox retorted.

Kelly's head bent forward. His lip quivered. "Home," he mumbled.

Fox jerked, eyes widening. "Hey, Kelly spoke! Did you hear that? He spoke! First time in two years!"

"Home," Kelly mumbled again.

"No, not home," Fox explained. "It's the only planet of Sirius."

"Hell," said Garcia, "if it'll make him happier, let him think it's Earth."

"No, it's the only planet of—"

"We can't be saying 'the only planet of Sirius' all the time. We got to give it a name."

"Home," mumbled the madman.

"What kind of a name would *that* be?" growled Garcia.

Captain Torkel said, patiently, "Kelly didn't mean that for a name. He was just saying the word."

Fox cried, "Let's name it after Kelly. Kelly's Planet!"

Van Gundy stepped forward. He was trembling. His trembling seemed as much a part of him as sight in his eyes. "No," he said.

"Why not?" snapped Fox.

"Because of what he did. He took the transmitter and—"

"We know all that. He couldn't help it. He's a schizophrenic. That doesn't mean we can't name a world after him, does it?"

Garcia balled his hands into fists. "Fox is right. I say we call it Kelly's Planet. How about it, Captain?"

"It's all right with me," said the captain.

"Then Kelly's Planet it is!" cried Fox.

"Strap down," Captain Torkel said. "This is it. We're going to land."

Then he said the words again in his mind: *This is it. This is the world that will give death or life to humanity, madness or sanity to us.*

The midnight blackness of space dissolved into gentle twilight as the *Star Queen* slid into the atmosphere of Kelly's Planet. The grumble of the jets became audible and then swelled until it was like a rebirth of the thunderous sound of an April takeoff more than six years ago.

Captain Torkel switched on the second layer of bow jets, braced himself in his crash-chair. Despite the effects of the deceleration compensator, his face was swollen and distorted. It was as if the soul was bubbling out of his body.

He realized that he should have commenced deceleration some ninety minutes ago. But he had forgotten.

The image of the planet broadened in the magni-screen. It filled the screen, then seemed to spill out of it. Captain Torkel beheld an expanse of blue which, in a silent explosion, was transformed into the cerulean calm of a sea. The blue was swept away. The brownish gold of mountains stabbed briefly upward, faded into the shadowy green of rushing forest. Then came the glassy green of a meadow.

The *Star Queen* paused, shaking with vibration. Its nose arched upward.

The *Star Queen* landed with an almost imperceptible thump. The atomic engines spluttered, coughed, died. The men unbuckled themselves, tested their limbs, slid off their chairs. They moved to the portholes like frightened old men treading on slippery ice.

They looked out.

They stared for a long moment. "I don't believe it," said Fox at last. "It's a mirage. We're still in space."

"It—it frightens me," stuttered Van Gundy. "There's death out there. The air is poisonous. I feel it."

"We're crazy," Garcia spat. "As crazy as Kelly." His eyes widened. "Or maybe we're dead. Could that be?"

"E—excuse me, Captain," said Lieutenant Washington. "I think I'll go aft for a minute."

Captain Torkel said nothing. He had forgotten where he was. He was nameless and lost, among strangers in a strange place.

But at this moment he somehow did not care. He was content to let his hungry gaze absorb the rainbow beauty beyond the ports.

The meadow was like molten emerald stirring lazily in a slight breeze. The meadow was spotted with flowers as large as a man's head, shaped like teardrops, and shining purple and yellow and blue and crimson in the light from a swollen, blood-red sun.

Some five hundred yards away on the rocket's starboard side rose a towering green forest. In its shadow was a dark jungle of colossal fern and twisted vines and more flowers. Beyond that, far away, snow-cloaked mountains stretched their ponderous bulk into sea-blue sky.

Captain Torkel returned his slow gaze to the interior of the strange place in which he stood. He beheld a group of strange men doing strange things.

A stern-looking man with tight lips and menacing eyes was looking up from a litter of glass flasks and electronic devices. "Air twenty-nine per cent oxygen—a bit higher than on Earth. Sixty-five per cent nitrogen. Rest is a mixture of water vapor, CO₂ and inert gases."

A small-boned man with a brown beard was saying, "Mass point-eight-three. That and the increased oxygen should make us feel like kids again."

A hawk-nosed man with trembling hands and a forehead glistening with perspiration said, "Temperature sixty-four Fahrenheit. No harmful radiation, pathogenic tests negative. Air pressure, eleven-point-three."

He pointed to an odd-looking flower and a tuft of grass in the window of a metal, box-like chamber. "Flora shows the same oxygen-CO₂ cycle as on Earth. Only the flowers here seem edible."

The men looked at one another.

"Captain, is everything all right?" the brown-bearded man asked anxiously.

Captain Torkel sensed that the strange men desired an affirmative answer from him. "Yes," he said.

The brown-bearded man clapped his hands. "And we can go outside! How about it, Captain? Can

we go outside without our suits? Can we go out now—please?"

Click.

Memory returned to Captain Torkel like water crashing out of a broken dam and into a barren valley. He blinked and took a deep breath.

The three men before him became Garcia and Fox and Van Gundy. He saw that Kelly was still strapped in his crash-chair. He did not see Lieutenant Washington, but from the aft compartment came a faint tinkling of glassware.

"Yes," he said, "we'll go outside. But first someone should go alone—just in case. Who'll volunteer?"

"Not me," said Van Gundy. "You can't depend on those tests. There's death out there. The whole human race will die out if it comes here."

"Why not let Kelly go?" asked Fox. "It's his planet."

"Sure," said Garcia. "If he dies, it'd serve him right, after what *he* did."

Captain Torkel thought, *It may be a dangerous planet. The captain ought to go first. He shouldn't send a madman to do a captain's job.*

"Let Kelly go first," he said, hating himself.

Fox helped Kelly out of the crash-chair, pushed him to the airlock.

"Go on, Kelly. This is your planet. You'll be the first to set foot on it."

Kelly did not move.

Fox pulled him to a port. "Look out there, Kelly. Damn it, don't keep looking at your feet. Out there, out the port!"

Fox raised Kelly's head and brushed the red hair back from his eyes.

The madman looked.

"Heaven?" he whispered.

"Not Heaven. Kelly's Planet. Your planet, Kelly."

They pushed Kelly into the airlock. A minute later they saw him stumble onto the green meadows. For eleven more minutes he stood silent and motionless. Then he turned toward the rocket. Through the ports the men saw his lips move.

"Heaven!" yelled Fox. "That's what he said! He said 'Heaven!'"

III

Captain Torkel and Fox and Garcia and Van Gundy stood beside Kelly. Lieutenant Washington, too drunk to stand, sprawled in the grass.

They let the cool, clean air wash out their lungs like sweet perfume. They took off their shoes. They dug their toes into the soft, silky grass. They sniffed the poignant, spicy smell of the brilliant flowers.

Van Gundy, despite his trembling, played *Turkey in the Straw* on his harmonica. Captain Torkel did a dance like that of a Russian Cossack. Lieutenant Washington, squatting like a dark Buddha and with his torso swaying drunkenly, clapped his hands in time with the dance. Fox hummed the tune, and even Kelly nodded his head rhythmically. Only Garcia stood motionless.

"It's a good planet!" exclaimed Fox at last.

Van Gundy's trembling hand whacked spit out of his harmonica. His eyes rolled fearfully toward the forest. "We don't know for sure yet."

"I think Fox is right," said Captain Torkel. "It *is* a good planet. Enjoy it, men. Breathe deeply. Smell those flowers. Feel the grass. Because very soon we've got to start Earthward. We've got to store our memories full of this beauty so it'll last for twelve years."

"Oh, God," sighed Fox. "Twelve years."

Garcia stepped forward, swelling his chest. Strangely, it seemed that all the hatred had been drained out of him. "I was wrong," he said. "We're not crazy and we're not dead. This planet is good. It's so good that I'd like to stay here as long as I live."

"What?" asked Captain Torkel, blinking.

"I said I'd like to stay here as long as I live."

The words echoed in the still air. They were like evil seeds, falling into fertile minds and sprouting.

"And not go back to Earth?" asked Fox, stroking his beard.

"And not go back to Earth."

Captain Torkel stiffened. "Get those thoughts out of your head, Garcia. There are two billion people back on Earth. They'll die unless we tell them about this planet. We've got wives, friends —"

"Not me," said Garcia sternly. "No wife and no friends."

Fox shrilled, "The only reason I volunteered for this trip was to get away from my wife and that lousy New York apartment. You're not married, are you, Captain?"

"N—no."

"Me neither," hiccupped Lieutenant Washington. "Not many girls'll marry spacemen."

"Kelly's married, though," mused Fox. "How about it, Kelly?"

"Heaven," mumbled Kelly.

Fox laughed. "Kelly means he wants to stay here."

Captain Torkel wiped perspiration from his upper lip with the back of his hand. "We got to get these thoughts out of our minds. We're talking like murderers. Garcia, think of the people you used to know. Think of their faces. Imagine how it would be for them to die."

Garcia looked up into the sky, his features softening. "I can't remember any faces, Captain. I can remember how the gulls used to fly over the coast at Monterey and how the fishing boats used to bounce over the waves. That's all. The gulls and the boats will be destroyed anyway. We can't save those."

Captain Torkel turned to Fox. "*You* remember faces, don't you, Fox?"

The little man shrugged. "They're like those crowd scenes we used to see in movies—hundreds and thousands of faces all huddled together. You really can't remember a single one. They're like shadows."

"But you remember your wife's face."

"I don't want to remember that. I might vomit. And I don't want to remember that cheesy New York apartment either."

In desperation the captain turned to Van Gundy. "And you?"

"I—I remember the face of an old woman who sold flowers on O'Farrell Street in Frisco. Stood there all year long, she did. In winter, summer, spring, fall. I used to buy gardenias from her when I had a date."

"Do you want her to die?"

"She was so old that she's probably dead by this time anyway. But listen, Captain, I—I'm not sure yet that this planet—"

Captain Torkel whirled frantically to Lieutenant Washington, kicked him lightly in the side. The lieutenant, apparently somewhat sobered by the cool air, rose shakily.

"Lieutenant, *you* remember the people of Earth. Can't you still see their faces in your mind?"

"The only face I remember," drawled Lieutenant Washington, "is my Mom's. A good face, with a lot of work in it, but thin around the lips and wrinkled around the eyes. It was a cold face, though. Mom was born in Louisiana and then moved up to Maine as a girl. Her bones weren't the kind to take those New England winters. So Mom slept, ate, lived and died cold. Been dead now for eight years, and I think she's still cold, even in her grave. I don't believe Mom'd mind one bit if the Earth burns up. She'd be warm then. I think she'd like it."

"That's not the point," said Captain Torkel angrily. "The point is—"

Fox broke in: "What do *you* remember, Captain?"

Captain Torkel swallowed hard. "Me? Why, I remember, I—" His mouth remaining open, he scratched the back of his neck. His memories suddenly vanished like puffs of smoke.

"Just like the rest of us!" burst Garcia, triumphantly.

"You know, Captain," said Fox, "if we didn't go back, the race wouldn't have to roast. People would still escape in their emergency rockets."

"But they wouldn't know where to go. They'd float around a few years, and then those flimsy mass-production ships would break up. Good Lord, men, we've got to act like human beings!"

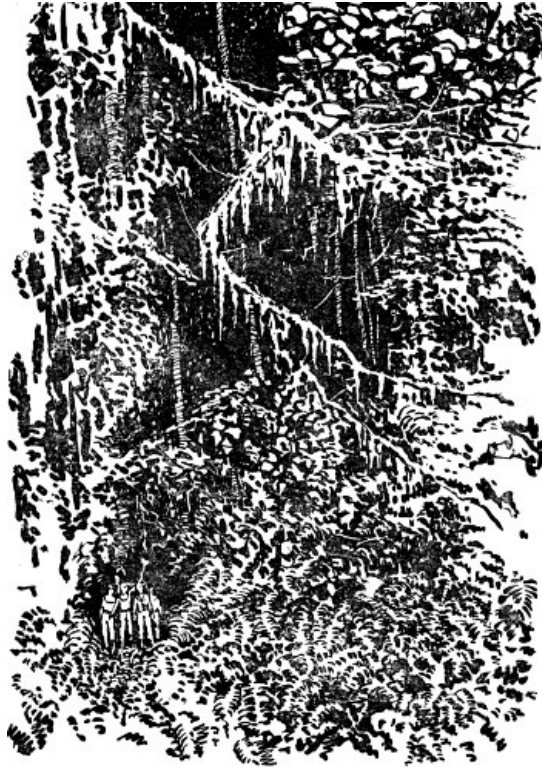
Garcia stepped forward. "Why don't we decide this later? Can't we relax for a few hours, Captain?"

Lieutenant Washington nodded agreement. "He's right. You said yourself, Captain, that if the planet was good we'd spend a day or so getting the madness out of our systems."

"All right," murmured Captain Torkel, shoulders drooping. "We'll look around some more."

They walked toward the forest. Fox led Kelly by the hand. Lieutenant Washington advanced under his own power.

They saw trees five hundred feet high with brown trunks like twisted, lumpy crullers and leaves like elephant ears of green velvet. From smaller trees hung fruit that shimmered like golden snow as light touched it. Here and there were clusters of scarlet berries as large as apples, and chocolate-brown balls the size of coconuts.



"Don't touch 'em," said Van Gundy, trembling. "I'll bet they're deadly poison."

"They look delicious," said Captain Torkel, stuffing three specimens in his knapsack, "but we'll test them first."

Van Gundy screamed.

The others whirled to look at him.

Van Gundy, speechless, pointed with a trembling forefinger.

A brown, smiling face broke out of the fern foliage. Then another appeared, and another and another.

A score or more of brown-skinned humanoids walked up to them.

IV

The Sirians were dressed in loin cloths as bright and multi-colored as the tear-shaped meadow flowers. Their resemblance to Earthmen made Captain Torkel gasp.

He could discern no appreciable difference save for the perfect roundness of their dark eyes and a slight elongation of their ears. Their flesh was golden tan.

"Well, hello!" said Captain Torkel.

The Sirians moved toward him, with such grace that they seemed not men striding through the singing forest, but part of the living trees and ferns and flowers.

"Hello," echoed the foremost Sirian, smiling. He was a young man, about thirty by Earth standards, with long black hair and wide, muscular shoulders. His handsome face reminded Captain Torkel of romantic Latin heroes in the micro-movies aboard the *Star Queen*.

Captain Torkel pointed to the sky. "We come from up there, from another world."

The Sirian's eyes were like black lights spearing into the captain's skull. "Yes, you come from star. You are Star People. Where is your star?"

"It's a long way—"

"Hey, he spoke in English!" cried Fox. "What the hell!"

"I—I'm going back to the rocket," stammered Van Gundy, shaking.

"Lord, I need a drink," murmured Lieutenant Washington, stepping back with Van Gundy.

"Wait, all of you," Captain Torkel commanded them. To the Sirian he said, "We know that Earthmen haven't been here before. How do you speak our language?"

The young man's smile broadened. "Your mind is a fire sending out warmth to us. Within the warmth I see sounds you use to make words."

"Telepathy," said Captain Torkel.

"Yes," the Sirian agreed. "And I see that your people are troubled. They fear a strange thing—a coming of heat and light. Your world is soon to be destroyed, yes?"

Suddenly the captain was afraid. The fear came to him in an invisible cloud, settling over him, seeping into his flesh and chilling his bones. He tried to believe that it was the senseless fear of a child whose imagination has peopled the dark corners of his room with nameless monsters. He tried to crush the fear, but it clung to him in fog-cold intensity.

The Sirian nodded understandingly. "You must not worry now about the coming of the great heat. You are tired. You must come with us to our village. You must see how we live."

The captain's legs were weak. He wanted to flee; he wanted to escape from the Sirian's omnipresent smile and his round-eyed piercing gaze.

Van Gundy whispered to him, very softly, "Did you bring weapons, Captain? Should we go without weapons?"

"I—I forgot about weapons," he whispered back, his face reddening.

Fox said anxiously, "How about it, Captain? Do we go with them?"

"I don't want to go," said Van Gundy, trembling. "Don't make me go, Captain."

"I'll be damned if I'll go," muttered Garcia. "I'm going back to the rocket."

Captain Torkel nodded. "You two can go back to the rocket."

Fox leaned forward. "The rest of us can go, can't we?"

Captain Torkel frowned at Fox and Lieutenant Washington and Kelly. The fear was still in him, but he said softly, "All right, we'll go."

Garcia and Van Gundy ran back toward the *Star Queen*, white-faced, shoulders hunched. Captain Torkel and Fox and Kelly and Lieutenant Washington, led by the young Sirian, stumbled down a wide forest trail. Other Sirians darted on either side of them and behind them, half hidden by the thick foliage. They were like happy, dancing nymphs. Every second or two the forest echoed their clear, melodious laughter.

"We forgot to introduce ourselves," Captain Torkel said to the Sirian. "My name is Torkel, Captain Jeffrey Torkel."

"My name is Taaleeb," replied the Sirian.

"A pretty name. You are the leader of your people?"

The Sirian's smile gave way to uncertainty. "Leader—that is a strange thought in your mind. We have no leaders."

"But you *must* have leaders."

"Why?" asked the Sirian, his eyes wide. "We have no star-boat. We are not going anyplace."

The captain cleared his throat. "We have leaders not only in our rockets. We have them to help us make our laws, to supervise our work, to guide us in the decisions of our living."

The Sirian laughed like a happy child. "Laws, work—more strange thoughts. We do not have laws. We do not have work."

A scowl creased Captain Torkel's forehead. "But you *must* do work of some kind. What do you do all the time?"

"We pick fruit from the trees and make love and sing and sleep and lie in the forest and make up poems. Is there anything else to do?"

"But when you build shelters or make clothes—*that* is work."

Taaleeb laughed again. "No, no. Building a shelter or making clothes is just building a shelter or making clothes."

They came to the village. It lay in circle of domes about eight feet high that reflected the same shining colors as the meadow flowers. Whether they were wooden, metallic or vegetable Captain Torkel could not tell.

"This is where we live," said Taaleeb proudly.

Captain Torkel nodded.

Then he saw the women coming toward them.

He felt the hair rise on the nape of his neck. For an instant he thought he was going to fall backward. Somehow he caught himself and managed to remain erect.

The women stood in a line in the center of the clearing as if gathered to meet the Earthmen. Like the men, they were clad only in loin-cloths. They were bronzed, sultry young goddesses.



The captain's gaze traveled over the nearest, a girl of perhaps twenty. His gaze began with her midnight hair that cascaded to firm, round breasts in a shower of black silk. It turned to her piquant, up-turned nose and dimpled cheeks and pink, sensual mouth. It fell to the slim, full body and the sweep of long, tanned thigh.

The girl smiled at him. Her eyes were like wells of interstellar space silvered with sparkling stars. He sat down on his haunches, too weak to stand. He'd almost forgotten that women of flesh and blood existed. He'd almost begun to believe that women were memories hidden in dark corners of his mind or flickering images striding across a micro-movie screen.

"We have presents for you," the young Sirian said, smiling down at him.

Captain Torkel forced his eyes away from the girl. He saw that older women and children were standing beside him, smiling, their arms filled with strange containers.

"Wine for the Star People," said a white-haired woman. She seized a golden flagon and filled golden cups held by children.

"Food for the Star People," said another.

More smiling women and children appeared carrying greenish, transparent bowls filled with slices of a yellow, porous substance.

Taaleeb chuckled at Captain Torkel's hesitancy. "It is good food," he said. "Everything is good. There is no end to food and no end to wine. There is plenty for all."

Lieutenant Washington and Fox and Kelly squatted beside Captain Torkel, accepting the strange bowls and the golden flagons.

Fox whispered, "Captain, shall we let Kelly test the food first? It *could* be poisonous."

"Let Kelly test it first," murmured Captain Torkel, hating himself again.

Fox stuffed a slice of the yellow food into Kelly's mouth. The fire-haired man gulped and blinked and grinned like a summer sunrise.

"Heaven," he mumbled.

Suddenly Captain Torkel froze. "Wait. Can't you see what these people are trying to do? They can

read our minds. They know that we'll probably bring millions and millions of people to their planet, that we'll probably overrun their civilization. They don't want us to go back to Earth. They want us to stay here. They're just pretending—"

He stopped as he saw the bronzed form of Taaleeb towering above him.

"You are wrong," said the Sirian, and it seemed that his smile faded ever so slightly, and a muscle in his cheek twitched almost imperceptibly. "Your thoughts are not good. We will welcome the people of your star—those who survive the long journey. We will be sorry to see you leave so soon. You leave in one day, yes? Then we will try to make your visit pleasant. Now, you must eat and drink. Be gay, my good friends."

Captain Torkel grunted. Reluctantly, he tasted the yellow food. It was delicious as a golden-brown fried chicken on Earth. His mood lightened.

He saw that it wouldn't be necessary to test the wine on Kelly. Lieutenant Washington had already emptied his flagon. It was now being refilled.

"Wine, Captain," said the smiling Sirian. "You must try our wine."

Captain Torkel cautiously raised the shining flagon to his lips. He sipped. It was more than wine. It was a sparkling, bubbling nectar of the gods. His throat and stomach glowed under its stimulating warmth. An almost miraculous sense of peace and well-being flooded through his body. It was as if he had become a god.

"More?" asked Taaleeb.

"Well—just a little."

Captain Torkel drank again. To Lieutenant Washington, he said, "I guess I was wrong. The Sirians are fine people. They really do like us."

The lieutenant drained his golden flagon. "I'm sure of it."

"Me, too," said Fox, pouring more of the sparkling liquid into Kelly's mouth. "I'd like to stay here always."

"Heaven," gurgled Kelly.

"You like the wine?" asked the smiling Sirian.

"Yes!"

"You relish our food?"

"Of course!"

"You are pleased with the daughters of our village?"

Captain Torkel shook with desire. "Quite pleased. They are beautiful."

"Each of you would like one of our daughters to stay with you during your visit here?"

Captain Torkel gulped. There was a movement among the women as of wind stirring through tall grass. The tall, lissome bodies stepped closer to the Earthmen.

"I, er—"

"I think we would," said Fox, nodding eagerly.

"Then each of you may pick a companion," said Taaleeb. "Perhaps you would like to select two for your friends who did not come to our village."

Captain Torkel rose, swallowing hard. He bowed shakily to the girl nearest him. "Would you—"

The girl smiled and stepped to his side.

Lieutenant Washington wiped perspiration from his bald head. He pointed. "I'll take you," he said thickly. "And you two for Garcia and Van Gundy."

"Garcia and Van Gundy may not want companions," said Captain Torkel.

"Don't be silly."

Eyes shining, Fox selected a tall, lean-faced girl. Then he pulled Kelly forward. "Kelly, pick yourself out a companion."

Kelly belched.

"Pick out one of the girls, you idiot. Which one do you want?"

Kelly stared glassily at the waiting, watching figures.

"All."

"No, Kelly, you can't have them all. Just one. Pick out one. No, I'll pick one out for you." Fox nodded at one of the girls. She laughed and came to Kelly.

Captain Torkel downed the rest of his wine. "Now we'll return to the rocket with our companions."

Taaleeb cocked his head, widening his omnipresent smile. "But your companions must wash and scent themselves and select the proper clothing. They must make themselves ready. You will return here tonight as the sun falls into the forest."

"Oh," said Captain Torkel, slumping. Then he shrugged. "We'll see you tonight then."

His gaze turned to Fox. His mouth tightened.

"Fox," he said sternly.

"Hummm?"

"Put it back."

Fox's brows lifted innocently.

"Put back the cup. Take it out of your pocket."

Pouting like a disappointed child, Fox placed the stolen cup on the ground.

"The bowl, too."

Fox's lips formed a silent curse. He put down the bowl that he'd hidden under his armpit.

Taaleeb stepped forward. "No, this must not be. Your friend must keep the cup and the bowl. Keep, please." He placed the objects in Fox's hands. "There are our gifts to our friends." His eyes twinkled slyly.

"I say just one more thing," he went on, his suggestive gaze wandering over the faces of the Earthmen. "It is such a pity that you think of leaving us. If you would stay with us always, you would be not only as friends to us, but also as gods. You would, if you wished, have a different companion every night. Your stomachs would have all the wine and food they could hold. We would build you a most big and most pretty house. Your friend—" he nodded at Fox—"your friend could take whatever his fingers desired. Your other friend—your thoughts call him Garcia—could break whatever he wanted. Your other friend, whose name I see as Van Gundy, would never have to be afraid again. Will you tell these promises to your Garcia and your Van Gundy?"

"We'll tell them," said Fox, quickly.

V

They waved good-by and started down the forest trail.

They began to sing the first song that popped into their heads:

Glory, glory, Hallelujah,
Glory, glory, Hallelujah,
Glory, glory, Hallelujah,
His truth is marching on.

The glowing effect of the wine remained with them. Many times they paused to nibble at the forest fruit and to throw themselves onto the soft cushions of fern.

"It's a wonderful planet," declared Captain Torkel.

"Best in the universe," said Fox.

"All," mumbled Kelly.

"And it's a long way home," said Lieutenant Washington suggestively, with a hiccough.

"A long, long way," commented Fox.

The lieutenant grumbled, "What did the people of Earth ever do for us?"

"Not a darned thing," said Fox. "Besides, I bet the sun has already exploded. That's what I bet."

"That Sirian sounded like he meant what he said, didn't he?"

"Sure he meant it. We'd be like gods."

"Captain," said Lieutenant Washington. "There's no use arguing any more. I'm going to stay here. To hell with Homo Sapiens!"

"To hell with Homo Sapiens!" repeated Fox.

The wine was still like hypnotic laughter in Captain Torkel's skull. "I—I don't know. It'd be nice to stay—"

They came to an object lying in the soft green grass, not far from the rocket.

"Hey, here's Van Gundy!" yelled Fox. "Van Gundy drank too much wine. Van Gundy's drunk!" He laughed and coughed and swallowed and then held his stomach and laughed again.

Lieutenant Washington began to sing:

What shall we do with a drunken spaceman,
What shall we do with—

"Shut up," said Captain Torkel, frowning. "Van Gundy wasn't with us. He didn't drink any wine."

They stood over Van Gundy. The singing stopped and the laughter stopped, and time, too, seemed to stop.

An ivory-handled knife was buried hilt-deep in Van Gundy's throat.

They carried the dead man to the shadow beneath the starboard side of the *Star Queen*. Each was a capped jug of solemn silence.

Captain Torkel withdrew the knife. "Van Gundy's," he muttered. "Van Gundy was killed with his own knife."

He knelt and wiped his blood-smeared hands on the grass. Then he saw Garcia squatting on the deck in the rocket's open airlock. A fan-nosed flame pistol dangled from the engineer's loose hand.

Captain Torkel walked up to him.

"Give me the pistol, Garcia."

Garcia didn't answer. His eyes were black pin-points in his hard, tight-lipped face. He raised the gun, leveled the barrel at the captain's chest.

"Give me the pistol. That's an order."

Garcia's face was a dark cloud of hatred and savagery.

"Garcia! I'm your captain! Give me the gun!"

The animal savagery faded from Garcia's face. He lowered the pistol and extended it by the barrel.

Captain Torkel moved forward and seized it. Then he puffed out his cheeks, blew breath from them, wiped sweat from his forehead.

Fox shouted, "The ports, Captain! Look at 'em! Look at the ports!"

The heavy, transparalite portholes of the *Star Queen* were ruthlessly pitted and chipped. Little pools of broken, shiny plastic lay on the grass beneath them. It was as if each port had been struck a hundred times with an axe.

Captain Torkel and Lieutenant Washington and Fox closed in on Garcia while Kelly stood smiling into the planet's sun.

"Did you do it, Garcia?" asked the captain. "Did you kill Van Gundy?"

Garcia still squatted on his haunches, dazed and staring. "I don't know."

"Did you try to smash the ports? Did Van Gundy try to stop you? Is that why you killed him?"

Garcia shook his head, bewildered.

"Why did you get the pistol?"

"I don't know."

"Did you and Van Gundy fight?"

No answer.

"Don't you remember anything?"

"I remember—" The engineer stopped, trembling.

"Yes, what do you remember?"

"I—I remember we decided not to go to the village, me and Van Gundy. We started back to the rocket. Then—then I remember you saying for me to give you the gun."

Fox said, "He's crazy, almost like Kelly. Whatever happened has made him almost crazy."

"Try to remember, Garcia. We got to know what happened."

"I can't remember."

"Retrograde amnesia," said Lieutenant Washington.

Captain Torkel finally voiced the thought that had taunted him ever since the discovery of Van Gundy. "Garcia, were the Sirians here? Did *they* kill Van Gundy?"

Garcia began to cry....

They buried Van Gundy in the rich moist soil beneath the sea-blue sky and the blood-red sun. They made a cross from the gnarled limbs of forest trees and draped it with blue and yellow meadow flowers. In its center they hung his harmonica and his jetman's medallion with its silver-starred reproduction of the Big Dipper.

Captain Torkel spoke into the silence, and over the cool meadow flowed the words, "... Yea,

though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...."

They put away the shovel. They gave Garcia a sedative and tucked him into his bunk. They sat Kelly down in the grass and handed him a red flower to play with.

Then Captain Torkel and Lieutenant Washington and Fox stood gazing into each other's eyes.

"Say what you're thinking, Captain," said Lieutenant Washington.

Captain Torkel sighed. "All right. It adds up. The Sirians can read our minds. They know we want to bring our race here. They'll do most anything to stop us. They attacked the rocket, tried to break the ports. Garcia and Van Gundy tried to stop them. Van Gundy got killed, and Garcia scared them away with the pistol."

Lieutenant Washington squinted dubiously at the captain. "I can't believe that. Why would they be so nice to us in the village?"

"To keep us there as long as possible. To keep us away from the rocket."

"They could have killed us in the village."

"Maybe they really don't want to kill us—unless they have to. Maybe they'd rather persuade us not to return to Earth."

Fox grumbled, "You say maybe they don't like to kill. Then why would they kill Van Gundy?"

"Van Gundy was killed with his own knife. That looks like self-defense."

Lieutenant Washington cleared his throat. "There's just one thing wrong with your ideas. You say the Sirians are trying to bribe us into staying here, trying to win us over by kindness. Now you say they tried to smash the ports. If the Sirians are hostile in any way, they wouldn't combine those two conflicting methods."

Captain Torkel was silent for a moment. "The Sirians are an alien race. Leadership seems to be an unknown concept to them, even though Taaleeb unconsciously assumed a kind of leadership this afternoon. The point is that the race isn't used to carrying out unified plans of procedure. Taaleeb might have used *his* method in the village, and another group might have hit upon the plan of destroying the rocket."

Lieutenant Washington shook his head. "You're wrong, Captain. The Sirians are good, innocent, child-like. Here's what happened: Garcia liked to break things. He went wild and started to break the ports. Van Gundy tried to stop him and got himself killed. The shock gave Garcia amnesia."

Fox tugged at his beard. "I bet you're right, Lieutenant, I bet that's it." Eagerness rose in his tone. "How about tonight? Are we still going to see our companions?"

Captain Torkel spat. "You'd go to the village with Van Gundy's grave-dirt still on your hands?"

"We've been in a grave for six years. Is there any difference?"

Captain Torkel ignored the question. "We *can't* forget the people of Earth!" he said suddenly. "We've got to start home now. Can't you see what the Sirians are trying to do? They'll get us to stay here tonight, then—"

Lieutenant Washington snapped, "I told you I made up my mind, Captain. You want to give us six—no, twelve more years of darkness and loneliness and frustration. We won't take it. We'd be as mad as Kelly."

"Right!" Fox slapped his fist into his open palm. "We've got no other choice. We *got* to stay here!"

Captain Torkel's mouth became a hard, gray line. He stepped back, spread his legs apart, withdrew his flame-pistol. "Get in the rocket!" he burst. "That's an order!"

Lieutenant Washington laughed contemptuously.

The captain repeated, "Get in the rocket! I'm your captain. So help me, I'll—"

"You'll do nothing," spat the rock-faced lieutenant. "Can you astrogate a rocket, Captain? Can you find your way back to Earth alone? Can you keep those engines going without Garcia or dodge those meteors without Fox? Go ahead and kill us. You might as well kill yourself, too. How about it, Fox?"

"Right," said Fox.

"And you, Kelly?"

"All," murmured Kelly.

"This is mutiny!" screamed Captain Torkel. "You can't—"

"We already have. Now get the hell away from here, Captain."

Despair fell upon Captain Torkel. His head sagged. The flame-pistol slipped from his fingers....

The sun settled behind the forest horizon, its pale pink rays filtering through the branches of trees and angling onto the cool meadow. The glare was reflected by the silver rocket and by the cross above Van Gundy's grave and by the small harmonica and the jetman's medallion.

Captain Torkel stood alone before the grave. Laughter drifted faintly from within the rocket. It was a lonely sound to Captain Torkel. *You're really alone now*, he thought. *Apart from Earth, and now apart from the men. You and Van Gundy.*

To hell with it, he thought bitterly. Why not join the men? Why not bathe and shave and smell of lotion and put on a clean white dress uniform? Why not forget about an insignificant planet fifty trillion miles away?

He pivoted toward the rocket, toward the laughter and the happy, getting-ready sounds. Then a small gust of wind sent Van Gundy's medallion tinkling against the grave-cross.

He paused. Through his mind passed a swirling vision of the people of Earth: the silent children too frightened to play in the sunlight, the white-faced women scanning the callous sky, the grim-lipped priests chanting ceaseless prayers. Two billion souls wrapped in a shroud of fear, counting off the swift seconds that carried them closer and closer to oblivion.

You can't force the men to go with you, he told himself. You can't make them believe that the Sirians are dangerous. You've got to make them *want* to return to Earth. And once they get to the village, they're lost. There's so little time....

He rubbed his chin. He was sure the Sirians had killed Van Gundy. If only Garcia could remember —

Suddenly he straightened.

Perhaps it was a blessing that Garcia did *not* remember!

Out of desperation that was like a prayer, a plan arose in his brain. It expanded and crystallized, then faded as memory slipped away like a rock under rising water. For a few moments he was a boy on a Dakota wheat farm, staring down at a strange grave.

Then the water receded; the rock remained. He was again Captain Torkel and the plan lay like an opened flower in his thoughts.

Please, God, don't let me forget now. Let me keep my memory for a while longer, just a little while longer.

His hand tight about his pistol, he strode across the meadow and plunged into the singing forest.

Rays from the sinking sun penetrated the foliage at intervals, creating islands of rainbow brilliance in the semi-darkness. Leaves fluttered above him. An orange-colored bird darted upward, releasing a cackle that was like shrill, old-woman laughter.

He moved slowly, hesitating, listening.

Soon he heard the low voices of Sirians. He stepped off the forest path, concealing himself in foliage. He tried to clear his mind so that the natives would not receive a telepathic warning.

The Sirians came nearer.

Captain Torkel counted: one, two, three, four, five. The first, he saw, was Taaleeb.

Perfect, he thought. *Thank you, God.*

He stepped out of the foliage.

Taaleeb's features broke into a smile. "Good evening, our friend from Earth-Star. We come to escort you back to our—"

The smile died. Alarm flooded his face.

Captain Torkel raised the pistol. "That won't be necessary. There's been a change in plan."

The Sirian's dark gaze speared into his skull. "Yes, I see," he murmured....

A few minutes later Captain Torkel returned to the meadow, the five scowling Sirians herded before him. Each carried an uprooted grapevine.

"You know what to do?" he asked, brandishing the pistol.

"Your mind has told us," said Taaleeb sullenly.

"I don't like to kill—no more than your people wanted to kill Van Gundy. But, like you, I will if I have to."

It seemed strange to Captain Torkel to see a snarl on Taaleeb's handsome features.

"You know everything," the Sirian muttered. "Your mind has guessed how we think and what we have done. Yet you are a fool. You could have had all I promised you—wine, food, happy nights!"

"But the others—the ones who stoned the rocket—would they have let you keep that promise?"

Taaleeb digested the question for a moment. "Perhaps not. And perhaps those others were wiser than Taaleeb. I see now that we should have killed you. I am sorry we did not—but perhaps even now it is not too late." His eyes were like dark, hot fires.

They walked across the meadow. The darkness was deepening, crawling like a hand over Van Gundy's grave.

"The pistol will be in my pocket," Captain Torkel cautioned his captives, "but it will be ready."

The Sirians nodded.

"And one more thing. *Smile.*"

The Sirians smiled.

They reached the *Star Queen* just as Lieutenant Washington and Fox and Kelly were stepping out of the airlock. Garcia stood behind them, sleepy-eyed, yawning off the effects of his sedative. The men stared first at the Sirians, then at Captain Torkel.

Lieutenant Washington said, threateningly, "Get out of here, Captain. We've made our decision."

"No," said Captain Torkel. "I'm going to join you. I'm going to the village, too."

"Hey!" exclaimed Fox. "He's going with us. Atta boy, Captain!"

"*Why?*" asked the stern-faced lieutenant.

"Because we won't have to return to Earth—not even if we wanted to. The Sirians are going in our place."

Garcia frowned. "Are you crazy, Captain?"

"No, I was just wrong about the Sirians, Garcia. They're good people, just like the lieutenant said. They like us. They want to help our people—and they're going to take the *Star Queen* back to Earth."

"That's impossible," spat Lieutenant Washington. "They're simple natives. They're ignorant. They couldn't astrogate that ship."

Of course not, thought the captain. *No more than we could sprout wings and fly back to Earth.*

He fought to keep his tone calm, convincing. "Why can't they? They're telepaths. They've gotten all our knowledge from our minds. They can be just as good in space as we are—maybe better. And they'll save humanity. Right. Taaleeb?"

"Right," said Taaleeb, smiling.

"Wonderful!" said Fox, clapping his hands. "Let's go to the village."

"But they haven't the intelligence," protested Lieutenant Washington. "Captain, I think you're—"

"Look at the way they've learned to talk our language. Doesn't that indicate an extremely high intelligence?"

"That's right," agreed Fox. "It does, Lieutenant. Let's go, Captain. Ready?"

Garcia edged forward, blinking the drowsiness from his eyes. "How about Van Gundy, Captain? Who killed Van Gundy?"

Captain Torkel started to speak. The lie stuck in his throat. He telepathed, *You tell him, Taaleeb. You tell him the lie.*

Taaleeb said, "You killed him, friend Garcia. We have looked into your mind. We see what happened. You began to break the portholes. Friend Van Gundy tried to stop you. He had knife, you took knife. You killed him. You took the flame-weapon because you were afraid of what friend captain might do."

Garcia groaned. "God. Is that right, Captain? Is that what happened? I—I can't remember."

"I'm afraid so," sighed the captain. To himself, he said, *And I pray you never remember.*

Then he saw Taaleeb glancing anxiously toward the forest. How strong was the Sirian telepathic sense? Strong enough to send to the village for help?

His fingers were hot and moist on the pistol in his pocket. He struggled to put down the rising anxiety that threatened to overwhelm him.

"Taaleeb," he said, "better have your men take the vines aboard."

"Yes," said Taaleeb, smiling. The Sirians carried the vines to the airlock, laid them within.

"What's the idea of that?" asked Lieutenant Washington.

"It was their idea," the captain lied. "Those vines will grow rapidly in our hydroponics tanks. They'll produce something like a bottle of wine for each of them once a month. That'll be something to make their trip a little more pleasant. And *that* shows they're intelligent, doesn't it?"

He motioned toward the rocket. "The Sirians want to leave for Earth now, men. Get whatever gear you want out of the ship."

"They're leaving *now*?" asked Fox.

"Of course. Tell them why, Taaleeb."

The Sirian said, "Because, as your friend captain says, we must allow a margin for error. Your sun may explode a day or two or three before the predicted time. Even if it does not, we wish to see your world as much as possible before its death."

Fox and Garcia started to enter the airlock.

"Wait," said Lieutenant Washington. "I don't think I like this."

Captain Torkel's heart pounded. *This may be it*, he thought. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean, these Sirians will be heroes to humanity, won't they?"

"I suppose so."

"And they'll return here with our race, or what's left of it, in twelve years?"

"Yes, God willing."

"Then what will our people think of *us*? What will they *do* to us?"

This is it, the captain told himself. He could feel blood pulsing through his temples like drumbeats. "They won't like us for what we're doing. That's a cinch. But there's no other solution. You wouldn't want the Sirians *not* to go, would you?"

The lieutenant slowly shook his head. "No. Of course not."

"No," chorused Fox and Garcia weakly.

The lieutenant snapped, almost accusingly, "Then we'd be exiles from our own people. They'd call us traitors."

"Who cares?" said Fox.

"I care," grumbled the lieutenant.

Captain Torkel turned to Garcia. "How do you feel about this? Would you care?"

Garcia wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "I wouldn't care about *that*. To hell with it. But —"

"Yes?"

"I'm not sure if I like the idea of someone else doing my job for me. I'm a good engineer. I'm forty years old, and no one's ever had to do my job for me."

The captain pursed his lips. "Well, I suppose you two could relieve two of the Sirians and go to Earth while Fox and Kelly and I stay here."

Lieutenant Washington snorted, "You've changed, Captain. You used to be so damned anxious to get back to Earth. What's happened to you?"

The captain pretended to be in deep thought. "I suppose it's because it was hard for me to make that decision not to go back to Earth. When I did make it, it was a solid decision, one not easily changed. Besides, you said yourself that we couldn't take another six or twelve years in space, that we'd go mad."

"But it's different now. We've gotten some of the madness out of us. I haven't had a drink since this afternoon. Garcia's got rid of some of his hatred. Maybe killing Van Gundy was like a kind of shock treatment to him. And Fox—"

"He's right," Fox interrupted him. "I'm going to stay here. Don't try to talk me out of that. But I feel *cleaner* inside. I guess when you know that nobody'll stop you from stealing, you lose desire."

"Even Kelly's better," said the lieutenant. "Look at the way he's been talking."

Captain Torkel nodded. "Yes, and my memory's been better these past few hours. You know, men, I *do* keep thinking of what Taaleeb said. He said he wanted to see as much as possible of our world before its death. If those predictions should turn out right, we'd have a whole week to spend on Earth. I could see Dakota again, see the wheat and the sky and the hills."

Lieutenant Washington mused "And I could fly down to Louisiana, take a look at Maine, too. Maybe put some flowers on Mom's grave, make her ready to become warm again."

Garcia said wistfully, "And we could see Monterey and the boats and listen to the gulls. And maybe that old flower peddler Van Gundy knew is still in Frisco. I bet Van Gundy'd like us to find out." He began to laugh almost hysterically.

"I'm going to stay here," declared Fox, "but we never thought of that week, did we? We kept thinking of being in space for twelve unbroken years. It wouldn't be that way at all."

Captain Torkel asked, "Wouldn't you like to see Broadway again, Fox? I'll bet they'll have it all lit up, all shining and proud and full of life. Wouldn't you, Fox?"

Fox gulped. Even in the gathering darkness, the captain saw tears in his eyes. "I—yes, Captain. I guess I would."

"And your wife, Fox?"

Fox wiped his eyes. "I don't know." Then he jerked backward. "I just thought of something. My wife'll be *here* in twelve years. She'll make the journey all right, make it if she has to take a rocket by herself and hold it together with hairpins. She'll locate me, too. When she finds out what I've—"

Fox suddenly stood very straight and heroic. "Captain, I'm going back to Earth—right now."

"And I," said Lieutenant Washington deeply.

"I *want* to go," said Garcia, his voice cracking, "but I'm a murderer. You don't want a murderer with you, do you?"

Captain Torkel glanced nervously toward the forest. He wasn't sure, but he thought he saw faint reflections of lights, and voices.

"We need you, Garcia. You've got to take care of those engines. We'll have a trial. Court is now in session. How do you plead?"

"I—"

"Guilty. Okay. Sentence suspended. Let's get aboard."

He kept his hand in his pocket, tight about the pistol. To Taaleeb he said, "Thanks, friend, but I guess we won't need your help after all." He shot out the thought: *Keep smiling, fellow. Keep smiling until the very last second.*

Fox slapped Kelly's face to gain his attention. "Kelly, we're going back to Earth. We're going home, back where your wife is. You want to come along or stay here alone?"

"Alone?"

"Alone."

"Kelly, Kelly—"

"Where, Kelly? To the village or to Earth? Damn you, say it!"

"Kelly go—Earth."

Captain Torkel leaned back in his crash-chair. The rocket shook under the vibration of thundering atomic engines. He flicked a switch. Acceleration began.

"Brace yourselves, men! Earth, here we come!"

Before the rising acceleration froze his movements, he snapped on the starboard visi-screen.

He stared only for a second.

He stared at the mass of Sirians filtering out of the dark forest, their sleek bodies illumined by the crimson glare from the jets and by the trembling fires from their torches.

They were like red devils, their faces contorted in rage and hatred as they poured over the meadow. Captain Torkel shivered at the sight of the knives, stones, clubs in upraised hands, at the savage mouths spitting forth alien oaths. This was what mankind would meet when the refugee ships began to land, twelve years hence.... But they had twelve years to decide what to do about it.

Then the image was swept away in space like a red stone falling into the depths of a black pool.

Captain Torkel turned off the screen. Acceleration pushed him deeper and deeper into his chair.

Soon the thunder of the jets faded, and there was silence. The blackness of space pushed itself against the ports. Captain Torkel cut the engines.

"Beautiful Louisiana," said Lieutenant Washington in low, reverent tones, "and lovely Maine."

"Good old Broadway."

"And the gulls and boats at Monterey."

"And North Dakota."

"Heaven," mumbled Kelly.

END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK TO SAVE EARTH ***

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