

The Last Days of the Captain

By KATE WILHELM

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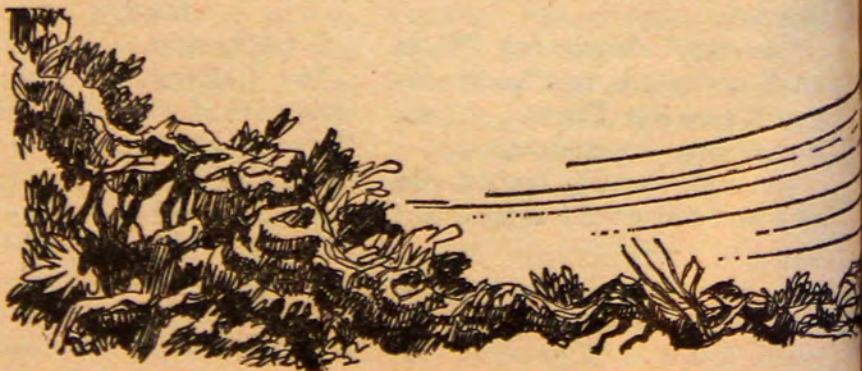
*There is much to be learned even under the worst
of circumstances. For example, about men
and women, and love and death.*

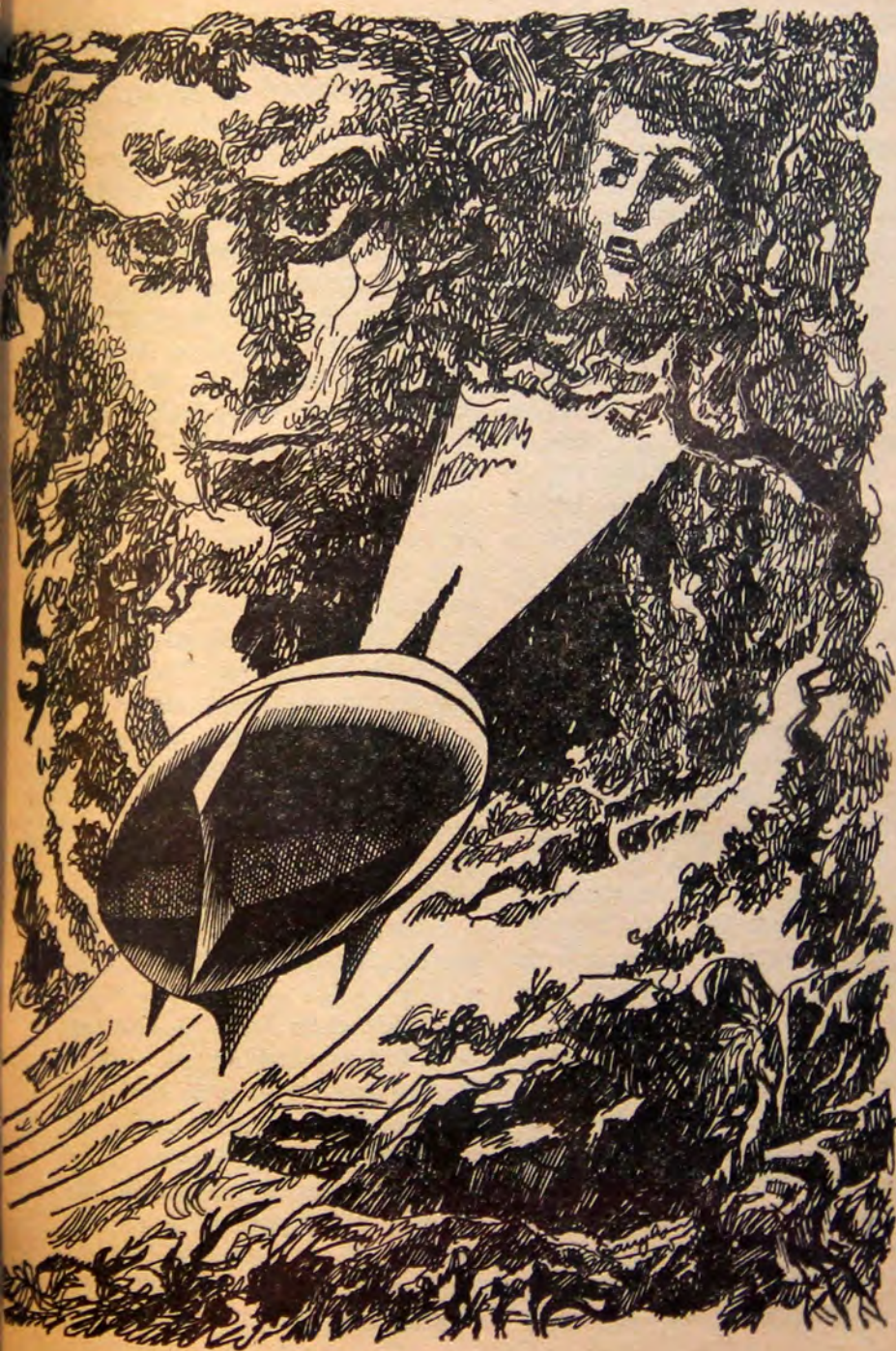
KEITH looked up scowling as the mayor entered his temporary office. "Well?" he snapped.

"Captain Winters, there are problems. Some of the people

don't wish to leave . . . Their crops, their homes . . ." Mayor Stebbins edged into the room hesitantly "If you'd talk to them . . ."

"Mayor Stebbins, don't you





have any power over these people? Won't they follow you?" Keith asked sharply.

"How can they adjust so fast, Captain? Only this morning they arose with everything normal, and now they are told they have to leave what they've worked for all their lives. How can I explain it to them?"

Keith's eyes filmed over as he stared at the little man. Slowly he said, "I'll talk to them. In an hour. And, Mayor, three loads of your people will leave tonight as Taros sets. You decide which ones. I'll want the information as soon as possible."

The meeting was held in the church. Keith studied the uneasy, pale faced congregation with an emotionless expression. They had silenced their buzzing whispers at his approach with the mayor and now waited. As Stebbins stepped forward to introduce him, he took his elbow and put him to one side, standing solidly behind the dais himself.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he started, his voice authoritative and hard, "you know who the Amorics are and that they have literally burned up three inhabited worlds. The Space Exploration Control has learned that they plan to attack Kulane in sixteen days, and for that reason the entire population is being evacuated. Following the evacuation there will be a surprise

counter attack. You will be put aboard a stellar ship at Lanning and transferred to safety." He paused and regarded them stonily, seeing not individuals but articles to be moved out. Here and there audible sobs were heard, but for the most part they were stunned and still.

Briskly he concluded, "Your mayor will sit in on a briefing shortly and he will be able to answer your questions later. I cannot stress too strongly how important it is to give the appearance of normalcy. We have located alien scanners on Taros and there's another one in orbit to coincide with the sun's motions. There may be others that we have not found. They must not report any undue activity!"

He strode through the empty street with the sound of the congregation's mass voice raised in hymns ringing in his ears. By the time he reached his make-shift office in the mayor's house, a cynical grin had replaced his earlier frown. Sheep!

* * *

SEVEN days later he climbed a hill overlooking the village. He sat watching until darkness came and one after another of the house lights flicked on. Very faintly he could make out the figures that appeared now and again in the streets, and he nodded his satisfaction. He glanced once toward the glowing disk of

a moon that hovered just above the tops of the mammoth conifers that made up the terrain of the planet Kulane. Very tiredly he pushed himself up from the ground and prepared to return to the village. This last night, and then he'd leave with the last truck load of settlers, mission accomplished. He stiffened and pivoted to face the shadowy tree trunks.

"Who's there?" He had heard of the giant cats of Kulane and his tight lips curled as his fingers became part of his smooth sonic gun.

"Oh, I didn't know you were up here. I'm sorry." It was a woman, her face a pale blank in the faint light of the moon. She stopped at the sight of the gun.

"What are you doing in the woods?" He didn't put the gun back in his tunic.

"Captain, please . . ." She advanced toward him, her hands held out so that he could see they were empty. "I'm Marilyn Roget. I came up here to wait for my husband and son. They'll come this way. Every night I come."

Stephan Roget, he remembered, was hunting the cats with his twelve year old son. He stared at the woman for a moment and then sheathed his gun. "You'd better be getting back," he said starting down the hill.

"Captain! I've tried to see you,

but they said you were busy. Please listen to me!"

"Waiting for your husband?" he said, but he stopped.

"Captain, I don't care what you think. You can't just go off and leave them. Stevie is only twelve. What will happen to them?"

"There's nothing I can do. We have to have this village emptied by tomorrow morning and if they aren't back by then, we'll have to leave them." His tone was remote and again he turned to start back.

SHE ran to his side and caught his arm. "But . . ." She let her hand fall and raised her head very high. "Of course, you have to obey orders, don't you. But I don't. I'll stay and wait. We can get out in one of the flyers." At the look on his face she rushed on, "Not flying it. We'll use it as a ground car. We do it when there's a high storm."

"And what if they don't get back in time to make Lanning?"

"I'll hide in the forest until the battle's over. Until the time comes to hide, I could stay right down there and give it a real look of authenticity. What if something goes wrong with the robots. What if the generators fail? Someone should stay and make sure everything looks real right up to the end. I'll do it, and then hide in the woods later."

Savagely Keith swung around to blaze at her, "You fool! There will be no battle! No fight! The Amorics will bombard Kulane from out in space and leave it a seething mass of radioactivity down to the deepest root of the tallest tree! We don't intend to let them suspect that the Control knows anything of it!"

Marilyn stared at him, incomprehension giving away to horror and fear. "I don't believe you," she whispered. "I don't believe you! I DON'T BELIEVE YOU! She flung herself at him and beat at his face with hard, tight fists.

Keith jerked away and slapped her angrily. "Come on," he said roughly grasping her arm and forcing her ahead of him. Taros dipped behind a swaying branch of needles and left them dark shadows that stumbled down the hill.

He held her arm tightly as they walked among the robots dressed in the villagers' clothes. She was weeping quietly now, making no sound, not even shaking, just steady tears flowing down her cheeks. Keith muttered a curse and shouted for Sorenson who was giving last minute instructions to the few remaining villagers waiting for the setting of the moon. The atom powered ground car stood loaded with supplies for the journey.

"Sorenson, take care of her.

Put her to bed in the mayor's house. Change in plans. You take this group and I'll come out tomorrow with her."

Sorenson looked from the woman back to Keith. "But how will you make it out?" he blurted.

"We'll use a flyer on the ground. If her husband and son get back, they'll come with us. Otherwise, I'll bring her alone."

WHEN Taros vanished Sorenson and the last of the villagers sped out of sight toward the towering trees. Despite the cheerful lighting of the houses, the village had an air of abandonment which deepened as one by one the house lights blinked out. In the rear of the mayor's house Marilyn slept fitfully under sedation, and finally Keith stretched out on the lounge in his office and also slept.

He cooked their breakfast when he heard her moving about, and by the time she appeared, he was ready to pour the coffee. She sat down opposite him, her eyes fastened on the plate before her.

"Better eat," he said. "We have lots to do today. You'll have to help get the flyer ready."

"Yes," she answered. When he finished his eggs, she rose and cleared the table. Her food was untouched.

Keith stripped down the craft as Marilyn made up a list of supplies for the trip. He noticed

without comment that she prepared enough food for four. Toward noon the flyer was packed and ready. There was nothing more to be done until Taros set that night.

He studied his charts and calculated quickly the times for traveling during the next eight nights. It would take every minute of time they had. He frowned as he arrived at the figure one hundred ten miles per hour for the sixty four and two-thirds hours when it would be dark and Taros and its companion scanner would not be keeping watch.

The afternoon wore on and Keith put away his charts to prowl restlessly about the mayor's house. Contemptuously he fingered the stuff that covered the old fashioned lounge and glanced over the outdated books and ornaments that cluttered the room. He had been in the Space Exploration Control since his eighteenth birthday, seventeen years earlier. This assignment had come as a blow to him, baby sitting a bunch of colonists. Like most of the Control officers he had nothing but scorn for the earthbound dirt grubbers and their petty, smug lives. By God, he thought, if someone had come to him and told him he had to leave his ship, he'd tell him to go to hell, and put him there if necessary. But these people had crossed their hands and had sung

a few hymns and had moved without an argument. He shook his head angrily; their psychology was as alien to him almost as that of the Amorites. It hadn't been worth the risk of discovery. He wheeled about as Marilyn entered the room hesitantly. Like her, he thought, scared to death of him. Ready to run like a rabbit.

"Captain, you should rest now if you're going to drive all night. Lieutenant Sorenson gave me these capsules . . . If you'd like one . . ."

Keith's mouth curled in an unpleasant smile and he said coolly, "Keep them. Just call me at 1030." She turned to leave and he added icily, "And, Mrs. Roget, don't leave. I've made all the flyers inoperative and I set the lock for the one we're to use."

The woman turned sharply. "I'm not going with you, Captain!" she cried fiercely. "I demand one of the flyers to use to look for them! What harm can that do? We use the flyers all the time, and I'd be going away from Lanning, not toward it."

"Those scanners aren't to pick up a single flyer, nothing to make them look twice."

"I'll walk then," she cried. "Don't you understand? I can't just leave them here to die! I can't!"

Keith shrugged and turned from her taking a paper from the

desk and handing it to her. "Read it, Mrs. Roget. It gives specific directions for your husband to follow if he returns before take-off time. If he does get back and does follow those instructions, he'll beat us to Lanning. But flying is strickly forbidden until on the very last day; he'll wait until then for the time lock to be released. Now stop being a child." He pulled off his boots as he spoke and sat on the side of the lounge.

"You're not lying?" Marilyn asked, wanting to believe.

"Read the instructions," he said brusquely and lay down. He listened to her footsteps as she replaced the paper on the desk and left.

THE roads through the forest were merely wide, cleared thoroughfares between the giant trees, held as nearly as possible to straight lines. Since the ground cars and trucks actually never touched the ground except when at rest, the trailing vines that covered the forest floor were allowed to grow undisturbed. Skimming eighteen inches above it, it took on the appearance of smooth, oiled concrete, and would feel just as hard if they should hit an obstruction at the speed Keith held. Marilyn sat motionless beside him oblivious to the streak of trees and vines they passed at speeds that often hit

one hundred thirty. Keith's face set in lines of intense concentration as he gazed steadily into the opening among the trees and with part of his mind listened to the roar of the jet streams of air. After three hours without slowing once, he brought the flyer to a dead stop, braking in quickly and smoothly.

"What's wrong?" Marilyn asked almost disinterestedly.

"Trees are having a hypnotic effect," he said shortly. They were thinner here and he adjusted the light downward. Marilyn handed him coffee and he drank it quickly. Five minutes later they were racing along the forest road again.

They traveled for nine hours and sixteen minutes that first night, and when dawn brought the second scanner into play, Keith slumped over the wheel of the flyer letting his muscles jerk and twitch as they found relaxation. They ate wordlessly and slept encased in air mattresses.

When he awakened, he thought she had gone. He was alone by the flyer and the forest was noisy with birds. The plastic mattress cover was now too warm as the sun advanced across the sky. He got up and repacked his bed and cover in the flyer and munched on a biscuit. He didn't hear her return until she was nearly up to the flyer and then he stared. She was dressed in a green, two-

piece knit suit that covered her entirely from her wrists to her ankles. She was delicately slender and well formed. He realized he was staring at her only when she flushed slightly and turned away. With a disturbing sensation that he had made a mistake in not letting her wait for her husband he jerked his chart from the flyer and walked to the trees to sit down and mark off one night. Later in the afternoon he strapped on his sonic gun and hoped one of the cats would make an appearance that day.

* * *

THE third night they came upon the first of a series of boulders that jutted out into the clearing. By day, or even by night, at a reasonable speed, it would have been simple to avoid them. As it was he had to cut his speed in half, and then some more, to keep the flyer above them, and out of the trees. Left to itself it would try to maintain the eighteen inches he had set, but in doing so, it would veer upward and meet disaster against the branches of the trees. Four hours after starting he called a halt for coffee.

"How did they find out an attack was coming?" Marilyn asked, holding her cup in both hands to warm them.

Keith leaned back, grudgingly grateful to her, and forced his mind off the boulders he knew

lay ahead of them. He demanded obedience from his muscles and nerves, compelling himself to untense. "One of your teachers from Lanning had a group of boys on Taros for a holiday and geology trip and he came across the scanner. He had enough sense not to disturb it and reported it immediately to the Control. From his description they decided it was probably a heat-sensing device and this plan fit. There were several alternative plans already drawn up, if the opportunity ever came to use them. The fleet was dispatched to maneuver in this sector for cover and then ostensibly withdraw again. When they leave, every person on Kulane is to be aboard the ships ready to take off. That will give us two days or more to finish setting the trap; it'll take them at least that long to gather in the sector, but this time it will be different."

"But you said there'd be no battle," she said quickly, a note of hope making her voice husky.

"There won't be. They'll think they've done it again. Hit and run. But we'll have a fix on them and follow them to home base."

"I see." Her voice went flat again. "Kulane will be destroyed as the other worlds were. Why didn't you tell them the truth?"

"This was the only way," Keith said coldly. "As it is, this mass evacuation is a calculated

risk, and if there had been four thousand more inhabitants, it wouldn't have been attempted." He started the motor again, remembering the look on her face when he set the lock on the two seater flyer that was fast enough to get from the village to Lanning in a single night.

In eight and a half hours they made only five hundred fifty miles. Keith drank his coffee quickly and stalked away. He walked several miles scouting the road that lay ahead of them and returned in a vicious mood. Marilyn avoided his eyes as she handed him the rest of his breakfast.

"Do you think the others are having trouble?" she asked after a long silence.

"It'll be easier for them. Those trucks, cars, or whatever you call them, are made for skimming. The flyer isn't." He didn't add that there were also enough men to drive in shifts.

She nodded gravely and prepared her bed.

He wondered if she slept and knew she must sometime despite the growing hollows beneath her eyes and the darkness of the hollows.

THAT afternoon he unloaded some of the food and replaced it with boulders. Marilyn helped, rearranging the remaining food, straining to help lift the heavy

stones into the flyer. "Might do some good," Keith grunted wiping his face with the back of his hand.

"Do you think we'll make it to Lanning in time?" she asked quietly.

"Not if we have many nights like last night. Afraid?" He could feel the sweat trickling down his back where his tunic didn't touch and he hunched his shoulders letting the material soak it up.

"There's a stream about a quarter of a mile down there," Marilyn said pointing. She was perspiring and moist and her hair had begun to curl about her face where little stray ends worked loose from the roll high on her head.

"Are you afraid?" he repeated.

"I don't know," she answered simply as if she hadn't considered it. "I keep praying Stephan and Stevie have got the message and will be there waiting for us. Perhaps I am afraid." Her eyes met his and she added, "But not of dying."

Keith turned sharply snatching his clean uniform from the flyer. "I'll go wash first and get dried. We'll freeze when the sun goes down," he said in the same voice he used with his sergeant.

That night they drove for eight hours and fifteen minutes and covered five-hundred twenty miles.

"I can't believe one lone flyer in the sky would be disastrous," Marilyn exclaimed, breaking into his monotonous swearing. "You can't stand many more nights like that and you know it."

"We can't take that risk!" he shot back at her. "One object in the sky might draw attention that would make this whole trek stand out. We don't even know for sure what kind of scanners they are using."

"Then be sensible and stop cursing those rocks. That isn't going to move them!" She slapped the can she was holding to the ground angrily, "What's happened to that perfect Control training, Captain? Are you afraid you'll be stuck here in the forest when the Amories attack?"

"Goddam it! Shut up! I've got a squadron to lead on a battleship! That's where I belong, not out here in a wilderness leading a bunch of moon faced settlers home to safety. This shouldn't have been tried in the first place! We'll give it all away and the Amories will bypass Kulane and hit somewhere else while we're playing nursemaid. Our first chance at them and some big brass has to louse it up with a stunt like this!"

"You would have voted against us, wouldn't you?" she asked softly a look of repugnance crossing her face. "Captain Win-

ters, just what are you fighting for?"

Keith felt his hands become fists and involuntarily he took a step toward her. Abruptly he turned and stalked off, conscious of her following stare until he passed from her sight.

HE walked unthinking until his legs throbbed and only then did he turn back. She was standing before the flyer and without raising her voice she said urgently, "There's a cat to my left! It's ready to spring."

Keith faded back several steps to get a view of the rear of the flyer, but he didn't dare risk hitting the ship. He could see the great beast moving, agonizingly slow, between the ten foot tree trunks. It was cat-like only in its tawny color and its crouching, ready-to-spring stalking. Its hairless head was long with a mouth that could open a foot wide; the rest of it, covered with stubby yellowish hair, seemed to be mostly long powerful legs built for leaping.

"I'll attract it over here," Keith called and stepped in front of the flyer.

"It won't change its prey," Marilyn answered. "Walk around behind me. As soon as I start to move it will jump. It will make two leaps; one to snatch me up and the next back to the trees. You'll have to be fast. If it misses

me it will keep going and try again before you know it. I'll count three, take two steps away from the flyer and dive back under at three."

"Marilyn, stand still!" Keith shouted and was furious with himself. "I'll circle it."

"They're never alone," she said. She glanced at him then and said steadily, "one." She took a step away from the ship. "Two." Another step. "Three." She whirled and dived and the beast was in the air higher than Keith's head. It landed without stopping its forward momentum, its claws raking the spot where she had been the second before. Keith's gun fired and the creature crashed to the ground and moved no more. He ran to Marilyn and they climbed into the flyer before the cat's mate appeared at the edge of the woods. It sniffed their presence, hesitated momentarily, then seized its partner and dragged it off through the trees.

"It won't be back," Marilyn said calmly as it disappeared.

"Is that what your . . . your people hunt?" Keith asked. He knew he wouldn't choose hunting the beasts for sport.

THE boulders were left behind them that night and when they stopped they had crossed off another eight hundred fifty-one miles.

THE weather was growing steadily colder and they slept in the flyer. He was acutely aware of her breathing as his legs jerked and muscles untied. The strain of following that one bright, low light among the tree trunks, of being alert to changes in the terrain and anticipating curves and turns was telling on his nervous system.

He listened to her sigh in her sleep and he wondered vaguely what it would be like to live with her, go hunting with her, see her in his bed, feel her at his side, share the breakfast table with her day by day. He wondered if she dimpled when she laughed, what it took to make her laugh. He let the fantasies loose and drifted off into sleep.

He wakened hearing her scream. Just the one scream of terror. He slipped from his seat and groped for her.

She fell against him shaking, unable to speak and he stroked her hair until she was still. He hadn't known she took her hair down when she slept. It was long, nearly to her waist, and incredibly soft. He held her and stroked her hair and remembered the thoughts he'd had while falling asleep. He pushed her from him and asked self-consciously, "Are you all right?"

"I'm sorry," she said weakly, fighting for control again. "I must have dreamed."

He knew she was weeping although her voice didn't break. "Try to rest some more," he said. "I'll see about coffee."

Nine hundred miles and they both took the sleeping medicine and huddled under their covers. He was groggy and heavy when he woke up, his appetite dulled and a bitter taste in his mouth. Marilyn was walking back and forth beside the flyer, a heavy tunic pulled over her green suit. There was no sign of the sun high over the trees.

Let it rain, he thought viciously. That was all he needed, to drive through a rain storm. It didn't however. They talked in a desultory manner, and regularly they got out and stamped up and down along the clearing. Neither of them mentioned the dream.

Night after night their traveling time had grown shorter as Taros set later. Kulane had thirty-two hour days and by the sixth night they were using only seven and three quarters hours of it for their journey. The day dragged interminably, and after sunset they still had eight hours to wait for Taros to go down. Keith sat stoically trying to ignore the cold that numbed his fingers. "You should have gone with the others," he said. "They'll be warmer inside the trucks."

Her voice floated back from the rear seat of the ship. "I'm all

right. Why did you wait?"

"It was the least I could do."

"You were glad," she said with a note of finality. "You didn't want to be confined with them for so long."

"Why don't you try to sleep. It's going to be rough when we do get started."

"Why don't you answer me? I could sense it every time I saw you, how you hated us all. You came so cold and hard, despising us, seeing us as things that stood in your way." Her voice was low and meditative, as if she were thinking aloud. "They all knew exactly how the Amorics left the other worlds they found. What good could they have done on the ground? You'll never know how much strength it took for them to leave."

Keith turned on his side and pretended to sleep. She was a stupid, ignorant peasant, he thought. All she knew was farming and hunting in the deep forests and how to keep her son and husband fed and content. Like animals all they had was acceptance for whatever came along. Strength! Were sheep strong? He dozed fitfully and the vision of her standing beside a slightly smaller version of her, a boy version of her, smiling, kept intruding in his dreams.

THAT night he got the speed up to a hundred quickly. One

ten, fifteen, twenty, thirty. The trees were a blur as they raced by them and only the opening before him was real and straight. The small craft edged past one thirty and the gauge needle reached for the one forty mark and held there. His arms ached after the first hour, and his eyes burned as if he had a fever as he stared ahead watching for a sudden curve or dip that could send them hurtling up into the trees. The way was ruler straight and the inclines long and rolling. The needle crept past the forty mark and held the fifty indicator. The trees were a solid wall, dark and impenetrable, gleaming back at him the reflection from the stabbing light.

Suddenly a boulder loomed ahead, and before he could react to it, the flyer arced up. It missed the first branch of the tree and climbed higher as he struggled to regain control. He headed the craft upward through the branches, reducing speed, hearing the snapping of branches as the nose of the flyer cut through them. Then they were above the trees and in the sky.

Without a moment's hesitation Keith turned the light downward and hovered above the branches looking for a way back in. Finally, very cautiously, he began to lower it, maneuvering it carefully among the tree limbs, feeling pain every time he heard the

inevitable scraping. At last they were back on the ground and he turned for the first time to look at Marilyn.

"Are you all right?"

A long shudder passed over her and she nodded. She pressed both hands into her face and shook but made no sound. Keith frowned helplessly, feeling the same need for release from tension. He started to reach for the coffee, but instead found himself gathering her into his arms.

"It's all right, Marilyn. It's all right now. I'm sorry." He held her murmuring quietly, his eyes closed, until she pushed back, calmed again. He tightened his arm about her shoulders.

"Please," she whispered tightly, "leave me alone."

Abruptly he pulled away and got the coffee out. He avoided looking at her, staring into the blackness outside instead. After swallowing the hot coffee he fingered the starter again. "I'm going to see if it will go," he said. "Ready?"

"Yes," she said steadily.

There were no more of the boulders and he held the speed on one forty almost hoping they would crash into one of the trees. It would be quick and painless, but the tunnel was smooth and he followed the wide curves without slackening speed until the sky was starting to lighten in streaks barely visible through



the covering of the needles above. When he brought the flyer to a halt and felt the faint bump as it met the ground, he let his head fall forward cradled in his arms over the control panel. Wearily he noted that they had made one thousand miles. He slept.

SOMETHING awakened him. He shifted his cramped position slightly without opening his eyes and a nearly inaudible gasp brought him to complete alertness. He didn't move, but tried to hear, and there was nothing else. Very deliberately he inched his hand across the seat to his gun, and he could have cursed. It wasn't there. Then he did open his eyes, just enough to see in the edge of his field of vision that Marilyn had the gun and she was watching him. The gun was pointed at his head.

He let his eyes close and waited. Do it now, kid, he thought. Do it! Do it! Take the flyer and go look for them. You have that much coming to you. Do it!

He couldn't hold the position after several more minutes; his legs were sending cramping pains up through his hips, and his hand was asleep on the seat where his gun had been. Keeping his eyes closed he shifted again. Damn her! She was a coward after all! She couldn't do it. Gradually he untensed and fa-

tigue dulled his thoughts. Coward, the word kept parading through his mind, and it was not clear whether he meant her for not shooting, or himself for wanting her to shoot.

Marilyn's voice roused him and he had no awareness of passage of time. "Keith," she said again, "you should eat and lie down. You'll be so cramped."

He pulled himself away from the seat reluctantly. He was aching all over, from both cold and cramped muscles. The gun was once more by him. Had he dreamed it then? Quickly he looked out at her. "Did I sleep long?" he asked.

"Several hours." She had her cover draped about her and her face was pinched and very cold looking.

He ate before he went out to inspect the damage the tree had done. It was surprisingly little. The sharp nosed, wingless craft was sturdy with no protuberances to catch and break. Apparently it had slid between the woody limbs with little more than scratching to show it.

From behind him she said, "It would have been so easy once you were up there to open up and cover five or six hundred miles during that lost hour. Didn't it occur to you?"

"I thought of it," he admitted tiredly arranging his cover on the front seat.

"But you wouldn't do it, would you? Not even for yourself."

He turned to look at her and her eyes were very bright and remote, almost glassy. "Not even for you," he said distinctly.

She turned her curiously bright eyes to his and took a step toward him. "I'm so cold," she said faintly.

Her face was ashen, but her eyes burned into him. He went to her, taking her in his arms gently. She was stiff and cold in his arms. He felt nearly unendurable pain as her soft fingers that were so strong clutched at his back.

When she slept he carefully covered her and crawled into the other seat where he lay watching her for a long time until he too slept.

THE moon was shining when they awoke and it lighted them as they ate. Afterward they sat inside the flyer, she in the rear seat and he up front. The trees shadowed the flyer and the dark grew deeper until he could see nothing and their voices when they spoke came from a void and sounded briefly and left nothingness behind.

"The ships will be uncomfortable," he said. "It would have been too risky sending regular passenger cruisers, so they stripped down cargo ships. Nothing left inside but the engine rooms and

floors. You'll be crowded and uncomfortable."

"That doesn't matter," she replied after a pause. "Just so they all get out."

They were silent a very long time and finally Keith said, "I'll get coffee. We should be eating, I suppose."

They ate little, however, but sipped the hot drink slowly savoring the warmth and strength of it.

"Marilyn, I want you to take one of those pills Sorenson gave you."

In the dim light he could see her wide, luminous eyes still burning with an unnatural light. "I'm all right," she said. "I can take it as long as you can drive."

"I know you can. I don't want you to have to."

"Keith," Marilyn said in a low voice, "I understand. Sometimes a woman knows things that aren't said and mustn't be said. I'm not afraid."

"And sometime, a long time from now, can I see you?"

She ducked her head not answering and he reached for the controls.

It was a nightmare in which there was no let-up of speed, no curve to break the monotony of the abyss that drew them along. As the miles were left behind with totals changing at dizzying speeds he kept thinking of Stevie, almost as big as she. Her son. Her

husband. How could she see him again? He didn't stop for a break although his arms ached and dragged leadenly at his commands and a numbness crept upward through his legs. They were entering Lanning when dawn was still several hours away.

* * *

Lt. Sorenson met them jubilantly. "I knew you'd make it, sir. Mrs. Roget, you're to go to room A-3 in the administration building. They'll direct you."

Keith ignored the man and helped Marilyn from the flyer. She started to walk toward the building, but turned and said, "Make it a very long time, Captain." The fierce brightness of her eyes was gone and there was only a deep, dull hurt there.

"What's that mean?" Sorenson asked and not waiting for a reply added, "You sure can't figure these colonists, can you? Wouldn't you have thought she'd at least ask about her husband and son?"

"Sorenson, shut your mouth!" Keith's voice was ominous. "These people are the only reason we have for even existing." He wheeled about and strode away remembering to hold himself as erect and proud as she had done. The pain in his own eyes, deep where it wasn't easily discernible, very nearly matched hers.

THE END