

FEATURING 100 JOURNEYS INTO TIME FROM

**DOUGLAS
ADAMS**

ISAAC ASIMOV

**URSULA K.
LE GUIN**

ALMANAC OF THE TIME TRAVELER'S



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JUNE
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SEPTEMBER
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DECEMBER

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**GEORGE R. R.
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& MANY MORE...

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WELLS**

WINNERS OF THE WORLD FANTASY AWARD FOR BEST ANTHOLOGY

EDITED BY ANN VANDERMEER & JEFF VANDERMEER

THE TIME TRAVELER'S ALMANAC

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ANN AND JEFF
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PREFACE

"I gave a party for time-travelers, but I didn't send out the invitations until after the party. I sat there a long time, but no one came."

Stephen Hawking (from an interview with *Ars Technica*)

Time travelers, as you will soon discover, are often too busy to attend parties – and the parties they attend are only those they know in advance are going to be good ones. Just because you travel through time does not mean that you can take time out from saving the universe, preserving history, finding your true love, or hunting dinosaurs just to confirm a famous physicist's theories. Indeed, the shadow Preservationists Guild,¹ founded in 2150, would argue that the worst thing for time travelers would be to show up at such a party.

Thus, most of us are left with the stories, the speculations – some of them based on facts and personal experiences – offered up by a variety of fiction writers. Which is not such a bad place to be. Because one thing we chrononauts know for sure: for more than a century, readers have been enthralled by time travel stories with classics from writers like H.G. Wells, Ray Bradbury, Richard Matheson, and Isaac Asimov becoming fixtures of modern fiction. Whether thrilling, cautionary, or adventurous, these imaginative *what-if* tales transport us to other worlds, most often right here on our own planet.

Today, time travel is as familiar a concept to readers as space travel. Such stories are more popular than ever, including such recent bestsellers as Stephen King's *11/22/63*, Charles Yu's *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*, and Audrey Niffenegger's *The Time Traveler's Wife*. The resurgence of iconic TV series like *Doctor Who* has fed into this trend. In addition, time travel often incorporates elements of such hot subgenres like steampunk and historical fiction, further extending its appeal. Time travel has also been popular with teens ever since the publication of such classics as Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*, extending to the present-day and such popular youth novels as *When You Reach Me* by Newberry winner Rebecca Stead. Meanwhile, movies like *The Terminator*, *Back to the Future*, *Time Bandits*, *Donnie Darko*, and *Safety Not Guaranteed* have shown the cinematic range of such tales.

Oddly, however, never before has there been an anthology that demonstrated the full depth and breadth of the time travel story. Perhaps this has something to do with the Preservationist Guild's Fifth Dictum: "Diffuse, disguise, confuse, obfuscate, deny." Most prior attempts have zeroed in on excellent yet decidedly science-fictional tales in which the focus has been on the dreaded "time paradox" – otherwise known as either "And Then I Found Out I Was My Own Father" or "Will I Ever Be Kissing My Grandmother By Mistake?" That may be the bedrock of time travel fiction, but there is so much more: tales of fantasy and horror that involve travel through time like Kim Newman's "Is There Anybody There?," E.F. Benson's "In the Tube," and Rick Bowes's "The Mask of the Rex," – in addition to such truly strange science fiction as "Traveller's Rest," by David Masson, "Loob" by Bob Leman, and "Hwang's Billion Brilliant Daughters" by Alice Sola Kim.

Not all effective stories of time travel focus on epic consequences or seismic shifts in the course of history, either. What would you do if you could go backwards or forwards in time? Perhaps you might do what Christine does in Karen Haber's "3 RMS, Good View" – use that ability to find a better

apartment. Maybe you'd use it to escape a war-torn country, as in Greg Egan's "The Lost Continent." Perhaps you'd even try to use it to get better grades in school ("The Most Important Thing in the World," Steve Bein), win an election ("The Final Days," David Langford), or, for that most delicate and yet powerful of reasons, for love ("If Ever I Should Leave You," Pamela Sargent).

You don't even need a time machine, believe it or not. Time machines are expensive to build and notoriously unpredictable – jury-rigged and perhaps even tampered with by the Preservationist Guild. That dial you spin to pick an era is always either stuck or spinning too fast or subject to variation from the slightest encounter with a paradox pebble while in the space-time corridor. You might wind up exiled forever making fungi spaghetti for yourself and a squirrel-like distant ancestor in a lonely shaft cave at the butt-end of the Cretaceous Period if you're not careful.

So, no time machine? That's okay. You can time travel via the Devil's Intent, like Enoch Soames in Max Beerbohm's accurate historical account of the same name or by eating a special plant like Dr. Phipps' patient in Norman Spinrad's "The Weed of Time." You might even travel by means of magic, as in Tamsyn Muir's "The House That Made Sixteen Loops of Time." That might not seem very scientific, but you should see what the propaganda wing of the Preservationist Guild calls "magic" as opposed to "science." But the ways are myriad, and the Guild's members finite – they cannot be everywhere, suppress everything. Black holes, the telephone, mutation – any of these might suffice to move you from the twenty-first century to, say, Leonardo Da Vinci's bedroom as he secretly dresses up and painted himself in the mirror for *Mona Lisa*.

Obviously, the sheer variety of time travel stories has created some organizational challenges. Therefore, we have divided *The Time Traveler's Almanac* into four distinct sections, each corresponding to some major strand of time travel endeavor. (Each section is also bookended with nonfiction: educational palate-cleansers for your enjoyment.)

• **Experiments** – Stories in which individuals or organizations are experimenting with time travel or are subjects of experimentation.

• **Reactionaries and Revolutionaries** – Stories in which people are trying to protect the past from change or because they are curious tourists or academicians and want to accurately document different times.

• **Mazes and Traps** – Stories in which the paradox of time travel is front-and-center, and characters become trapped in those paradoxes.

• **Communiqués** – Stories about people trying to get a message to either someone in the past or in the future – out of their own time.

These categories may seem stable and grounded in time-honored tradition. But we must, as a public service, point out that time travel stories are devious narratives. While we have managed to lock each tale into a particular category, we cannot guarantee that some anomaly or future temporal attacks by rival anthology editors will not mean that the copy you hold in your hands fails to match up exactly. There may even be wormholes and rifts that warp the very nature of the pages. (We cannot recommend the eel-skin 2040 edition, for example, nor the "cheese cloth" edition of 2079.)

For this reason, we hope you will dive deep in these sections, but do so while attached to a rope or bungee cord. Because some of these stories will pull you into other times and other places so immersively that you may find it hard to get back to your era after reading them.

Because the truth is, fiction is one of the most effective time travel machines in the universe and always has been.

Ann & Jeff VanderMeer
Tallahassee, Florida, 2013 and 215

INTRODUCTION

Rian Johnson

Let's time travel. Right now. Are you ready?

After this paragraph I'm going to type a symbol that is a sort of hidden Easter egg on the M keyboard, and after you see it, once your brain absorbs its contours and angles, a metaphysical displacement will occur and in the space between two beats of your heart we will both be transported through time. Alright. Let's do this. Here we go.

* * *

We have now hopped into the near future, and you have already read a good chunk of this book.

How am I certain of this? Oh, subtle changes in the room. An almost imperceptible ghosting of dust on the desk. A different charge to the ions in the air. A shift in the quality of the light. But most of all, I am certain that you have already read a big chunk of this book because nobody in their right mind would pick up this volume filled with some of the best science fiction writing from the last one hundred and fifty years from the greatest writers the genre has known on the most beguiling and thematically rich topic sci-fi has produced, *nobody* would pick this up and read the "Introduction by Rian Johnson" first. Hell, just looking over the table of contents, I want to flip ahead myself. (Come ahead and flip at any time, by the way. I encourage it. It seems fitting.)

The stories in this collection span across the past century and a half, from the nascent beginnings of the genre itself in Edward Page Mitchell's pre-Wells "The Clock That Went Backward" (1881) through those gilded golden years of the 1950s with (my own personal favorite) Bradbury, into the cultural cross-currents that sci-fi charted for our generation in the late twentieth century, and finally forging into some of the best and brightest voices in the genre today.

As a broad survey it's invaluable, and in one way this book can be seen as a cultural almanac. Charting how we've used this infinitely malleable tool of time travel to engage with the changing landscape around us is a tempting method for mapping our recent history. A back-to-back reading of Wells's "The Time Machine" with Bradbury's "A Sound of Thunder" makes your stomach drop, and within a few quick pages we plunge from the scientific advancements of the late 1800s that were opening the world up for mankind to those of the 1950s that were threatening to bring the sky down onto his puny head. Flip a few more pages into Reagan's 1980s in Gibson's "The Gernsback Continuum," in which the enemy (and focal point of the story) is no longer technology at all but a vision of a utopian society rising from the mythologies of the past to crush what makes modern man human.

Sci-fi attracts armchair tinkerers. I know that I'm one myself. It makes sense that the take-it-apart-and-see-why-it-works (or if-it-works) instinct is drawn to this impossibly broad realm of fiction whose one unifying element is some degree of world-building. The one thing you know when you pick up a science fiction story is that there will be some sort of geared mechanism at its core that you can

take apart and analyze, whether it's a PKDish thought puzzle or an Asmovian interplanetary society. you're denying your healthy (and encouraged!) flipping instinct and are still reading this introduction in a few paragraphs I'll passionately argue that this is not the essential appeal of great sci-fi, but it's biggie. When it comes to time travel stories this tinkering instinct kicks up into a higher gear, but also (to badly mix bad metaphors) a double-edged sword.

On the one hand, the pleasure of time travel dissection is a beautiful and necessary thing. someone hands you a kinked-up slinky, what do they expect you to do with it? Turn it over in your hands and appreciate the beauty of the tangle? Nuts to that. "Let's see if we can untangle and make sense of this thing" is part of its purpose, and a good time travel story will have an interior logic that encourages and stands up to untangling, and smoothly slinks down the stairs when you're finished. However, with time travel stories there's also a unique danger to this untangling. There is, I believe, a right and a wrong way to do it, and the wrong way can very easily lead to becoming "that guy." You know the guy I'm talking about. He's the guy who can talk to you for an hour at a party (in a tone pitched between the Comic Book Guy from *The Simpsons* and a Whit Stillman character) about whether this or that slinky is well tangled or isn't, but doesn't seem to actually enjoy playing with them.

When we're talking about whether or not a story's "time travel logic" makes sense, it is important to remember that every story builds its own framework for its own logic. In that sense, time travel is more of a fantasy-based story element than a science-based one. Time travel does not exist in the real world, and any broadly accepted rules for how it can and can't work were derived from a bunch of "that guys" talking about time travel *fiction*. There is no "makes sense" in the universal sense – that is to say, criticizing a time travel story because its rules do not line up with rules in the real world is akin to dismissing the Harry Potter books because the conductive properties of wood could never sustain the energy required for spell casting.

Approaching a time travel story with a dogmatic measuring stick in hand also denies the unique pleasure that the genre affords tinkerers. A good story's internal logic is flawless, and everything in between its first and last word makes sense on its own terms. In that way, it presents the tinkerer with the literary equivalent of an Escher drawing. Internally, step by step, the logic of Escher's staircases makes (or makes you believe it makes) nefariously perfect sense, and its dissonance with what we know to be possible is not something you have to "just accept and get over to enjoy it," but is the very source of what's enjoyable about it.

For all its pleasures, though, the untangling-game cannot sustain a story, let alone a sub-genre that has thrived for so many years. Something about the concept of time travel snaps into our selves like a jigsaw-puzzle piece, just like invisibility or the power of flight. It is wish fulfillment on a primeval level of the psyche. When I fly in my dreams I'm not doing any of the "wouldn't it be cool to..." things that our conscious minds wish for, like saving time getting across town or arriving at parties through the window or having lunch on top of the Empire State Building. In my dreams I'm just flying, and just that feeling of soaring through the air feels like it scratches some deeply rooted itch.

Meeting Abraham Lincoln, hunting dinosaurs, making a fortune on the stock market, giving your younger self one piece of advice, all these "wouldn't it be cool" reasons we'd like to time travel do not get to the root of why we really *want* to time travel. I think partly it has to do with the cruel clockwork of this defined span of years each of us is assigned, the linear piece of chain we're all rolling across like a gear from beginning to inevitable end. Few wishes in life go deeper than the desire to give that chain the finger.

There's also something deeply familiar about time travel. It feels like something that is not at all foreign to our brains; it makes sense in an odd way. How much of our lives do we live in the past or future, looking forward or looking back, whether regretting or pining or fearing? Speaking for myself, the answer is a sheepish "lots." Time travel stories give us the dual pleasure of the carrot and the stick.

on one hand letting us imagine going physically to where our minds can only take us, to re-experience that perfect day or change that awful thing, and on the other hand warning us that actually doing that would not turn out well, and that our place is in the present.

Ultimately, though, there is only one base ingredient that everything in this book absolutely has in common: they are all damn good stories by damn good storytellers.

But I don't have to tell you this. You've already read them. And I feel bad about that. Wouldn't it be nice to be able to go back and experience all these incredible stories for the first time again?

Rian Johnson

TOP TEN TIPS FOR TIME TRAVELERS

Charles Yu

1. Here's the thing: you're doing something that you don't understand. That's not a knock on you. It's just a fact. Humans can't wrap their heads around time travel, and it's not a software thing. It's hardware. Our brains just don't get it yet. Maybe someday. But that will take, for lack of a better word, time. We could evolve, as a species, but that would require a selection pressure, some environmental advantage for minds unburdened by the illusion of temporal sequence, the notion of cause and effect. But that's not what we have. What we have is the opposite. What we have are minds that are very good at being trapped in time. We are geniuses, each and every one of us. We are unbelievable machines, capable of incredible feats of psychological athleticism. We are full-grown, half-starved Bengal tigers, pacing in our cages, and we know every inch of the space in front of us, and behind, and to either side. We have evolved to survive in cages, and so, when one of us manages to get free, we look for walls, for a ceiling. We want to get back indoors, back inside time. We look for our cages. We look for rules.

2. So, the most important thing is, forget any rules. If you're really going to do this, you're going to have to open your mind. If you go into it with preconceived notions about what time is, what causality is, well, then, you're only going to get stuck through those conceptual lenses. You'll understand it, of course, because that's what we do. We understand things. But sometimes understanding gets in the way. Especially when something can't be understood.

3. But, but, but, you say. What do you mean? What could it even mean to understand something that can't be understood? Well, that's easy. When things can't be understood, and you understand them, well, then, what you're doing is making stuff up. A circle looks at a sphere, and it understands it as a circle. A cross-section, it understands it exactly to the extent that it already makes sense to it.

4. So if you can't understand it, then what are you supposed to do? Well, not supposed to do, that's not right. You can't suppose anything, that's the point. You are free. As free as any human who has ever lived. You broke out. Of the ultimate constraint. There have been a few others – go look in your library books. Maybe in your religious texts – they've got stories of people who have done the same. Although you might not think of them as time travelers, that's what they were. They tend to worship them, tell stories about them. People might tell stories about you, too, depending on how you handle this.

So get rid of the concept of supposed to do. Suppose anything. You can, you know. Suppose that you are a time traveler. Sounds like some kind of philosophical experiment, doesn't it? And that's the thing. You're traveling in time, my friend. That's pretty philosophical. And the ultimate experiment.

5. Which is not to say you are imagining this. This is as real as anything.

6. What kinds of tips are these? You thought you were going to get some advice about avoiding paradoxes. About ripple effects and avoiding stable time loops and all of that. Don't kill grandma, do kill Hitler, don't step on that twig. No kidding. All good ideas, to be sure. Don't need to repeat them here.

Or maybe you wanted a brochure. A guide from the tourism office. Some good times to visit, catch the show. Back-row seats at some key moments in the history of the world. Crucial moments in the history of the world.

But that's not what you're getting.

What you're getting is this instead. Ask yourself, who am I? Am I important?

7. You are. You're very important. By definition. You're a time traveler, and with that comes some level of responsibility. Think about it. Your whole life, you've imagined time travel. You have the power to affect the flow of events, the lives of other people, the course of the universe, in a way that is unique and ineffably strange. How did you get to be one of these select, chosen few? What makes you so special?

8. Here is what makes you so special: you remember. You always had a gift, a knack, a predisposition to this. You look ahead. You knew there was more to it. That there had to be, if not a way out, a way up, and around, and back in. That there was something fishy about the whole infrastructure. Why build roads if no one can go anywhere? Why do we have all of this temporal equipment inside of us, if we can never use it? You were right. You didn't know how right you were. Everyone thought it was poetic. A grand metaphor. A way of thinking about our psychology. You knew it was more, waited for the moment, waited for this moment. You were right, and you had no idea how right you were.

9. Here is what you need to ask yourself: how did you come to be a time traveler? Did you choose this, or did it choose you? Are you on some kind of mission? Do you feel like you might be stuck in a stable time loop? Is there anyone in your life who you need to go see in the past? Have you ever had dreams about the future that might not be dreams but premonitions? Are you lost and adrift outside of time and if so do you want to get back in? Who is asking you these rhetorical questions? Why are you looking for tips, and especially from someone or something that you don't know anything about? How do you know you're not asking yourself these questions, that this isn't your own diary you are reading, from the future or the past or the future or the present and that you haven't read this eleven million seven hundred ninety three thousand four hundred sixty one times? And will read it an infinite number of times more? That these tips are all that you have, all that you ever will be, or ever was, which is the same thing, because nothing has ever existed that has not always existed, that you live in an eternal block universe, timeless and frozen, and that time, as you knew it when you started this, that time is still there, but it's still there, and you can go back, and then you can come back here, and you have, and you will.

You wanted some tips. You have some tips. Probably not quite what you were expecting. But what were you expecting? Time travel is a lonely activity. Time travel means you can never go home again. But maybe it also means always being able to see home from here. Don't you remember? These tips are what got you into trouble in the first place.

10. Now that you know this information, go back to tip number 2 above. Go back to the time when you first read that, and read it again. There are no rules. Okay? None. Now: what a concept. Now. Now: you've got your whole life, what you've done before and what will come after, gathered up here in this little area here, the whole thing. What are you going to do with your life? What was it, what is it, what will it be?

EXPERIMENTS

DEATH SHIP

Richard Matheson

Richard Matheson was an American author and screenwriter most known for his work in fantasy, horror, and science fiction. Some of his best-known works are *The Shrinking Man*, *Hell House*, and *I Am Legend* (the latter having been adapted into full-length films three times). In addition to the many feature films adapted from his work, he also wrote several episodes of *The Twilight Zone* original series in the 1960s. "Death Ship" was first published in *Fantastic Story Magazine* in 1953 and then later adapted for television as Episode 6, Season 4, of *The Twilight Zone* in 1963.

Mason saw it first.

He was sitting in front of the lateral viewer taking notes as the ship cruised over the new planet. His pen moved quickly over the graph-spaced chart he held before him. In a little while they'd land and take specimens. Mineral, vegetable, animal – if there were any. Put them in the storage lockers and take them back to Earth. There the technicians would evaluate, appraise, judge. And, if everything was acceptable, stamp the big, black inhabitable on their brief and open another planet for colonization from overcrowded Earth.

Mason was jotting down items about general topography when the glitter caught his eye.

"I saw something," he said.

He flicked the viewer to reverse lensing position.

"Saw what?" Ross asked from the control board.

"Didn't you see a flash?"

Ross looked into his own screen.

"We went over a lake, you know," he said.

"No, it wasn't that," Mason said. "This was in that clearing beside the lake."

"I'll look," said Ross, "but it probably was the lake."

His fingers typed out a command on the board and the big ship wheeled around in a smooth arc and headed back.

"Keep your eyes open now," Ross said. "Make sure. We haven't got any time to waste."

"Yes, sir."

Mason kept his unblinking gaze on the viewer, watching the earth below move past like a slowly unrolled tapestry of woods and fields and rivers. He was thinking, in spite of himself, that maybe the moment had arrived at last. The moment in which Earthmen would come upon life beyond Earth, a race evolved from other cells and other muds. It was an exciting thought. 1997 might be the year. And he and Ross and Carter might now be riding a new *Santa Maria* of discovery, a silvery, bulletproof galleon of space.

"There!" he said. "There it is!"

He looked over at Ross. The captain was gazing into his viewer plate. His face bore the expression Mason knew well. A look of smug analysis, of impending decision.

"What do you think it is?" Mason asked, playing the strings of vanity in his captain.

"Might be a ship, might not be," pronounced Ross.

Well, for God's sake, let's go down and see, Mason wanted to say, but knew he couldn't. It would have to be Ross's decision. Otherwise they might not even stop.

"I guess it's nothing," he prodded.

He watched Ross impatiently, watched the stubby fingers flick buttons for the viewer. "We might stop," Ross said. "We have to take samples anyway. Only thing I'm afraid of is..."

He shook his head. Land, man! The words bubbled up in Mason's throat. For God's sake, let's go down!

Ross evaluated. His thickish lips pressed together appraisingly. Mason held his breath.

Then Ross's head bobbed once in that curt movement which indicated consummated decision. Mason breathed again. He watched the captain spin, push and twist dials. Felt the ship begin its tilt to upright position. Felt the cabin shuddering slightly as the gyroscope kept it on an even keel. The ship did a ninety-degree turn, clouds appeared through the thick ports. Then the ship was pointed at the planet's sun and Ross switched off the cruising engines. The ship hesitated, suspended a split second, then began dropping toward the earth.

"Hey, we settin' down already?"

Mickey Carter looked at them questioningly from the port door that led to the storage lockers. He was rubbing greasy hands over his green jumper legs.

"We saw something down there," Mason said.

"No kiddin'," Mickey said, coming over to Mason's viewer. "Let's see."

Mason flicked on the rear lens. The two of them watched the planet billowing up at them.

"I don't know whether you can ... oh, yes, there it is," Mason said. He looked over at Ross.

"Two degrees east," he said.

Ross twisted a dial and the ship then changed its downward movement slightly.

"What do you think it is?" Mickey asked. "Hey!"

Mickey looked into the viewer with even greater interest. His wide eyes examined the shiny speck enlarging on the screen. "Could be a ship," he said. "Could be."

Then he stood there silently, behind Mason, watching the earth rushing up.

"Reactors," said Mason.

Ross jabbed efficiently at the button and the ship's engines spouted out their flaming gases. Speed decreased. The rocket eased down on its roaring fire jets. Ross guided.

"What do you think it is?" Mickey asked Mason.

"I don't know," Mason answered. "But if it's a ship," he added, half wishfully thinking, "I don't see how it could possibly be from Earth. We've got this run all to ourselves."

"Maybe they got off course," Mickey dampened without knowing.

Mason shrugged. "I doubt it," he said.

"What if it is a ship?" Mickey said. "And it's not ours?"

Mason looked at him and Carter licked his lips.

"Man," he said, "that'd be somethin'."

"Air spring," Ross ordered.

Mason threw the switch that set the air spring into operation. The unit which made possible landing without then having to stretch out on thick-cushioned couches. They could stand on deck and hardly feel the impact. It was an innovation on the newer government ships.

The ship hit on its rear braces.

There was a sensation of jarring, a sense of slight bouncing. Then the ship was still, its pointed nose straight up, glittering brilliantly in the bright sunlight.

"I want us to stay together," Ross was saying. "No one takes any risks. That's an order."

He got up from his seat and pointed at the wall switch that let atmosphere into the small chamber in the corner of the cabin.

"Three to one we need our helmets," Mickey said to Mason.

"You're on," Mason said, setting into play their standing bet about the air or lack of it in every new planet they found. Mickey always bet on the need for apparatus. Mason for unaided lung use. So far they'd come out about even.

Mason threw the switch and there was a muffled sound of hissing in the chamber. Mickey got the helmet from his locker and dropped it over his head. Then he went through the double doors. Mason listened to him clamping the doors behind him. He kept wanting to switch on the side viewers and see if he could locate what they'd spotted. But he didn't. He let himself enjoy the delicate nibbling of suspense.

Through the intercom they heard Mickey's voice.

"Removing helmet," he said.

Silence. They waited. Finally, a sound of disgust.

"I lose again," Mickey said.

The others followed him out.

"God, did they hit!"

Mickey's face had an expression of dismayed shock on it. The three of them stood there on the greenish-blue grass and looked.

It was a ship. Or what was left of a ship for, apparently, it had struck the earth at terrible velocity, nose first. The main structure had driven itself about fifteen feet into the hard ground. Jagged pieces of superstructure had been ripped off by the crash and were lying strewn over the field. The heavy engines had been torn loose and nearly crushed the cabin. Everything was deathly silent, and the wreckage was so complete they could hardly make out what type of ship it was. It was as if some enormous child had lost fancy with the toy model and had dashed it to earth, stamped on it, banged on it insanely with a rock.

Mason shuddered. It had been a long time since he'd seen a rocket crash. He'd almost forgotten the everpresent menace of lost control, of whistling fall through space, of violent impact. Most talk had been about being lost in an orbit. This reminded him of the other threat in his calling. His throat moved unconsciously as he watched.

Ross was scuffing at a chunk of metal at his feet.

"Can't tell much," he said. "But I'd say it was our own." Mason was about to speak, then changed his mind. "From what I can see of that engine up there, I'd say it was ours," Mickey said.

"Rocket structure might be standard," Mason heard himself say, "everywhere."

"Not a chance," Ross said. "Things don't work out like that. It's ours all right. Some poor devil from Earth. Well, at least their death was quick."

"Was it?" Mason asked the air, visualizing the crew in their cabin, rooted with fear as their ship spun toward earth, maybe straight down like a fired cannon shell, maybe end-over-end like a crazy fluttering top, the gyroscope trying in vain to keep the cabin always level.

The screaming, the shouted commands, the exhortations to a heaven they had never seen before, to God who might be in another universe. And then the planet rushing up and blasting its hard face against their ship, crushing them, ripping the breath from their lungs. He shuddered again, thinking of it. "Let's take a look," Mickey said.

"Not sure we'd better," Ross said. "We say it's ours. It might not be."

"Jeez, you don't think anything is still alive in there, do you?" Mickey asked the captain.

"Can't say," Ross said.

But they all knew he could see that mangled hulk before him as well as they. Nothing could have survived that.

The look. The pursed lips. As they circled the ship. The head movement, unseen by them.

"Let's try that opening there," Ross ordered. "And stay together. We still have work to do. Only doing this so we can let the base know which ship this is." He had already decided it was an Earth ship.

They walked up to a spot in the ship's side where the skin had been laid open along the welds.

seam. A long, thick plate was bent over as easily as a man might bend paper.

“Don’t like this,” Ross said. “But I suppose...”

He gestured with his head and Mickey pulled himself up to the opening. He tested each hand gingerly, then slid on his work gloves as he found some sharp edge. He told the other two and they reached into their jumper pockets. Then Mickey took a long step into the dark maw of the ship.

“Hold on, now!” Ross called up. “Wait until I get there.”

He pulled himself up, his heavy boot toes scraping up the rocket skin. He went into the hole, to Mason followed.

It was dark inside the ship. Mason closed his eyes for a moment to adjust to the change. When he opened them, he saw two bright beams searching up through the twisted tangle of beams and plates. He pulled out his own flash and flicked it on.

“God, is this thing wrecked,” Mickey said, awed by the sight of metal and machinery in violent death. His voice echoed slightly through the shell. Then, when the sound ended, an utter stillness descended on them. They stood in the murky light and Mason could smell the acrid fumes of broken engines.

“Watch the smell, now,” Ross said to Mickey who was reaching up for support. “We don’t want to get ourselves gassed.”

“I will,” Mickey said. He was climbing up, using one hand to pull his thick, powerful body up along the twisted ladder. He played the beam straight up.

“Cabin is all out of shape,” he said, shaking his head.

Ross followed him up. Mason was last, his flash moving around endlessly over the snapped joints of the wild jigsaw of destruction that had once been a powerful new ship. He kept hissing in disbelief at himself as his beam came across one violent distortion of metal after another.

“Door’s sealed,” Mickey said, standing on a pretzel-twisted catwalk, bracing himself against the inside rocket wall. He grabbed the handle again and tried to pull it open.

“Give me your light,” Ross said. He directed both beams at the door and Mickey tried to drag it open. His face grew red as he struggled. He puffed.

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “It’s stuck.”

Mason came up beside them. “Maybe the cabin is still pressurized,” he said softly. He didn’t like the echoing of his own voice.

“Doubt it,” Ross said, trying to think. “More than likely the jamb is twisted.” He gestured with his head again. “Help Carter.”

Mason grabbed one handle and Mickey the other. Then they braced their feet against the wall and pulled with all their strength. The door held fast. They shifted their grip, pulled harder.

“Hey, it slipped!” Mickey said. “I think we got it.”

They resumed footing on the tangled catwalk and pulled the door open. The frame was twisted, the door held in one corner. They could only open it enough to wedge themselves in sideways.

The cabin was dark as Mason edged in first. He played his light beam toward the pilot’s seat. It was empty. He heard Mickey squeeze in as he moved the light to the navigator’s seat.

There was no navigator’s seat. The bulkhead had been stove in there, the viewer, the table and the chair all crushed beneath the bent plates. There was a clicking in Mason’s throat as he thought of himself sitting at a table like that, in a chair like that, before a bulkhead like that.

Ross was in now. The three beams of light searched. They all had to stand, legs spraddled, because the deck slanted.

And the way it slanted made Mason think of something. Of shifting weights, of *things* sliding down ...

Into the corner where he suddenly played his shaking beam.

And felt his heart jolt, felt the skin on him crawling, felt his unblinking eyes staring at the sight. Then felt his boots thud him down the incline as if he were driven.

“Here,” he said, his voice hoarse with shock.

He stood before the bodies. His foot had bumped into one of them as he held himself from going down any further, as he shifted his weight on the incline.

Now he heard Mickey’s footsteps, his voice. A whisper. A bated, horrified whisper.

“*Mother of God.*”

Nothing from Ross. Nothing from any of them then but stares and shuddering breaths.

Because the twisted bodies on the floor were theirs, all three of them. And all three ... dead.

* * *

Mason didn’t know how long they stood there, wordlessly, looking down at the still, crumpled figure on the deck.

How does a man react when he is standing over his own corpse? The question plied unconscious at his mind. What does a man say? What are his first words to be? A poser, he seemed to sense, loaded question.

But it was happening. Here he stood – and there he lay dead at his own feet. He felt his hands grow numb and he rocked unsteadily on the tilted deck.

“*God!*”

Mickey again. He had his flash pointed down at his own face. His mouth twitched as he looked. All three of them had their flash beams directed at their own faces, and the bright ribbons of light connected their dual bodies.

Finally Ross took a shaking breath of the stale cabin air.

“Carter,” he said, “find the auxiliary light switch, see if it works.” His voice was husky and tight, restrained.

“The light switch – the light switch!” Ross snapped.

Mason and the captain stood there, motionless, as Mickey shuffled up the deck. They heard his boots kick metallic debris over the deck surface. Mason closed his eyes, but was unable to take his foot away from where it pressed against the body that was his. He felt bound.

“I don’t understand,” he said to himself.

“Hang on,” Ross said.

Mason couldn’t tell whether it was said to encourage him or the captain himself.

Then they heard the emergency generator begin its initial whining spin. The light flickered, went out. The generator coughed and began humming and the lights flashed on brightly.

They looked down now. Mickey slipped down the slight deck hill and stood beside them. He stared down at his own body. Its head was crushed in. Mickey drew back, his mouth a box of unbelieving terror.

“I don’t get it,” he said. “I don’t get it. What is this?”

“Carter,” Ross said.

“That’s *me!*” Mickey said. “God, it’s *me!*”

“Hold on!” Ross ordered.

“The three of us,” Mason said quietly, “and we’re all dead.”

There seemed nothing to be said. It was a speechless nightmare. The tilted cabin all bashed in and tangled. The three corpses all doubled over and tumbled into one corner, arms and legs flopped over each other. All they could do was stare.

Then Ross said, “Go get a tarp. Both of you.”

Mason turned. Quickly. Glad to fill his mind with simple command. Glad to crowd out tense horror.

with activity. He took long steps up the deck. Mickey backed up, unable to take his unblinking gaze off the heavy-set corpse with the green jumper and the caved-in, bloody head.

Mason dragged a heavy, folded tarp from the storage locker and carried it back into the cabin, legs and arms moving in robotlike sequence. He tried to numb his brain, not think at all until the first shock had dwindled.

Mickey and he opened up the heavy canvas sheet with wooden motions. They tossed it out and the thick, shiny material fluttered down over the bodies. It settled, outlining the heads, the torsos, the one arm that stood up stiffly like a spear, bent over wrist and hand like a grisly pennant.

Mason turned away with a shudder. He stumbled up to the pilot's seat and slumped down. He stared at his outstretched legs, the heavy boots. He reached out and grabbed his leg and pinched it, feeling almost relief at the flaring pain.

"Come away," he heard Ross saying to Mickey. "I said, *come away!*"

He looked down and saw Ross half dragging Mickey up from a crouching position over the bodies. He held Mickey's arm and led him up the incline.

"We're dead," Mickey said hollowly. "That's us on the deck. We're *dead!*"

Ross pushed Mickey up to the cracked port and made him look out.

"There," he said. "There's our ship over there. Just as we left it. This ship isn't ours. And those bodies. They ... can't be ours."

He finished weakly. To a man of his sturdy opinionation, the words sounded flimsy and extravagant. His throat moved, his lower lip pushed out in defiance of this enigma. Ross didn't like enigmas. He stood for decision and action. He wanted action now.

"You saw yourself down there," Mason said to him. "Are you going to say it isn't you?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying," Ross bristled. "This may seem crazy, but there's an explanation for it. There's an explanation for everything."

His face twitched as he punched his bulky arm.

"This is me," he claimed. "I'm solid." He glared at them as if daring opposition. "I'm alive," he said.

They stared blankly at him.

"I don't get it," Mickey said weakly. He shook his head and his lips drew back over his teeth.

Mason sat limply in the pilot's seat. He almost hoped that Ross's dogmatism would pull them through this. That his staunch bias against the inexplicable would save the day. He wanted for it to save the day. He tried to think for himself, but it was so much easier to let the captain decide.

"We're all dead," Mickey said.

"Don't be a fool!" Ross exclaimed. "Feel yourself!"

Mason wondered how long it would go on. Actually, he began to expect a sudden awakening, his jolting to a sitting position on his bunk to see the two of them at their tasks as usual, the crazy dream over and done with.

But the dream went on. He leaned back in the seat and it was a solid seat. From where he sat he could run his fingers over solid dials and buttons and switches. All real. It was no dream. Pinching wasn't even necessary.

"Maybe it's a vision," he tried, vainly attempting thought, as an animal mired tries hesitant steps on solid earth.

"That's enough," Ross said.

Then his eyes narrowed. He looked at them sharply. His face mirrored decision. Mason almost felt anticipation. He tried to figure out what Ross was working on. Vision? No, it couldn't be that. Ross would hold no truck with visions. He noticed Mickey staring open-mouthed at Ross. Mickey wanted the consoling of simple explanation too.

“Time warp,” said Ross.

They still stared at him.

“What?” Mason asked.

“Listen,” Ross punched out his theory. More than his theory, for Ross never bothered with that link in the chain of calculation. His certainty.

“Space bends,” Ross said. “Time and space form a continuum. Right?”

No answer. He didn’t need one.

“Remember they told us once in training of the possibility of circumnavigating time. They told us we could leave Earth at a certain time. And when we came back we’d be back a year earlier than we calculated. Or a year later.

“Those were just theories to the teachers. Well, I say it’s happened to us. It’s logical, it could happen. We could have passed right through a time warp. We’re in another galaxy, maybe different space lines, maybe different time lines.”

He paused for effect.

“I say we’re in the future,” he said.

Mason looked at him.

“How does that help us?” he asked. “If you’re right.”

“We’re not dead!” Ross seemed surprised that they didn’t get it.

“If it’s in the future,” Mason said quietly, “then we’re going to die.”

Ross gaped at him. He hadn’t thought of that. Hadn’t thought that his idea made things even worse. Because there was only one thing worse than dying. And that was knowing you were going to die. And where. And how.

Mickey shook his head. His hands fumbled at his sides. He raised it to his lips and chewed nervously on a blackened nail.

“No,” he said weakly, “I don’t get it.”

Ross stood looking at Mason with jaded eyes. He bit his lips, feeling nervous with the unknown crowding him in, holding off the comfort of solid, rational thinking. He pushed, he shoved it away. He persevered.

“Listen,” he said, “we’re agreed that those bodies aren’t ours.”

No answer.

“Use your heads!” Ross commanded. “Feel yourself!”

Mason ran numbed fingers over his jumper, his helmet, the pen in his pocket. He clasped solid hands of flesh and bone. He looked at the veins in his arms. He pressed an anxious finger to his pulse. It’s true, he thought. And the thought drove lines of strength back into him. Despite all, despite Ross’s desperate advocacy, he was alive. Flesh and blood were his evidence.

His mind swung open then. His brow furrowed in thought as he lightened up. He saw a look almost of relief on the face of a weakening Ross.

“All right then,” he said, “we’re in the future.”

Mickey stood tensely by the port. “Where does that leave us?” he asked.

The words threw Mason back. It was true, where did it leave them?

“How do we know how distant a future?” he said, adding weight to the depression of Mickey’s words. “How do we know it isn’t in the next twenty minutes?”

Ross tightened. He punched his palm with a resounding smack.

“How do we know?” he said strongly. “We don’t go up, we can’t crash. That’s how we know.”

Mason looked at him.

“Maybe if we went up,” he said, “we might bypass our death altogether and leave it in this space-time system. We could get back to the space-time system of our own galaxy and...”

His words trailed off. His brain became absorbed with twisting thought.

Ross frowned. He stirred restlessly, licked his lips. What had been simple was now something else again. He resented the uninvited intrusion of complexity.

"We're alive now," he said, getting it set in his mind, consolidating assurance with reasonable words, "and there's only one way we can stay alive."

He looked at them, decision reached. "We have to stay here," he said.

They just looked at him. He wished that one of them, at least, would agree with him, show some sign of definition in their minds.

"But ... what about our orders?" Mason said vaguely.

"Our orders don't tell us to kill ourselves!" Ross said. "No, it's the only answer. If we never go up again, we never crash. We ... we avoid it, we prevent it!"

His head jarred once in a curt nod. To Ross, the thing was settled.

Mason shook his head.

"I don't know," he said. "I don't..."

"I do," Ross stated. "Now let's get out of here. This ship is getting on our nerves."

Mason stood up as the captain gestured toward the door. Mickey started to move, then hesitated. He looked down at the bodies.

"Shouldn't we...?" he started to inquire.

"What, what?" Ross asked, impatient to leave.

Mickey stared at the bodies. He felt caught up in a great, bewildering insanity.

"Shouldn't we ... bury ourselves?" he said.

Ross swallowed. He would hear no more. He herded them out of the cabin. Then, as they started down through the wreckage, he looked in at the door. He looked at the tarpaulin with the jumble mound of bodies beneath it. He pressed his lips together until they were white.

"I'm alive," he muttered angrily.

Then he turned out the cabin light with tight, vengeful fingers and left.

* * *

They all sat in the cabin of their own ship. Ross had ordered food brought out from the lockers, but he was the only one eating. He ate with a belligerent rotation of his jaw as though he would grind away all mystery with his teeth.

Mickey stared at the food.

"How long do we have to stay?" he asked, as if he didn't clearly realize that they were to remain permanently.

Mason took it up. He leaned forward in his seat and looked at Ross.

"How long will our food last?" he said.

"There's edible food outside, I've no doubt," Ross said, chewing.

"How will we know which is edible and which is poisonous?"

"We'll watch the animals," Ross persisted.

"They're a different type of life," Mason said. "What they can eat might be poisonous to us. Besides, we don't even know if there are any animals here."

The words made his lips raise in a brief, bitter smile. And he'd actually been hoping to contact another people. It was practically humorous.

Ross bristled. "We'll ... cross each river as we come to it," he blurted out as if he hoped to smother all complaint with this ancient homily.

Mason shook his head. "I don't know," he said.

Ross stood up.

“Listen,” he said. “It’s easy to ask questions. We’ve all made a decision to stay here. Now let’s do some concrete thinking about it. Don’t tell me what we can’t do. I know that as well as you. Tell me what we can do.”

Then he turned on his heel and stalked over to the control board. He stood there glaring at blank faced gauges and dials. He sat down and began scribbling rapidly in his log as if something of great note had just occurred to him. Later Mason looked at what Ross had written and saw that it was a long paragraph which explained in faulty but unyielding logic why they were all alive.

Mickey got up and sat down on his bunk. He pressed his large hands against his temples. He looked very much like a little boy who had eaten too many green apples against his mother’s injunction and who feared retribution on both counts. Mason knew what Mickey was thinking. Of that still body with the skull forced in. The image of himself brutally killed in collision. He, Mason, was thinking of the same thing. And, behavior to the contrary, Ross probably was too.

Mason stood by the port looking out at the silent hulk across the meadow. Darkness was falling. The last rays of the planet’s sun glinted off the skin of the crashed rocket ship. Mason turned away. He looked at the outside temperature gauge. Already it was seven degrees and it was still light. Mason moved the thermostat needle with his right forefinger.

Heat being used up, he thought. The energy of our grounded ship being used up faster and faster. The ship drinking its own blood with no possibility of transfusion. Only operation would recharge the ship’s energy system. And they were without motion, trapped and stationary.

“How long can we last?” he asked Ross again, refusing to keep silence in the face of the question. “We can’t live in this ship indefinitely. The food will run out in a couple of months. And a long time before that the charging system will go. The heat will stop. We’ll freeze to death.”

“How do we know the outside temperature will freeze us?” Ross asked, falsely patient.

“It’s only sundown,” Mason said, “and already it’s ... minus thirteen degrees.”

Ross looked at him sullenly. Then he pushed up from his chair and began pacing.

“If we go up,” he said, “we risk ... *duplicating* that ship over there.”

“But would we?” Mason wondered. “We can only die once. It seems we already have. In this galaxy. Maybe a person can die once in every galaxy. Maybe that’s afterlife. Maybe...”

“Are you through?” asked Ross coldly.

Mickey looked up.

“Let’s go,” he said. “I don’t want to hang around here.”

He looked at Ross.

Ross said, “Let’s not stick out our necks before we know what we’re doing. Let’s think this out.”

“I have a wife!” Mickey said angrily. “Just because you’re not married—”

“Shut up!” Ross thundered.

Mickey threw himself on the bunk and turned to face the cold bulkhead. Breath shuddered through his heavy frame. He didn’t say anything. His fingers opened and closed on the blanket, twisting and pulling it out from under his body.

Ross paced the deck, abstractedly punching at his palm with a hard fist. His teeth clicked together as his head shook as one argument after another fell before his bullheaded determination. He stopped and looked at Mason, then started pacing again. Once he turned on the outside spotlight and looked out to make sure it was not imagination.

The light illumined the broken ship. It glowed strangely, like a huge, broken tombstone. Ross snapped off the spotlight with a soundless snarl. He turned to face them. His broad chest rose and fell heavily as he breathed.

“All right,” he said. “It’s *your* lives too. I can’t decide for all of us. We’ll hand vote on it. The thing out there may be something entirely different from what we think. If you two think it’s worth the

risk of our lives to go up, we'll ... go up."

He shrugged. "Vote," he said. "I say we stay here."

"I say we go," Mason said.

They looked at Mickey.

"Carter," said Ross, "what's your vote?"

Mickey looked over his shoulder with bleak eyes.

"Vote," Ross said.

"Up," Mickey said. "Take us up. I'd rather die than stay here."

Ross's throat moved. Then he took a deep breath and squared his shoulders.

"All right," he said quietly. "We'll go up."

"God have mercy on us," Mickey muttered as Ross went quickly to the control board.

The captain hesitated a moment. Then he threw switches. The great ship began shuddering as gas ignited and began to pour like channeled lightning from the rear vents. The sound was almost soothing to Mason. He didn't care any more; he was willing, like Mickey, to take a chance. It had only been a few hours. It had seemed like a year. Minutes had dragged, each one weighted with oppressive recollections. Of the bodies they'd seen, of the shattered rocket – even more of the Earth they would never see, of parents and wives and sweethearts and children. Lost to their sight forever. No, it was far better to try to get back. Sitting and waiting was always the hardest thing for a man to do. He was no longer conditioned for it.

Mason sat down at his board. He waited tensely. He heard Mickey jump up and move over to the engine control board.

"I'm going to take us up easy," Ross said to them. "There's no reason why we should ... have any trouble."

He paused. They snapped their heads over and looked at him with muscle-tight impatience.

"Are you both ready?" Ross asked.

"*Take us up!*" Mickey said.

Ross jammed his lips together and shoved over the switch that read: *Vertical Rise*.

They felt the ship tremble, hesitate. Then it moved off the ground, headed up with increasing velocity. Mason flicked on the rear viewer. He watched the dark earth recede, tried not to look at the white patch in the corner of the screen, the patch that shone metallically under the moonlight.

"Five hundred," he read. "Seven-fifty ... one thousand ... fifteen hundred..."

He kept waiting. For explosion. For an engine to give out. For their rise to stop.

They kept moving up.

"Three thousand," Mason said, his voice beginning to betray the rising sense of elation he felt. The planet was getting farther and farther away. The other ship was only a memory now. He looked across at Mickey. Mickey was staring, open-mouthed, as if he were about ready to shout out "*Hurry!*" but was afraid to tempt the fates.

"Six thousand ... *seven thousand!*" Mason's voice was jubilant. "We're *out* of it!"

Mickey's face broke into a great, relieved grin. He ran a hand over his brow and flicked great drops of sweat on the deck.

"God," he said, gasping, "my God."

Mason moved over to Ross's seat. He clapped the captain on the shoulder.

"We made it," he said. "Nice flying."

Ross looked irritated.

"We shouldn't have left," he said. "It was nothing all the time. Now we have to start looking for another planet." He shook his head. "It wasn't a good idea to leave," he said.

Mason stared at him. He turned away, shaking his head, thinking ... you can't win.

“If I ever see another glitter,” he thought aloud, “I’ll keep my big mouth shut. To hell with alien races anyway.”

Silence. He went back to his seat and picked up his graph chart. He let out a long shaking breath. Let Ross complain, he thought, I can take anything now. Things are normal again. He began to figure out casually what might have occurred down there on that planet. Then he happened to glance at Ross.

Ross was thinking. His lips pressed together. He said something to himself. Mason found the captain looking at him. “Mason,” he said.

“What?”

“Alien race, you said.”

Mason felt a chill flood through his body. He saw the big head nod once in decision. Unknown decision. His hands started to shake. A crazy idea came. No, Ross wouldn’t do that, not just to assuage his vanity. Would he?

“I don’t...” he started. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Mickey watching the captain too.

“Listen,” Ross said. “I’ll tell you what happened down there. I’ll *show* you what happened!”

They stared at him in paralyzing horror as he threw the ship around and headed back.

“What are you doing!” Mickey cried.

“Listen,” Ross said. “Didn’t you understand me? Don’t you see how we’ve been tricked?”

They looked at him without comprehension. Mickey took a step toward him.

“Alien race,” Ross said. “That’s the short of it. That time-space idea is all wet. But I’ll tell you what the idea isn’t all wet. So we leave the place. That’s our first instinct as far as reporting it? Saying it’s uninhabitable? We’d do more than that. We wouldn’t report it at all.”

“Ross, you’re not taking us back!” Mason said, standing up suddenly as the full terror of returning struck him.

“You bet I am!” Ross said, fiercely elated.

“You’re crazy!” Mickey shouted at him, his body twitching, his hands clenched at his sides, looking menacingly.

“Listen to me!” Ross roared at them. “Who would be benefited by us not reporting the existence of that planet?”

They didn’t answer. Mickey moved closer.

“Fools!” he said. “Isn’t it obvious? There *is* life down there. But life that isn’t strong enough to kill us or chase us away with force. So what can they do? They don’t want us there. So what can they do?”

He asked them like a teacher who cannot get the right answers from the dolts in his class.

Mickey looked suspicious. But he was curious now, too, and a little timorous as he had always been with his captain, except in moments of greatest physical danger. Ross had always led them, and it was hard to rebel against it even when it seemed he was trying to kill them all. His eyes moved to the viewer screen where the planet began to loom beneath them like a huge dark ball.

“We’re alive,” Ross said, “and I say there never was a ship down there. We saw it, sure. We *touch* it. But you can see anything if you believe it’s there! All your senses can tell you there’s something when there’s nothing. All you have to do is *believe* it!”

“What are you getting at?” Mason asked hurriedly, too frightened to realize. His eyes fled to the altitude gauge. Seventeen thousand ... sixteen thousand ... fifteen ...

“Telepathy,” Ross said, triumphantly decisive. “I say those men, or whatever they are, saw us coming. And they didn’t want us there. So they read our minds and saw the death fear, and they decided that the best way to scare us away was to show us our ship crashed and ourselves dead in it. And it worked ... until now.”

“So it worked!” Mason exploded. “Are you going to take a chance on killing us just to prove your damn theory?”

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