

Three Spacemen Left To Die!

By Russ Winterbotham

Disease contaminated their ship; any moment one of them might become infected and spray lethal sparks to the others. There was no cure—except prevention. And that meant—

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Commander Al Andrews had closed and locked the energy-proof, neutralizing bulkheads against the creeping red glow that infected one quadrant of his circular space ship. Now he stood in the Control Center, in the mid-section of the revolving wagon-wheel ship, looking at Oakey Matthews.

There had been times aboard this ship when a whole crew had been comfortable in months-long trips through space. But now there were only three men, three men fleeing from death and it was no longer comfortable here, because death was breathing down the neck of at least one of them.

Oakey was intent on the instruments in front of him. Oakey was young, with a face that glowed with velvet skin. Even in space Oakey shaved every day, shined his shoes and pressed his uniform. Al was sloppy, bearded and ungroomed. But Al had lived most of his 50 years in space.

Oakey looked up toward Al. His young eyes searched the hard leathery face of his commander. He saw the grim set to Al's jaw and the hard lines around the older man's eyes. Al was cold. Nerveless as a piece of rope.

"How's Joe?" Oakey asked.

Al shook his head. "Last stages," he said. The commander went to a tier of built-in drawers across the room from the control panel. His arm reached out, pulled on the third drawer from the bottom. From this drawer he took an old-fashioned revolver and a box of

shells. Not ordinary shells. The bullets were plastic, strong enough to pierce flesh, too soft to rupture the walls of the space ship.

"Don't do it, Al," Oakey said, watching the commander.

Al shook his head. He slipped bullets into the cylinder.

"We're the last earthmen, let's not die killing each other," pleaded the young man. "This thing will catch us all before long. Let's stop fighting it. Joe's our pal. Let him live."

"We're the last earthmen and we're going down fighting," said Al.

"We've fought. For ten years we've fought. Now we're in space, Al. So far from the sun we can't tell it from any other star. There's no earth women here. Even if we live a few years longer, the strain of earth-blood dies with us. We're licked, Al. Let's surrender gracefully."

"We're earthmen," said Al. "We fight."

"The last earthmen. There's nothing left to fight for—"

"Except life," said Al. "Now listen, Oakey. I'm still commander. I know what I'm doing and you take orders from me—or it's mutiny. Yeah, I know the Quinnies have covered the earth. From the Arctic to the tropics men died shooting sparks like fireworks. But the earth isn't the only planet in the Galaxy where men exist. You didn't take that first trip this ship made, did you, boy?"

Oakey laughed. "That was ten years ago. I was a kid in high school then."

Al flipped the cylinder closed and made sure the gun was ready to use. "We went to another system," he said. "A fluke, maybe. Or

maybe the Old Man planned it. He believed in interstellar travel by dimensional short cuts. I was third mate, like you. I fingered the controls and he gave me the figures. Something like a double right-angle repeated twice. I was dizzy as hell when I finally put old Wagon Wheel on a straight course, but after I blinked my eyes a couple of times and looked out through a porthole, I knew that the Old Man was right. There was the cutest little green planet, and the nicest, warmest fourth-magnitude sun you ever saw." He smiled and the hard lines disappeared for a moment. "Where are we now?"

"Sixty-three, seven, ninety-one. At 1300. I can work it down to twelve decimals, sir, if you want—"

"Never mind. Just watch the instruments. The chronometer lines will tell you when."

Al stuffed the revolver under his belt in the front of his trousers. "We're going back to that planet, Oakey. A pretty little place, soft and warm as a tropical isle. And there were nice looking people there—human beings like us." Al closed his eyes. "Such women. Nice round shoulders. Soft brown eyes you could spend a lifetime looking into. There was one...."

Al paused while his fingers seemed to caress the butt of the pistol. "She called herself something like Dwea.... I taught her to speak English a little." The commander shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe you'll find a girl there, Oakey. Maybe I'll see mine again. That was ten years ago." He chuckled. "She's probably got a husband and six kids now."

Al took a step toward the doorway marked C, one of four, each leading to a quadrant of the wagon wheel.

"Please, sir," said Oakey. "Don't—"

Al pulled open the door. "Time's getting short and we can't take the Quinnies to that planet with us." A sweep of centrifugal force caught him as he opened the door. His big, hairy hand caught the rung of a ladder beside the door. "Joe went on that trip. He and I were the only ones of the crew that didn't catch the Quinnies the minute we landed back on earth. We ducked out again, shipping with a new commander with a new crew on old Wagon Wheel again. We went to Ganymede."

"Yeah," said Oakey. "I was cabin boy on that trip. My first space flight. Maybe that's how I escaped the Quinnies too." Oakey glanced at the chronometer. "We've still got fifty-five minutes. Why don't you wait twenty minutes or so?"

Al heaved a sigh and swung onto the ladder, letting himself down, which was outward, toward the rim of the wheel. "I might have trouble," he said.

Al put his hands against the bulkhead door. It was cool enough. The Death Glow wasn't seeping into the ship. The Glow itself wasn't the contagious part. It was the sparks that shot from men's bodies. The early stages of the disease were the dangerous ones, for then the sparks were often too small to be seen. In the later stages a man suffering from Quinnies gave off his own warning and could be avoided.

Al took a small intercom phone from a box beside the doorway. He spoke into it. "Joe."

A voice came back. "Yeah. That you, commander?"

"Yes, Joe. How do you feel?"

"Like hell, I guess. Funny though, there's no pain. Just annoying. Like the hiccups. And I'm getting weaker."

"You're in the last stages."

"Maybe. Maybe not. I've heard of guys that lived fourteen months shooting sparks worse than I'm doing right now."

"I'm coming in, Joe."

"Give me a break, Al. I won't come near you or Oakey. I'll stay here. There's food, water ... everything I need. Just let me live till it starts to hurt. Maybe I'll ask you to come in then."

"There isn't time, Joe. Besides, it'll be easier this way. You're dying. You're shooting sparks from your hair roots. Something might happen and Oakey and I would come down with the Quinnies. We are the only earthmen left now, Joe."

"Don't be too sure." Joe's voice was harsh, like the hissing of sparks. "You might have the Quinnies and not know it."

"You're not in pain?"

"Hell no. I told you I wasn't. But I'm lit up like the Fourth of July, Guy Fawkes Day, Bastille Day and the Chinese New Year."

"Your brain's a dynamo of energy, Joe. It's shooting Quinnies in all directions through every nerve fibre of your body."

"Are you trying to make it easier, or something?"

"I'm trying to make you understand. I've got to kill you. I'm not doing it because I want to. You're my best friend, Joe. We've had a lot of swell times together. But I've got to kill you—Oakey and I

have to land on the Green Planet and we're not taking the Quinnies there with us."

"You're doing me a favor, huh? Some favor. Better make sure you haven't got the Quinnies yourself before you try to make like God."

"I'd know if I had 'em," said Al. "I'm coming in, Joe."

"I'll kill you first," said Joe. "As a favor to myself."

Al shot back the bolt. "Don't try it, Joe."

The commander pulled on the door. It swung open a couple of feet. A bolt of red fire swept through the opening. But Al had expected this and he was safe behind the neutralizing door. Then Al stepped into the opening. He didn't need light, for Joe was a red glow against the quadrant wall.



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