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A woman with dark hair, wearing a white, low-cut, sleeveless dress, floats in the center of the frame with her arms raised. She is positioned against a bright, glowing red circular light in a sky that is a deep, solid red. Below her, a cityscape is visible, with several tall buildings. The buildings on the left and right are dark and appear to be crumbling or falling apart, with jagged, red, root-like structures growing from them. The overall scene suggests a dramatic, apocalyptic, or fantastical event.

**TONIGHT
THE SKY
WILL FALL!**

by
**DANIEL F.
GALOUYE**

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE STRANGER ***

THE STRANGER

By Gordon R. Dickson

**If the alien space craft was not a rocket
ship, what was it? And an even bigger question:
should they investigate—or run for their lives!**

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We will not consider the odds involved in their finding the stranger, for the odds were impossible.

They came down to rest their tubes on an unnamed planet of a little-known star in the Buckhorn Cluster. Because they were tired from weeks in space, they came in without looking. They circled the planet once and spiraled down to an open patch of sand between two rocky cliffs. Only then did they see the other ship.

Jeff Wadley was at the controls and his eyes widened when he saw it. But his fingers did not hesitate on the controls, for a deep-space starship is not the kind of vehicle that can change its mind about landing once it is within half a mile of the ground. He brought the Emerald Girl in smoothly to a stop not five hundred feet from the stranger. Then he sat back.

"Dad," he said flatly, into the intercom, "swing the turret!"

Peter Wadley, up in the instrument room, had already seen the strange ship, and the heavy twin barrels of the automatic rifles were depressing to cover. Jeff leaned forward to the communicator.

"Identify yourself!" The tight beam in Common Code snapped across the little stretch of open sand to the cliff against which the other seemed to nestle. "We are the mining ship Emerald Girl, Earth license, five hundred and eighty-two days out of Arcturus Station. *Identify yourself!"*

There were steps behind Jeff, and Peter Wadley came to stand behind his son's tense back.

"Do they answer, Jeff?"

"No."

"Identify yourself. Identify yourself! Identify yourself!"

The angry demand crackled and arced invisibly across the space between both vessels. And there was no answer.

Jeff sat back from the communicator. The palms of his hands were wet and he wiped them on the cloth of his breeches.

"Let's get out of here," he said nervously.

"And leave *him*?" his father's lean forefinger indicated the strange silent ship.

"Why not?" Jeff jerked his face up. "We're no salvage outfit or Government exploration unit."

There was a moment of tenseness between them. The older man's face tightened.

"We'd better look into it," he said.

"Are you crazy?" blazed Jeff. "It was here when we came. It'll be here if we leave. Let's get going. We can report it if you want. Let the Federal ships investigate."

"Maybe it just landed," his father said evenly. "Maybe it's in trouble."

"What if it is?" Jeff insisted. "Don't you realize we're a sitting target here? And what do you think it is—Aunt Susie's runabout? Look at it!" And with a savage flip of his hand he shoved the magnification of the viewing screen up so that the other ship seemed to loom up a handbreadth beyond their walls.

It was an unnecessary gesture. There was no mistaking that the lines of the other ship were foreign to any they had ever seen. It was big: not outlandishly big, but bigger than the Emerald Girl, and bulb-shaped with most of its bulk in front. There was no sign of ports or airlocks, only a few stubby fins, which projected forlornly from the body at an angle of some thirty degrees.

And from its silence and immobility, its strange inhuman lines, a cold air of alien menace seemed to reach out to chill the two watching men.

"Well?" challenged Jeff. But the older man was not listening.

"The radarcamera," he said, half to himself. He turned on his heel and stalked off. Jeff, sitting tensely in his chair, heard his father's footsteps die away, to be succeeded seconds later by the distant clumsy sounds of a man getting into a spacesuit. Jeff swore, and jumping to his feet, ran to the

airlock. His father, radarcamera at his feet, was already half-dressed to go outside.

"You aren't going out there?" he asked incredulously.

The older man nodded and picked up his fishbowl helmet. Jeff's face twisted in dismay.

"I won't let you!" he half-shouted. "You're risking your life and I can't navigate the ship without you."

Helmet in hand, his father paused, the deep-graved lines of his face stiffening.

"I'm still master of this ship!" he said curtly. "Alien or not that other ship may need assistance. By intraspace law I'm obliged to give it. If you're worried, cover me from the gun-turret." He dropped the helmet over his head, cutting Jeff off from further protest.

Seething with mixed fear and anger, Jeff turned abruptly and climbed hurriedly to the gun-turret. The twin barrels of the rifles were already centered on their target, which the aiming screen showed, together with the area between the two vessels and a portion of the Emerald Girl's airlock, which projected from her side. As Jeff watched, the outer lock swung open and a grey, space-suited figure raced for the protection of the bow. It was a dash of no more than five seconds' duration, but to Jeff it seemed that his father took an eternity to reach safety.

He reached for the microphone on the ship's circuit and pulled it to him.

"All right, Dad?" In spite of himself, Jeff's voice was still ragged with anger.

"Fine, Jeff," his father's voice came back in unperturbed tones. "I'm well shielded and I can get good, clean shots at every part of her."

"Let me know when you're ready to start back," said Jeff, and shoved the microphone away from him.

He sat back and lit a cigarette, but his eyes continued to watch the other ship as a man might watch a dud bomb which has not yet been disarmed. After a while, he noticed his fingers were shaking, and he laid the cigarette carefully down in the ashtray.

When he comes back, thought Jeff, it'll be time. We'll have this thing out then. He's become some sort of a religious fanatic, and he doesn't know it. How a man who's been all over hell and seen the worst sides of fifty different races in as many years can think of them all as lovable human children, I don't know. But, know it or not, this taking of chances has got to stop someplace; and right here is the best place of all. When he gets back—if he gets back, we're taking off. And if he doesn't get back ... I'll blow that bloody bastard over there into so many bits....

"Coming in, Jeff," his father's voice on the speaker interrupted him.

Jeff leaned forward, his hands on the trips of the rifles; the small grey figure suddenly shot back to the protection of the airlock, which snapped shut behind it. Then, he took a deep breath, stood up, and wiped the perspiration from his forehead. He went down to the instrument room.

Peter Wadley was already out of his suit and developing the pictures. Jeff picked them up as they came off the roll, damp and soft to the touch.

"I can't tell much," he said, holding them up to the light.

"There's a great deal of overlap," his father answered. "We're going to have to section and fit the pieces together like a jigsaw puzzle. Wait'll I'm through here."

For about five minutes more, pictures continued to come off the roll. Then Peter picked up a pair of scissors and arranged the prints in their proper sequence.

"Clear the table," he told Jeff, "and fit these together as I hand them to you."

For a little while longer, they worked in silence. Then Peter laid down his scissors.

"That's all," he said. "Now, what have we got?"

"I don't know," answered Jeff, bewilderment in his voice. "It looks like nothing I've ever seen."

Peter stepped up to the table and squinted at the shadowy films with eyes practiced in reading rock formations. He shook his head.

"It is strange," he said, finally.

"Do you see what I see?" demanded Jeff. "There's no real crew space. There's this one spot—up front—" he indicated it with his finger—"that's about as big as a good sized closet. And nothing more than that—except corridors about twenty inches in diameter running from it to points all over the ship. She must be flown by a crew of midgets."

"Midgets," echoed the older man, thoughtfully. "I never heard of an intelligent race that small."

"Then they're something new," said Jeff, with a shrug of his shoulders.

"No," said his father, slowly. "I don't remember when or where I heard it, but there's some reason why you couldn't have an intelligent race much smaller than a good sized dog. It has something to do with the fact that they grow in size as their developing intelligence gives them an increasing advantage over their environment."

"Here's the evidence," Jeff answered, tapping the film with one finger.

"No," Pete was bending over the picture fragments again. "Look at these things in the corridor. They're obviously controls."

Jeff looked.

"I see what you mean," he said at last. "If there's any similarity between their mechanical system and ours, these controls are built for somebody pretty big. But look how they're scattered all over the ship. There's a good fifteen or twenty different groups of instruments and other things. That means a number of crew members; and you simply can't put a number of large crew members in those little corridors."

"There's a large amount of total space," Pete began. Then, suddenly a faint tremor ran through the ship. Jeff leaped for the screen and his father moved over to stand behind him.

"Good Lord," said Jeff, "look at her."

The other ship shook suddenly and rolled slightly to one side. Some unseen center of gravity pulled her back to her original position. She hesitated a moment, and then tried again, with the same results. She lay quiescent.

Jeff pounced on his radiation drum graph.

"What does it say?" Peter asked.

Jeff shook his head in astonishment. "Nothing," he answered, "just nothing at all."

"Nothing?" Peter came over to take a look at the graph himself. It was as Jeff had said. The line tracing the white surface of the graph was straight and undisturbed.

"But that's impossible," Peter frowned.

The two men turned back to the screen. As they watched, one final shudder shook the strange ship, and then, like a stranded whale who has given up hope, it lay still.

"My God!" said Pete, and Jeff turned to him in astonishment. It was the closest to profanity his father had come in twenty years. "Jeff, do you know what I think? I think that ship is manned by just one great big creature—like a giant squid. That's why no radiation registered. He was trying to move his ship by sheer strength."

Jeff stared at his father.

"You're crazy," was all he could manage to say. "Why, something big enough to shake that ship would have to fill every inch of space inside it. You can't live in a space ship that way."

"That's right," Pete answered. He clamped his hand on Jeff's shoulder excitedly and led him back to the jigsaw puzzle on the table.

"If I'm right," he said, "that's no ship at all as we understand it, but some sort of a space-going suit for something terrifically large. Something like a giant squid, as I said, or some other long-tentacled creature. His body would

lie here—in this space you said was about the size of a closet—and his tentacles or whatever they are, would reach out in these corridors to the various groups of instruments."

Jeff frowned.

"It sounds sensible," he muttered. "And in any case, he wouldn't be able to get outside his ship to fix anything that went wrong. And I take it there is something wrong, or else he wouldn't be jumping around inside."

"Jeff," Pete said, "I'm going outside to take a close look at him."

Jeff's head snapped up from the jigsaw puzzle. The old, sick fear had come back. It washed over him like a wave.

"Why?" he demanded harshly.

"To see if I can find out what's wrong with his ship," said Pete over his shoulder as he went to the airlock. "Coming?"

"Wait!" cried Jeff. He stood up and followed his father. For a moment there, they stood facing each other, two tall men with less apparent physical difference between them than their ages might indicate, poised on the brink of an open break.

"Wait," said Jeff again, and now his voice was lower, more under control. "Dad, there's no point in playing around any longer. You aren't going to be satisfied just to look around out there and then leave. You're going to do something. And if that's it I want to know now."

There was a moment's silence; then Pete turned back to Jeff, his face set.

"That's right," he said. "I don't have to look. I know what's wrong. And I know what I'm going to do about it. There's a living intelligence trapped in that space-thing as you and I might be trapped. I can set it free with two of our motor jacks. If you've got one inkling of what it means to be ignored when you're caught like that, you'll help me. If not, I'm taking two jacks out the airlock and you can fire the motors and take off and be damned to you."

Between the two big men the tension built and strained and broke. Jeff let out a ragged sigh.

"All right," he said. "I'm with you."

"Good," said the older man, and there was new life in his voice. "Get your suit on. I'll explain as we dress."

"The trouble with our friend there is that he's fallen over. I see you don't understand, Jeff. Well, this ship of ours lands on her belly. We've got booster rockets all over the hull to correct our landing angle. But ships weren't always that way. They used to have to sit down on their tail. There's no furrow where that ship landed, only a circular blasted spot, so it figures. Maybe some of his mechanism went wrong at the last minute.

"At any rate, I'm betting that if we get him upright again, he can take care of himself from there on out. So you and I are going to go out there with a couple of jacks and see if we can't jack him back up into position."

The sand was thick and heavy. The walk over to the other ship was tedious, with the heavy jacks weighing them down. They reached the alien hull, paused a moment to get their breath and then attached the magnetic grapples to the skin of the ship at two points on opposite sides of the hull and roughly a fourth of the way up from the rocket tubes.

It was hard to anchor the jacks in the soft sand. They finally found it necessary to dig them in some three or four feet to a layer of rock that underlay the sand. Then, when everything was ready, they took their stations, each at a jack, and Pete called to Jeff on the helmet set.

"All ready? Start your motor."

Jeff reached down and flicked a switch. The tiny, powerful jack motor began to spin, and the jack base settled more solidly against its rocky bed. When he was sure that it would not slip, he left it, and went around the rockets to stand by his father.

His face was grey.

"Well," said Pete tensely, "up she goes."

The nose of the alien ship was raising slowly from the sand. It quivered softly from some motion inside the ship.

"Yes," said Jeff, "up she goes." His words were flat and dull. Pete turned to look at him.

"Scared, son?" he asked. Jeff's lips parted, closed and opened again.

"You know how we stand," he said, dully. "I've heard what you said from other men, but never from an alien. Most of the ones we know hit first, and talk afterward. You know that once this ship is on its feet we're at his mercy. Just his rocket blasts alone could kill us; and there won't be time to get back to the Girl."

The alien was now at an angle of forty-five degrees. The little jacks stretched steadily, pushing their thin, stiff arms against the strange hull. Sand dripped from the rising ship.

"Yes, Jeff," Pete said. "I know. But the important thing isn't what he does, but what we do. The fact that we've helped him—can't you see it that way, son?"

Jeff shook his head in bewilderment.

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

The ship was now nearly upright. Suddenly, with an abruptness that startled both men, it shook itself free of the jacks and teetered free for a second, before coming to rest, its nose pointing straight up.

"Here it goes," said Pete, a tinge of excitement in his voice. They moved back some yards to be out of the way of the takeoff blast. Suddenly the ground trembled under their feet. Pete put his hand on the younger man's shoulder.

"Here it goes," he repeated, in a whisper.

Flame burst abruptly from the base of the ship. It was warming up its tubes. Slowly the flame puffed out from its base and it began to rise.

Jeff shook suddenly with an uncontrollable shudder. His voice came to Pete through the earphones, starkly afraid.

"Now what?" he cried. "What'll he do now?"

Pete's grip tightened on his shoulder.

"Steady boy."

The ship was rising. Up it went, and up, until it was the size of a man's little finger, a tiny sliver of silver against the black backdrop of the sky. Then, inexplicably, it halted and began to reverse itself.

Slowly it turned, until the blunt nose pointed toward them. Jeff's hoarse breathing was loud in his helmet. *Now it comes*, he thought, and his muscles tensed.

A long minute flowed by and still the alien hung there. Then, abruptly it went into a series of idiotic gyrations; it twisted and turned, and spun around, swinging its fiery trail of rocket gases like a luminous tail in the darkness. Then, just as abruptly, it reversed once more, so that its head was away from them; in the twinkling of a moment it was gone.

Pete sighed, a deep, ragged sigh.

"Did you see it, boy?" he cried. "Did you see it?"

"I saw," Jeff's voice was filled with a new awe. "Now I get it. He wasn't sure—he didn't know we were really trying to help him until we let him get all the way out there by himself. Then he knew he was free. That's why he wouldn't answer before."

"Sure, Jeff, sure," said the older man, a note of triumph in his voice. "But that's not what I mean. Did you notice all those contortions he was going through up there? What did they remind you of?"

There was a moment of silence, then the words came, at first slowly, then in a rush from Jeff's lips.

"Like a puppy," he said, haltingly, stumbling over the wonder of it. "Like a puppy wagging its tail."

And the light of a new understanding broke suddenly in his eyes.

"Dad!" said Jeff, turning to his father. "Dad! Do you know what I think? I think we've made a friend."

And the two men stood there, side by side, looking into the blackness of space where an odd-shaped spacecraft had vanished. It, they felt, was on its way home.

And they were right. Moreover, It was hurrying.

For It had a story to tell.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE STRANGER

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