

The Lonely One

by Robert Silverberg, 1935–

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Jannes very carefully guided the two-man cruiser out through the HAUGHTSMITH's lock, while Norb Kendon paced up and down in the tiny confines of the little ship, watching the red dot of light that was Sol.

"I feel kind of funny about this, Harl." Norb stared at the small hard point of red light. "I feel like a kid going where the grownups belong."

Jannes said nothing till the cruiser was in free fall; then he wheeled around to face the other. "So what if it's Earth? Those wild men down there can't be anything to get sentimental about. That's your trouble, Norb—sentiment. You haven't learned, have you?"

Norb repressed a tiny beat of anger that rose suddenly within him. "You know I'm not being sentimental. It's just that—just that here's the planet that gave birth to life. The source of all mankind; and here it is dead or almost dead."

"And that's not being sentimental, eh? What do you call it, then?"

Norb frowned. "You win you long-nosed devil; I'm being sentimental. So what? Is it a crime? I just can't help feeling reverential right now."

"I'll lay off," Jannes said. A smile creased his face, and pulled his long, twisting snake of a nose into an even more grotesque shape.

The cruiser began to spiral down into its landing orbit. Jannes skillfully cut the orbit to minimum and sat the ship gently on its tail. He deactivated the pile, while Norb tested the atmosphere. "How is it, Norb?"

"What do you expect? Cold as hell, but breathable."

"How cold?"

"Plenty; five below, I hope the natives have some warm igloos for us."

"If we find natives, that is," Jannes rejoined. "We haven't heard a peep out of Earth for twenty years, and there were only a few hundred left then."

"We'll find them," Norb said. "Life doesn't give up so easily on this planet, methinks. Man'll stick pretty closely to his home world."

"Sentiment again," Jannes snorted, as they snapped open the lock and headed out.

The snow was soft and unbroken, and the two spacemen sank in to their hips. They floundered around in the drifts for a few moments.

"Hey," Jannes called shouting to make himself heard over the whistling wind. "We'd better clear a path in front of us, or we'll never get anywhere."

They fumbled out their blasters and began to melt a path through the snow. The warmth fanned out around them.

"Which way is that colony?" Norb asked.

"Mukennik said due east which is thataway. If it's a colony, that is; how anything could survive in this kind of territory is beyond me."

They pushed on through the snow, leaving a little river of warmth behind them. The day was dark with the perpetual gloom of a dying world, and the dwarfed sun afforded little illumination and less heat. For as far as they could see, there was nothing but the shiny glint of the snow, broken occasionally by the few twisted, leafless trees which pierced the white blanket and stood out sharp against the grey skies.

"Are we headed east, Harl?"

"Don't you trust the compass?" Jannes asked. "It says we're going east. Not that it matters much."

"It's just that I don't see any sign of that colony. If Mukennik could see signs of life from the HAUGHTSMITH we ought to be able to find them from down here. And there's nothing in sight in any direction."

Jannes stared hard at the compass. "It says east is out that way; and we'll go that way. If we don't find anything, we'll turn back. Let Mukennik come down here and freeze for a while; I don't see why that green-faced clown couldn't come looking for his own colonies, instead of sending us."

Norb looked quizzically at his companion. "Quit it, Harl. You know a Sirian couldn't stand this kind of climate, or else Mukennik would be down here without any coaxing. Besides, we volunteered."

"Yeah. I almost forgot that, didn't I?" Jannes wiped a speck of snow from the end of his nose. "Let's look real hard, yes? Maybe bring back a live Earthman or two for Mukennik's collection."

Norb said nothing. He squinted out toward the horizon, hoping to catch the slow rising of smoke or some other token of life. Suddenly he stretched up on tiptoe. "You see that out there Harl? That look like a living thing to you?"

"Where? You mean that tree all the way out there?" Jannes pointed.

“Right direction, but it’s not a tree; looks like a moving figure to me.”

“I’ll take your word for it. Say, is Mukennik serious about that offer?”

“I’m sure he is,” said Norb, straining hard to see the distant figure.

“He’ll feel pretty foolish if we do find them. He’ll have one hell of a time trying to fit them all aboard the HAUGHTSMITH.” Mentioning the ship reminded Jannes that he had descended from space in a ship, and he hastily turned to look for the cruiser. He was somewhat surprised to see that the trail they had blazed extended only a few hundred meters back to the ship.

“Look at that, Kendon; I was sure we’d gone farther than that.”

“Must be your mind snapping,” Norb retorted. “Say, that is a figure out there!”

Jannes stared and agreed. They began to shout and run as fast as they could—which was not—very fast—through the snow toward the far-off shape.

The old man had caught sight of them as they ran, and was standing in the snow, arms akimbo, waiting for them to approach. He was waiting by one of the gnarled trees, and, Norb observed, he was as gnarled himself as the twisted tree he leaned against. He was very old and terribly dried-out looking; Norb hoped he wasn’t deaf.

“Greetings, Earthman,” Norb said slowly and carefully once they were within speaking range. “We have come from the skies in silver bird.” Norb illustrated this with his hands, and Jannes followed Norb’s lead.

“Do you understand us, old one?” Jannes asked, rolling each syllable out with care.

The wrinkled oldster smiled. “Of course I do, son. Why do you star people insist on treating us like savages, anyway?” The old man’s voice was husky and impossibly deep. “I’ve been speaking this language for as long as both of you’ve been alive.”

The two spacemen looked at each other in surprise. “Sorry,” Norb said, smiling. “It’s just that Earth’s been out of touch with the System for so many years that we didn’t know exactly what to expect.”

“Quite all right, believe me. Welcome to Earth. Where’d you say you were from, anyway?”

“Starship HAUGHTSMITH, out of Vega II.”

“Is Vega II a beautiful planet, young man?”

“That it is,” Norb said. “Our winters are only a few degrees cooler than our summers, and the Climate Constant is one of the best in the galaxy.”

“Interesting,” the old man said.

“We’ll be glad to get back there,” Jannes replied. “No snow.”

Norb heard a low rumbling coming from the Earth. It grew steadily in intensity. “What’s that?”

“Earthquake,” the old man said. “Means Earth’s annoyed at what you said about going back. She likes to keep her visitors around for a while.”

“We’ll be here a while,” Jannes said; “and then we’ll clear out as fast as we can—if we’re not frozen solid first.” The ground began to quiver and the two Vegans fell forward in the snow. The old Earthman remained upright calmly ripping up the bark of the tree with horny fingers and stuffing the pieces of bark into a sack as they came off.

"Guess you got her angry, all right. Come; I've got all the bark I need now, so let me take you to see the king before you get into some real trouble. My name's Calvin, by the way; I'm just about the oldest man on Earth, I guess. McNeil's been expecting you for years—ever since the transmitter broke down." Calvin gestured and led them off in a path through the snow.

Suddenly, the old man disappeared from sight. His voice boomed up from the ground below. "Keep moving; the entrance is right in front of you."

The two spacemen moved cautiously forward, Norb in the lead, and felt the ground beginning to slope. Abruptly the snow fell away and Norb saw there was a slanting hole in the ground. He entered.

Kalvin was standing there with a knot of people around him. Most of them were old, Norb noted, all thin and knotty-looking. There were a few children, not many.

"Welcome to the capital city of Earth," Calvin said, "the last survivors of the glory that was Terra salute you."

"Do you all live here?" Jannes asked.

"All hundred and two of us," replied Calvin, waving. "You see before you the guardians of man's immortal heritage. That's what they told us when they left us behind." He laughed raucously.

A tall man appeared from somewhere in the back of the cavern. Like the others, he was warmly dressed in animal furs, and in his flowing white hair was a crown made of shining metal. As he approached the spacemen saw that he was very tall indeed.

"I'm McNeil," the tall man said. Norb looked him up and down and decided he was almost three meters tall from shining crown to fur-swathed feet—the tallest man he had ever seen. "Welcome to Earth," McNeil said. "I'm the king."

Jannes and Norb exchanged uncertain glances. The space manual didn't say anything about proper behavior in front of kings. "We're honored, Your Majesty," Norb began uncertainly. "We represent the Starship HAUGHTSMITH out of Vega II."

"Just call me McNeil," the big man said. "Pleasure is all mine; I've been expecting visitors from space for twenty years—ever since our transmitter went off. Sorry we had to hide from you, but when I saw your ship up there I figured the best thing to do was to cover up all traces of our city until we knew whether it was safe or not. I think you saw us from up there before we had a chance to cover up, because you seemed to know where to land." McNeil turned to Calvin, who was standing nearby. "Hey, oldster, you've earned another."

The king took a strip of fur from his collar and put it around Calvin's neck, where, Norb observed, there already were a number of similar strips. Calvin smiled, bowed, and fingered the new fur strip pleasedly.

"Kalvin's our most honored knight," McNeil explained. "The old dog's lived so long he's been knighted ten times over. I was hoping the spacemen would eat you when you went out to get them, leatherface." He gave the old man a playful shove and Calvin backed slowly away.

"He said there were just a hundred and two of you," Norb said.

"That's right. There used to be more, but we're slowly dying out. This life isn't an easy one, and Earth seems to get colder every year. I won't give us more than

another century, and then this'll be a dead planet. Come on, I'll show you a room you can have while you're here."

Norb and Jannes followed the tall king down a winding corridor. Jannes was still too amazed to say very much, and followed along in silence.

"That's why we came," Norb said; "we weren't sure anyone was left on Earth or not. But now you won't have to fight the cold anymore; we're going to take you back to Vega with us—all of you—and you can spend the rest of your lives in warmth."

"I'm afraid it's too late for that," said McNeil; "better forget the idea. Here's your room. The people will be putting on a dance for you tonight, and we'll come get you when it's time." The king showed them a small room carved out of the side of the cavern, bowed, and vanished into the corridor.

"I guess you were right," Jannes said, as soon as they were alone.

Norb smiled at the smaller man. "I guess so, Longnose. It's wonderful to find the home of civilization again, isn't it? When we get them back to Vega, we can give them a whole village and make it into a living museum to preserve the ways of dead Earth. Mukennik'll really be delighted by this."

"Somehow I don't like it though," said Jannes. "First, Calvin telling us to watch out, and now McNeil saying it's too late for them to leave. I smell trouble cooking."

"My father warned me to watch out for people with long noses," Norb said. "They find trouble where there's none to be found."

"Have it your own way, Kendon. You're so thrilled to be on Earth that you can't see beyond the end of your nose—which isn't so small itself."

Norb settled back on his bed of straw and did not answer. It had been an exhausting walk through the snow and now was the time for some sleep.

It seemed to be an instant later that there was a timid rap on the wall of their room. A girl tiptoed in and stood there. She was bundled in furs except for her pretty, somewhat dirty, high-cheekboned face. About eighteen, Norb judged, as he waited for her to master her fear.

"The dance is about to start, sirs," she whispered. "McNeil thinks you'll be interested." Having delivered her message, she turned quickly and dashed away into the corridor.

"We'd better go," Jannes said; "they're expecting us."

"Right." They wandered down the corridor toward where they heard the sound of drums.

All hundred and two inhabitants of Earth were gathered in the largest room of the underground village. They were massed in a compact group—except for McNeil, who stood in front, and two drummers pounding drums made of animal-skin.

"We're about ready to start," said McNeil. "We hold these dances regularly, but this is the first time we've had outsiders to watch. They're all very excited about it."

McNeil sat down at the side of the room, beckoning to the two Vegans to follow suit. "It's our only remaining art form to speak of. We had to discourage other forms of art because they weren't useful; but at least the people get some exercise out of this."

"What sort of a dance is it?"

"It's really an historical pageant. It dramatizes the history of Earth from its time of greatest strength to its old age. Which reminds me—are you still thinking of taking the Earthfolk off to Vega with you?"

"Yes," Norb said.

"Forget about it; we can't come. And don't try to get any of my younger men to come back with you. You'll be in for a surprise or two, I think."

"But why, McNeil? Here we offer you free transportation, and all the comforts of the universe on a warm planet, and you refuse. Do you really enjoy living in this frozen hole?"

"Whisper, please," said the king; "I don't want to alarm my subjects. No, of course we don't enjoy living here. But it isn't as bad as it seems; Earth's been freezing for thousands of years, and we're used to cold weather and nothing else; we've never known any other. But that's not the reason why we can't leave. You'll find out during the dance. I think they're ready to start."

The drummers began to beat in a tricky syncopation, and the massed Earthmen in the center of the room slowly began to move. They were interweaving in intricate patterns, moving faster and faster, winding around one another in snakelike rhythms.

"That represents Earth as it used to be," said McNeil; "the crowded home of mankind."

Norb and Jannes watched as the motion became more and more rapid, the Earthmen entangling themselves in complex patterns and then patterns still more complex.

Suddenly there was a terrible pounding on the drums, and one of the dancers burst from the twisting multitude and ran toward an empty corner of the room.

"First interplanetary voyage," McNeil whispered.

The rest of the dancers continued to move in a close-packed mass. Then, another drumroll and a second dancer detached himself and headed for another corner of the room. "The second," McNeil said.

Now the dancers ran in more dizzy patterns than before, and a third and fourth ran off to corners. The drumbeats grew more frenzied.

"Here comes the exodus," said McNeil. "The big push outward that left Earth almost deserted."

The drummers practically went wild, as one after another of the dancers pranced out from the center and headed for one corner or another, until there were more dancers in the clusters in the corners of the room than in the center. Those in the center began to move more slowly now, as their numbers diminished.

Only about ten Earthmen were still in the center of the room, out of the original ninety-nine. They continued to weave through their patterns, but more and more slowly. One dancer finally pulled himself free and ran to the most distant corner. Another followed. Then another.

Finally, there were just three left in the center, revolving slowly around each other. Their movements grew more and more tortured, and they writhed as if their feet were glued to the floor. Slowly they sank to the cold floor and stayed there, their bodies still wriggling. They stretched out flat on the ground, moving now a finger, now a toe, but seemingly unable to rise. One by one they stopped moving completely, until the last one let his head drop.

That was the signal for a wild demonstration by all the dancers. They began shouting and singing, and the three in the middle leaped up and joined them. The dance was over.

Norb and Jannes sat transfixed. "That's our last art form," said McNeil. "What do you think of it?"

"It's wonderful," Norb said, suddenly jarred back to reality. "But I didn't quite catch the symbolism at the end. Why didn't the last three run off to join the others on the other planets?"

"I thought it would be obvious," McNeil said; "but perhaps it's just that I've seen the dance so many times. Look: they would have left but they couldn't; the planet wouldn't let them."

"What's that?" said Jannes in surprise.

"Earth is a very lonely world, Vegans. She's not getting much heat from her sun any more, and she knows she's dying. And she doesn't want to die alone. Just about all of her people have left her, but she's clinging with all her might to her last hundred-and-two. It's been centuries since any Earthman's been allowed to get off-planet. Earth doesn't want us to leave, and she's holding us in a tight grip."

"Don't give us that, McNeil," said Jannes angrily. "I know you think that we regard you as savages, but that doesn't mean you have to play along. There's some other reason why you don't want to leave. Don't start spouting mythology at me. We know—"

Jannes suddenly spilled to the floor. The ground gave a convulsive shudder.

"Earthquake," McNeil said calmly. "It's pretty common now. Every time the Earth gets angry—and I suppose you made her angry. I think you'd better get back to your ship before there's worse trouble. Calvin, you'd better guide them to their ship."

"Wait. Before you let us go, we want to speak to our commander and find out what he thinks."

"What he thinks can't possibly concern us," McNeil said; "but go ahead if it'll please you."

Jannes began to set up the radio equipment. It was fairly simple work for an experienced pilot like Jannes; but for some reason, his hands shook and it took longer than usual. He dialed the HAUGHTSMITH, and Mukennik's familiar voice crackled down to them.

"How's it going?" the commander asked. "We watched you go into that hole with the Earthman; what's been happening?"

"You'd better do the talking," Jannes whispered to Norb. Norb replaced him at the controls of the set.

"Trouble, chief," Norb said. "We found the Earthmen all right—a hundred and two of them—and they say they're the whole population of the planet."

"Healthy?"

"Healthier than we are. It's about five below down here and I guess that keeps them in shape."

"Are they savages?"

Norb looked around. A knot of curious Earthmen had gathered around the transmitter and were watching closely. "No, Mukennik. But they're—well, not quite civilized either." Norb heard a snort of protest from McNeil.

"What do you mean? Have you asked them to leave Earth?"

"Yes," Norb said. "I told them all about Vega; but they're not going to come."

"Not coming? Why?"

"We spoke to the king here, and he tells us there's an Earth-spirit which is lonely and dying, and won't let them leave. He seems to say they'd like to get to a warmer planet, but they're stuck here for good."

"Oh," Mukennik said. He was obviously disappointed. "So they won't come at all."

"No."

There was silence from the HAUGHTSMITH for a moment. "Well, don't try to force them," Mukennik said, finally. "It doesn't pay to meddle with tribal customs. Might as well give it up as a bad job and come back; we'll do up a report on it and let it go at that. At least we've found the legendary Earthmen."

"Yes," Norb said. "At least we've found them. Well, we're going to head for our ship now; get the airlock ready to receive us."

The trek across the snow to where the gleaming two-man ship stood upright was a long and slow one. Calvin accompanied them—the old man was seemingly tireless—and stared with apparent amazement at the ship.

Norb and Jannes began to climb the catwalk to the entrance of the cruiser. Calvin stood below, watching.

"So long, old man," Norb said.

"So long," Jannes echoed; "we'll remember you on Vega. It's nice and warm there, you know. An old chap like you could live forever in that warm climate."

"I know," boomed Calvin. "But I belong here. Farewell, Longnose. Farewell, Squarehead."

"Farewell, Calvin," Norb said, a little miffed at the nickname.

"Don't rush about blasting off," said Calvin. "I want to be clear of the ship before you do... *If* you do, that is." The old man emitted a series of deep chuckles from the back of his throat and wandered off in the snow, heading toward his people.

Norb watched him retreat. "Well, that's that. They're funny people, these Earthmen; the cold has made them strong and—and sort of noble."

"You're still sentimental," Jannes said. "Take a last look before we blast off."

Norb stared out the port at the flickering red sun which so soon would be dark. Jannes reached for the firing stud.

"Hey!"

Norb turned and saw Jannes straining to touch the firing stud; his arm was not fully unbent at the elbow. "Something's wrong; I can't straighten my arm. You better come over here and push the stud for me."

Norb hurried over to the control board. "I'm not too sure how it works."

"Nothing to it," said Jannes, grimacing from the sharp pain in his arm. "Just reach out and push the stud."

Norb extended his arm. It did not reach the stud. "I can't do it."

He looked at Jannes with growing horror. "I can't touch the stud."

"Go ahead," Jannes urged. "Just push it." The pilot continued to rub his bent arm trying to straighten it out.

Beads of perspiration broke out on Norb's forehead. He tried to push his hand forward to meet the stud. "It's as if there's a wall around it," Norb said. "I can't get to it." He tried again and then sat down in a rage of frustration.

Jannes reached out with his good arm. "I can't do it either." He looked at Norb; Norb looked at him.

"You know what I think?" Jannes demanded, quietly.

Norb nodded. "I think so too." He made another attempt to push the stud, and failed.

Norb stared out at the reflection of the red sun along the snow. Jannes watched him silently.

"But it's crazy," he finally burst out. "You don't believe that story about the Earth-spirit, do you?"

"I'm the sentimental one, remember, Jannes?"

"This is no time for bickering. Why can't we touch that stud?"

Norb said slowly, "They believe in the Earth-spirit. Maybe the Earthfolk hypnotized us during that dance, and left a post-hypnotic command not to go near the firing stud. There's no physical reason why we can't touch it."

"Can we un-hypnotize ourselves?" Jannes joined Norb at the port and looked out over the snow.

"I'm just guessing that that's what they did. That whatever happened, they did it. But for all I know, it's the Earth herself that won't let us go."

"But that's crazy!" Jannes shouted. He leaped to the board and tried to press the stud. He made no contact. "It must be hypnotism," he said. "I can put my arm out, but when I reach the stud I draw back; I just can't bring myself to touch it."

"Maybe if you keep your hand there, and I back up into you, and accidentally nudge your hand into the stud—"

"It's worth a try," Jannes said. He put his finger as close to the gleaming stud as he could, and waited. Norb casually sauntered up behind him, whistling, and suddenly pushed.

Jannes screamed and held up his finger. "It's no use; there might just as well be a wall around that stud."

Norb frowned. "Look out the port," he said pointing. "Under that tree."

Kalvin was sitting cross-legged in the snow, about a hundred meters from the ship, watching and waiting.

"They know exactly what's going on in here," Jannes said. "I'll bet he's roaring with laughter."

Savagely he grabbed a length of pipe from the tool-cabinet and brought it down on the firing stud.

The ship stayed on the ground.

The stud broke off.

"Now you've done it," Norb said. "How do you plan to get up now? Do you know anything about repairing the starting mechanism?"

"Not much, but we don't have to bother; I'm going to call Mukennik and have them come down and pick us up."

"Suppose *they* get stuck here, too?"

"At least we're no worse off, and we'll have company."

"That's not a very good attitude, Harl; but I suppose I'm being sentimental again."

"Shut up." Jannes was dialing in the HAUGHTSMITH.

"I thought you were coming back up," said Mukennik immediately. "We're waiting for you."

"We're stuck. We can't get the ship up."

"What's the trouble? Mechanical difficulties?" Mukennik sighed. "Or won't the Earth-spirit let you go?"

"We've broken the firing stud."

"Use the auxiliary; it's under the rear cover."

They looked. It was. They failed to make contact.

"We can't touch it," Norb said. "I think the Earthmen left us with a posthypnotic command against blasting off."

Jannes looked out the port. "Kalvin's still there. Why don't we get him in here and get him to push the stud for us?"

"That's out," said Mukennik; "we'd only have to return him afterward."

"What do we do?" Jannes demanded.

"Hold on a while. I'm going to send down the other ship to get you out of this, you idiots."

In a short while, the second cruiser stood on its tail in the snow not far from the first. Norb saw that Calvin was watching with evident interest as the rescue-cruiser came down.

Two well-clad spacemen came dashing down the cat-walk and hurried toward Norb and Jannes. "Hurry up," one of them said. "Mukennik doesn't want to waste any more time than necessary. Kinnear's going to take you two up in our ship, and I'll bring yours in alone."

Norb and Jannes headed back to the second ship with Kinnear. Calvin stood up under his tree and yawned loudly.

Kinnear tried to push the stud; he failed.

"Are we *all* crazy?" he demanded.

"It looks as if it's contagious," Norb said. He glanced through the port. "Doesn't seem as if Bartle's gotten very far with our ship, either."

Kalvin was wandering in slow circles in the snow.

"Is there any way out of this?" Kinnear asked. "Let's call Mukennik and ask him to bring the HAUGHTSMITH down for us."

"You don't think *he's* going to risk getting stranded here himself, do you?"

"He can't leave four men here."

"You don't know Mukennik, then." Norb waved to Calvin, who was still outside. The old man approached and stood outside the ship.

"What's the trouble spacemen? I thought you'd be gone long before."

"We can't blast off," Norb said.

"Oh? Motor trouble?"

"No. You know what it is?"

Kalvin smiled. "We'll welcome you at our little village; it isn't often that we get new blood."

"Isn't there any way out?"

"The earth is a lonely planet," Calvin said. "It wants all the company it can get."

Norb looked back toward the control room. Jannes was talking into the transmitter and Mukennik's voice crackled faintly through the air.

"What's happening?"

"They won't come," Jannes said. "He's awarding us all medals and leaving us behind."

"Leaving us behind? Why?"

"He wants to get out of the atmosphere fast. He's afraid this Earth-spirit will get him to bring the HAUGHTSMITH down here, and that would never do. You know how Mukennik hates cold weather."

Norb felt an icy chill growing inside him.

"That's too bad," Calvin said. "It would have been nice to have the big ship down here, too. We all could have lived in that instead of our cave."

"Yeah, too bad. I'm really sorry for you," Jannes said.

Bartle came trotting over from the other ship. They explained what had happened.

They looked up. The giant silvery form of the HAUGHTSMITH was still circling in its orbit around the Earth. Norb turned and went back into the ship.

"They're starting to move," Jannes called from outside.

"Come on back in," Norb yelled. "One last try." They all crowded into the little ship except Calvin. The old Earthman stood by the side of the ship.

Norb reached for the stud and made no contact.

"That's it," he said. "Let's go. Hope you like cold weather, fellow Earthmen."

They climbed silently down the catwalk and Calvin led them through the path in the snow toward the little village of Earthmen. There would be all the time in the world to find the answers. But right now, the air seemed warmer and softer, as if Earth was happy, now that there were a hundred and six to comfort her dying days.

