



The Guardians
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Mryna Brill intended to ride the god-car above the rain mist. For a long time she had not believed in the taboos or the Earth-god. She no longer believed she lived on Earth. This paradise of green-floored forests and running brooks was something called Rythar.

Six years ago, when Mryna was fourteen, she first discovered the truth. She asked a question and the Earth-god ignored it. A simple question, really: What is above the rain mist? God could have told her. Every day he answered technical questions that were far more difficult. Instead, he repeated the familiar taboo about avoiding the Old Village because of the Sickness.

And consequently Mryna, being female, went to the Old Village. There was nothing really unusual about that. All the kids went through the ruins from time to time. They had worked out a sort of charm that made it all right. They ran past the burned out shells of the old houses and they kept their eyes shaded to ward off the Sickness.

But even at fourteen Mryna had outgrown charms and she didn't believe in the Sickness. She had once asked the Earth-god what sickness meant, and the screen in the answer house had given her a very detailed answer. Mryna knew that none of the hundred girls and thirty boys inhabiting Rythar had ever been sick. That, like the taboo of the Old Village, she considered a childish superstition.

The Old Village wasn't large—three parallel roads, a mile long, lined with the charred ruins of prefabs, which were exactly like the cottages where the kids lived. It was nothing to inspire either fear or legend. The village had burned a long time ago; the grass from the forest had grown a green mantle over the skeletal walls.

For weeks Mryna poked through the ruins before she found anything of significance—a few, scorched pages of a printed pamphlet buried deep in the black earth. The paper excited her tremendously. It was different from the film books photographed in the answer house. She had never touched anything like it; and it seemed wonderful stuff.

She read the pamphlet eagerly. It was part of a promotional advertisement of a world called Rythar, "the jewel of the Sirian Solar System."

The description made it obvious that Rythar was the green paradise where Mryna lived—the place she had been taught to call Earth. And the pamphlet had been addressed to "Earthmen everywhere."

Mryna made her second find when she was fifteen, a textbook in astronomy. For the first time in her life she read about the spinning dust of the universe lying beyond the eternal rain mist that hid her world.

The solid, stable Earth of her childhood was solid and stable no longer, but a sphere turning through a black void. Nor was it properly called Earth, but a planet named Rythar. The adjustment Mryna had to make was shattering; she lost faith in everything she believed.

Yet the clock-work logic of astronomy appealed to her orderly mind. It explained why the rain mist glowed with light during the day and turned dark at night. Mryna had never seen a clear sky. She had no visual data to tie her new concept to.

For six years she kept the secret. She hid the papers and the astronomy text which she found in the Old Village. Later, after the metal men came, she destroyed everything so none of the other women would know the Earth-god was a man.

At first she kept the secret because she was afraid. For some reason the man who played at being god wanted the kids to believe Rythar was Earth, the totality of the universe enveloped in a cloud of mist. She knew that because she once asked god what a planet was. The face on the screen in the answer house became frigid with anger—or was it fear?—and the Earth-god said:

"The word means nothing."

But late that night a very large god-car brought six metal men down through the rain mist. They were huge, jointed things that clanked when they walked. Four of them used weapons to herd the kids together in their small settlement. The two others went to the Old Village and blasted the ruins with high explosives.

Vaguely Mryna remembered that the metal men had been there before, when the kids were still very small. They had built the new settlement and they had brought food. They lived with the children for a long time, she thought—but the memory was hazy.

As the years passed, Mryna's fear retreated and only one thing became important: she knew the Earth-god was a man. On the fertile soil of Rythar there were one hundred women and thirty men. All the boys had taken mates before they reached seventeen. Seventy girls were left unmarried, with no prospect of ever having husbands. A score or more became second wives in polygamous homes, but plural marriage had no appeal for Mryna. She was firmly determined to possess a man of her own. And why shouldn't it be the Earth-god?

As her first step toward escape, Mryna volunteered for duty in the answer house. For as long as she could remember, the answer house had stood on a knoll some distance beyond the new settlement. It was a square, one-room building, housing a speaking box, a glass screen and a

console of transmission machinery. Anyone in the settlement could contact god and request information or special equipment.

God went out of his way to deluge them with information. The simplest question produced voluminous data, transmitted over the screen and photographed on reels of film. Someone had to be in the answer house to handle the photography. The work was not hard, but it was monotonous. Most of the kids preferred to farm the fields or dig the sacrificial ore.

A request for equipment was granted just as promptly. Tools, machines, seeds, fertilizers, packaged buildings, games, clothing—everything came in a god-car. It was a large cylinder which hissed down from the rain mist on a pillar of fire. The landing site was a flat, charred field near the answer house. Unless the equipment was unusually heavy, the attendant stationed in the house was expected to unload the god-car and pile aboard the sacrifice ores mined on Rythar.

God asked two things from the settlement: the pieces of unusually heavy metal which they dug from the hills, and tiny vials of soil. In an hour's time they could mine enough ore to fill the compartment of a god-car, and god never complained if they sometimes sent the cylinder back empty. But he fussed mightily over the small vials of Earth. He gave very explicit directions as to where they were to take the samples, and the place was never the same. Sometimes they had to travel miles from the settlement to satisfy that inexplicable whim.

For two weeks Mryna patiently ran off the endless films of new books and unloaded the god-car when it came. She examined the interior of the cylinder carefully and she weighed every possible risk. The compartment was very small, but she concluded that she would be safe.

And so she made her decision. Tense and tight-lipped Mryna Brill slipped aboard the god-car. She sealed the lock door, which automatically fired the launching tubes. After that there was no turning back.

The dark compartment shook in a thunder of sound. The weight of the escape speed tore at her body, pulling her tight against the confining walls. She lost consciousness until the pressure lessened.

The metal walls became hot but the space was too confining for her to avoid contact entirely. Four narrow light tubes came on, with a dull, red glow, and suddenly a gelatinous liquid emptied out of ceiling vents. The fluid sprayed every exposed surface in the cubicle, draining through the shipment of sacrifice ores at Mryna's feet. It had a choking, antiseptic odor; it stung Mryna's face and inflamed her eyes.

Worse still, as the liquid soaked into her clothing, it disintegrated the fiber, tearing away the cloth in long strips which slowly dissolved in the liquid on the floor. Before the antiseptic spray ceased, Mryna was helplessly naked. Even her black boots had not survived.

The red lights went out and Mryna was imprisoned again in the crushing darkness. A terror of the taboos she had defied swept her mind. She began to scream, but the sound was lost in the roar of the motors.

Suddenly it was over. The god-car lurched into something hard. Mryna was thrown against the ceiling—and she hung there, weightless. The pieces of sacrifice ore were floating in the darkness just as she was. The motors cut out and the lock door swung open.

Mryna saw a circular room, brightly lighted with a glaring, blue light. The nature of her fear changed. This was the house of the Earth-god, but she could not let him find her naked.

She tried to run into the circular room. She found that the slightest exertion of her muscles sent her spinning through the air. She could not get her feet on the floor. There was no down and no up in that room. She collided painfully with the metal wall and she snatched at a light bracket to keep herself from bouncing free in the empty air again.

The god-car had landed against what was either the ceiling or the floor of the circular room. Mryna had no way of making a differentiation. Eight brightly lighted corridors opened into the side walls. Mryna heard footsteps moving toward her down one of the corridors; she pulled herself blindly into another. As she went farther from the circular room, a vague sense of gravity returned. At the end of the corridor she was able to stand on her feet again, although she still had to walk very carefully. Any sudden movement sent her soaring in a graceful leap that banged her head against the ceiling.

Cautiously she opened a thick, metal door into another hall—and she stood transfixed, looking through a mica wall at the emptiness of space pinpointed with its billions of stars. This was the reality of the charts she had seen in the astronomy text: that knowledge alone saved her sanity. She had believed it when the proof lay hidden above the rain mist; she must believe it now.

From where she stood, she was able to see the place where the god-car had brought her—like a vast cartwheel spinning in the void. The god-car was clamped against the hub, from which eight corridors radiated outward like wheel spokes toward the rim. Far below the gigantic wheel Mryna saw the sphere of Rythar, invisible behind its shroud of glowing mist.

She moved along the rim corridor, past the mica wall, until she came to a door that stood open. The room beyond was a sleeping compartment and it was empty. She searched it for clothing, and found nothing. She went through four more dormitory rooms before she came upon anything she could use—brief shorts, clearly made for a man, and a loose, white tunic. It wasn't suitable; it wasn't the way she wanted to be dressed when she faced him. But it had to do.

Mryna was pawing through a footlocker looking for boots when she heard a hesitant step behind her. She whirled and saw a small, stooped, white-haired man, naked except for trunks like the ones she was wearing. The wrinkled skin on his wasted chest was burned brown by the hot glare of the sun. Thick-lensed glasses hung from a chain around his neck.

"My dear young lady," he said in a tired voice, "this is a men's ward!"

"I'm sorry. I didn't know—"

"You must be a new patient." He fumbled for his glasses. Instinctively she knew she shouldn't let him see her clearly enough to identify her as a stranger. She shoved past him, knocking the glasses from his hand.

"I'd better find my own—ward." Mryna didn't know the word, but she supposed it meant some sort of sleeping chamber.

The old man said chattily, "I hadn't heard they were bringing in any new patients today."

She was in the corridor by that time. He reached for her hand. "I'll see you in the sunroom?" It was a timid, hopeful question. "And you'll tell me all the news—everything they're doing back on Earth. I haven't been home for almost a year."

She fled down the hall. When she heard voices ahead of her, she pulled back a door and slid into another room—a storeroom piled with cases of medicines. Behind the cartons she thought she would be safe.

This wasn't what she had expected. Mryna thought there might be one man living in a kind of prefab somehow suspended above the rain mist. But there were obviously others up here; she didn't know how many. And the old man frightened her—more than the dazzling sight of the heavens visible through the mica wall. Mryna had never seen physical age before. No one on Rythar was older than she was herself—a sturdy, healthy, lusty twenty. The old man's infirmity disgusted her; for the first time in her life she was conscious of the slow decay of death.

The door of the supply room slid open. Mryna crouched low behind the cartons, but she was able to see the man and the woman who had entered the room. A woman—here? Mryna hadn't considered that possibility. Perhaps the Earth-god already had a mate.

The newcomers were dressed in crisp, white uniforms; the woman wore a starched, white hat. They carried a tray of small, glass cylinders from which metal needles projected. While the woman held the tray, the man drove the needles through the caps of small bottles and filled the cylinders with a bright-colored liquid.

"When are you leaving, Dick?" the woman asked.

"In about forty minutes. They're sending an auto-pickup."

"Oh, no!"

"Now don't start worrying. They have got the bugs out of it by this time. The auto-pickups are entirely trustworthy."

"Sure, that's what the army says."

"In theory they should be even more reliable than—"

"I wish you'd wait for the hospital shuttle."

"And miss the chance to address Congress this year? We've worked too long for this; I don't want to muff it now. We've all the statistical proof we need, even to convince those pinchpenny halfwits. During the past eight years we've handled more than a thousand cases up here. On Earth they were pronounced incurable; we've sent better than eighty per cent back in good health after an average stay of fourteen months."

"No medical man has ever questioned the efficiency of cosmic radiation and a reduced atmospheric gravity, Dick."

"It's just our so-called statesmen, always yapping about the budget. But this time we have the cost problem licked, too. For a year and a half the ore they send up from Rythar has paid for our entire operation."

"I didn't know that."

"We've kept it under wraps, so the politicians wouldn't cut our appropriations."

Their glass tubes were full, and they turned toward the door. "It isn't right," the woman persisted, "for them not to send a piloted shuttle after you, Dick. It isn't dignified. You're our assistant medical director and—"

Her words were cut off as the door slid shut behind them. Mryna tried to fit this new information into what she already knew—or thought she knew—about the Earth-god. It didn't add up to a pretty picture. She had once asked for a definition of illness, and it was apparent to her that this place which they called the Guardian Wheel was an expensive hospital for Earthmen. It was paid for by the sacrificial ores mined on Rythar. In a sense, Rythar was being enslaved and exploited by Earth. True, it was not difficult to dig out the ore, but Mryna resented the fact that the kids on Rythar had not been told the truth. She had long ago lost her awe of the man called god; now she lost her respect as well.

Mryna was glad she had not seen him, glad no one knew she was aboard the Guardian Wheel. She would return to Rythar. After she told the others what she knew, Rythar would send up no more sacrifice ores. Let the Earthmen come down and mine it for themselves!

Very cautiously she pulled the door open. The rim corridor was empty. She moved toward one of the intersecting corridors. When she heard footsteps, she hid in another dormitory room.

This was different from the others. It showed more evidence of permanent occupation. She guessed it was a dormitory for the people who took care of the sick. Pictures were fastened to the curved, metal walls. Personal articles cluttered the shelves hung beside the bunks. On a writing desk she saw a number of typed reports. Five freshly laundered uniforms, identical to the one she had lost in the antiseptic wash, hung on a rack behind the door. Mryna stripped off the makeshift she was wearing and put on one of the uniforms; she found boots under the desk. When she was dressed, she stood admiring herself in the polished surface of the metal door.

She was a handsome woman, and she was very conscious of that. Her face was tanned by the mist-filtered sunlight of Rythar; her lips were red and sensuous; her long, platinum-colored hair fell to her shoulders. She compared herself to the small, hard-faced female she had seen in the supply room. Was that a typical Earthwoman? Mryna's lips curled in a scornful smile. Let the gods come down to Rythar, then, and discover what a real female was like in the lush, green, Rytharian paradise.

Mryna went to the desk and glanced at the typed reports. They had been written by a man who signed himself "Commander in Charge, Guardian Wheel," and they were addressed to the Congress of the world government. One typed document was a supply inventory; a second, still unfinished, was a budget report. (*You won't show a profit next time, Mryna thought vindictively, when we stop sending you the sacrifice ore.*) Another report dealt with Rythar, and Mryna read it with more interest.

One paragraph caught her attention,

"We have asked for soil samples to be taken from an area covering ten thousand square miles. Our chemical analysis has been thorough, and we find nothing that could be remotely harmful to human life. Atmospheric samples produce the same negative results. On the other hand, we have direct evidence that no animal life has ever evolved on Rythar; the life cycle is exclusively botanical."

The soil samples, Mryna realized, would be the vials of Earth which the Earth-god had requested so often. Were the Earthmen planning to

move their hospital down to Rythar? That idea disturbed her. Mryna did not want her garden world cluttered up with a lot of sick, old men discarded by Earth.

She turned to the second page of the report. "The original colony survived for a year. The Sickness in the Old Village developed only after the first harvest of Rytharian-grown food. It is more and more evident that the botanical cycle of Rythar must be examined before we find the answer. To do that adequately, we shall have to send survey teams to the surface; that requires much larger appropriations for research than we have had in the past. The metal immunization suits, which must, of course, be destroyed after each expedition—"

"And what, may I ask, is the meaning of this?"

Mryna dropped the report and swung toward the door. She saw a woman standing there—another hard-faced Earthwoman, with a starched, white cap perched on her graying hair.

"I must have come to the wrong room," Mryna said in a small voice.

"Indeed! Everyone knows this is command headquarters. Who are you?" The woman put her hand on Mryna's arm, and the fingers bit through the uniform into Mryna's flesh.

Mryna pulled away, drawing her shoulders back proudly. Why should she feel afraid? She stood a head taller than this dried up stranger; she knew the Earthwoman's strength would be no match for hers.

"My name is Mryna Brill," she said quietly. "I came up in a god-car from Rythar."

"Rythar?" The woman's mouth fell open. She whispered the word as if it were profanity. Suddenly she turned and ran down the rim corridor, screaming in terror.

She's afraid of me! Mryna thought. And that made no sense at all.

Mryna knew she had to get back to the god-car quickly. Since the Earthmen had built up the taboos in order to get their sacrifice ores from Rythar, they would do everything they could to prevent her return. She ran toward an intersecting spoke corridor. An alarm bell began to clang, and the sound vibrated against the metal walls. An armed man sprang from a side room and fired his weapon at Mryna. The discharge burned a deep groove in the wall.

So they would even kill her—these men who pretended to be gods!

Before the man could fire again, Mryna swung down a side corridor, and at once the sensation of weightlessness overtook her. She could not move quickly. She saw the armed man at the mouth of the corridor.

Frantically she pushed open the door of a room, which was crowded with consoles of transmission machines. Three men were seated in front of the speakers. They jumped and came toward her, clumsily fighting the weightlessness.

Mryna caught at the door jamb and swung herself toward the ceiling. At the same time the armed man fired. The discharge missed her and washed against the transmission machinery. Blue fire exploded from the room. The three men screamed in agony. Concussion threw Mryna helplessly toward the rim again.

And the Guardian Wheel was plunged into darkness. Mryna's head swam; her shoulder seethed with pain where she had banged into the wall. She tried to creep toward the circular room, but she had lost her sense of direction and she found herself back on the rim.

The clanging bell had stopped when the lights went out, but Mryna heard the panic of frightened voices. Far away someone was screaming. Running feet clattered toward her. Mryna flattened herself against the outer wall. An indistinct body of men shot past her.

"From Rythar," one of them was saying. "A woman from Rythar!"

"And we've blasted the communication center. We've no way of sending the warning back to Earth—"

They were gone.

Mryna moved back into the spoke corridor. She felt her way silently toward the circular hub room and the god-car. Suddenly very close she heard voices which she recognized—the man and the woman who had been talking in the supply room.

"You're still all right, Dick," the woman said. "She hasn't been here long enough to—"

"We don't know that. We don't know how it spreads or how quickly. We can't take the chance."

"Then ... then we've no choice?" Her voice was a small whisper, choked with terror.

"None. These have been standing emergency orders for twenty years. We always faced the possibility that one of them would escape. If we'd been allowed to use a different policy of education—but the politicians wouldn't permit that. The Wheel has to be destroyed, and we must die with it."

"Couldn't we wait and make sure?"

"It works too fast. None of us would be able to do the job—afterward."

The voices moved away. Mryna floated toward the hub room. She found the air lock and pulled herself into the god-car. The metal lock

hissed closed and light came on. Then she knew she had made a mistake. This ship was not the one she had used when she came up from Rythar. The tiny cabin was fitted with a sleeping lounge, a food cabinet and a file of reading films. Above the lounge a mica viewplate gave her a broad view of the sky.

Mryna remembered that the man in the supply room had said he was waiting for an auto-pickup; he was on his way back to Earth. Mryna had taken his ship instead of her own. In panic she tried to open the door again, but she found no way to do it. Machinery beneath her feet began to hum. She felt a slight lurch as the pickup left the hub of the Guardian Wheel.

It swung in a wide arc. Through the viewplate she saw the enormous Wheel growing small behind her, silhouetted against the mist of Rythar. Suddenly the wheel glowed red with a soundless explosion. Its flaming fragments died in the void.

Mryna dropped weakly on the lounge. Nausea spun through her mind. The man had said they would destroy themselves. Because Mryna had come aboard? But why were they afraid of her? What possible harm could she do them? Mryna had left Rythar to discover the truth, and the truth was insanity. Was truth always like this—a bitter disillusionment, an empty horror?

She had something else to say to the people of Rythar now: not that the gods were men, but that men were mad. Believe in the taboos; send up the sacrificial ores. It was a small price to pay to keep that madness away from Rythar.

And Mryna knew she could not go back. With the Wheel gone, she could never return to Rythar; the auto-pickup was carrying her inexorably toward Earth. The scream of the machinery slowly turned shrill, hammering against her eardrums. The stars visible in the viewplate blurred and winked out. Mryna felt a twist of vertigo as the shuttle shifted from conventional speed into a time warp. And then the sound was gone. The ship was floating in an impenetrable blackness.

Mryna had no idea how much time passed subjectively. When she became hungry, she took food from the cabinet. She slept when she was tired. To pass the time, she turned the reading films through the projector.

Most of the film stored in the shuttle covered material Mryna already knew. The Earthmen, clearly, had not denied any information to Rythar. Only one thing had been restricted—astronomy. And that would have made no difference, if Mryna had not found the text in the ruins of the

Old Village. The people on Rythar never saw the stars; they had no way of knowing—or caring—what lay above the rain mist.

Mryna was more interested in the history of Earth, which she had never known before. She studied the pictures of the great industrial centers and the crowded countryside. She was awed by the mobs in the city streets and the towering buildings. Yet she liked her own world more—the forests and the clear-running brooks; the vast, uncrowded, open spaces.

It puzzled her that the people of Earth would give the Rytharian paradise to a handful of children, when their own world was so overcrowded. Was this another form of the madness that had driven the people in the Wheel to destroy themselves? That made a convenient explanation, yet Mryna's mind was too logical to accept it.

One film referred to the founding of the original colony on Rythar, a planet in the Sirian System which had been named for its discoverer. Rythar, according to the film, was one of a score of colonies established by Earth. It was unbelievably rich in deposits of uranium.

That, Mryna surmised, was the name of the sacrificial ore they sent up in the god-cars.

The atmosphere and gravity of Rythar duplicated that of Earth; Rythar should have become the largest colony in the system. The government of Earth had originally planned a migration of ten million persons.

"But after twelve months the survey colony was destroyed by an infection," Mryna read on the projection screen, "which has never been identified. It is called simply the Sickness. The origin of this plague is unknown. No adult in the survey colony survived; children born on Rythar are themselves immune, but are carriers of the Sickness. The first rescue team sent to save them died within eight hours. No human being, aside from these native-born children, has ever survived the Sickness."

Now Mryna had the whole truth. She knew the motivation for their madness of self-destruction. It was not insanity, but the sublime courage of a few human beings sacrificing themselves to save the rest of their civilization. They smashed the Guardian Wheel to keep the Sickness there. And Mryna had already escaped before that happened! She was being hurled through space toward Earth and she would destroy that, too.

If she killed herself, that would in no way alter the situation. The ship would still move in its appointed course. Her body would be aboard; perhaps the very furnishings in the cabin were now infected with the

germ of the Sickness. When the ship touched Earth, the fatal poison would escape.

Dully Mryna turned up another frame on the film, and she read what the Earthmen had done to help Rythar. They built the Guardian Wheel to isolate the Sickness. Sealed in metal immunization suits, volunteers had descended to the plague world and reared the surviving children of the colonists until they were old enough to look out for themselves. The answer house had been set up as an instructional device.

"As nearly as possible, the scientists in charge attempted to create a normal social situation for the plague carriers. They could never be allowed to leave Rythar, but when they matured enough to know the truth, Rythar could be integrated into the colonial system. Rytharian uranium is already a significant trade factor in the colonial market. An incidental by-product of the Guardian Wheel is the hospital facility, where advanced cases of certain cancers and lung diseases have been cured in a reduced gravity or by exposure to cosmic radiation."

Mryna shut off the projection. The words made sense, but the results did not. And she knew precisely why Earth had failed. When they matured—in those three words she had her answer.

And now it didn't matter. There was nothing she could do. Her ship was a poisoned arrow aimed directly at the heart of man's civilization.

Mryna had slept twice when the auto-pickup lurched out of the time drive and she was able to see the stars again. Directly ahead of her she saw an emerald planet, bright in the sun. And she knew instinctively that it was Earth.

A speaker under the viewport throbbed with the sound of a human voice.

"Auto-shuttle SC 539, attention. You are assigned landing slot seven-three-one, Port Chicago. I repeat, seven-three-one. Dial that destination. Do you read me?"

Three times the message was repeated before Mryna concluded that it was meant for her. She found three small knobs close to the speaker and a plastic toggle labeled "voice reply." She snapped it shut and found that she could speak to the Chicago spaceport.

Her problem was easily solved, then. She could say she came from Rythar. Without hesitation, Earth ships would be sent to blast her ship out of the sky before she would be able to land. But she knew she had to accomplish more than that; the same mistake must not be repeated again.

"How much time do I have?" she asked.

"Thirty-four minutes."

"Can you keep this shuttle up here any longer than that?"

"Lady, the auto-pickups are on tape-pilot. Come hell or high water, they land exactly on schedule."

"What happens if I don't dial the slot destination?"

"We bring you in on emergency—and you fork over a thousand buck fine."

Mryna asked to be allowed to speak to someone in authority in the government. The Chicago port manager told her the request was absurd. For nine minutes Mryna argued, with a mounting sense of urgency, before he gave his grudging consent. Her trouble was that she had to skate close to the truth without admitting it directly. She could not—except as a last resort—let them kill her until they knew why the isolation of Rythar had failed.

It was thirteen minutes before landing when Mryna finally heard an older, more dignified voice on the speaker. By then the green globe of Earth filled the sky; Mryna could make out the shapes of the continents turning below her. The older man identified himself as a senator elected to the planetary Congress. She didn't know how much authority he represented, but she couldn't afford to wait any longer.

She told him frankly who she was. She knew she was pronouncing her own death sentence, yet she spoke quietly. She must show the same courage that the Earthmen had when they sacrificed themselves in the Guardian Wheel.

"Listen to me for two minutes more before you blast my ship," she asked. "I rode the god-car up from Rythar—I am coming now to spread the Sickness on Earth—because I wanted to know the truth about something that puzzled me. I had to know what was above the rain mist. In the answer house you would not tell us that. Now I understand why. We were children. You were waiting for us to mature. And that is the mistake you made; that blindness nearly destroyed your civilization.

"You will have to build another Guardian Wheel. This time don't hide anything from us because we're children. The truth makes us mature, not illusions or taboos. Never forget that. It is easier to face a fact than to have to give up a dream we've been taught to believe. Tell your children the truth when they ask for it. Tell us, please. We can adjust to it. We're just as human as you are."

Mryna drew a long breath. Her lips were trembling. Did this man understand what she had tried to say? She would never know. If she failed, Earth—in spite of its generosity and its courage—would one day be

destroyed by children bred on too many delusions. "I'm ready," Mryna said steadily. "Send up your warships and destroy me."

She waited. Less than ten minutes were left. Her shuttle began to move more slowly. She was no more than a mile above Earth. She saw the soaring cities and the white highways twisting through green fields.

Seven minutes left. Where were the warships? She looked anxiously through the viewport and the sky was empty.

Desperately she closed the voice toggle again. "Send them quickly!" she cried. "You must not let me land!"

No reply came from the speaker. Her auto-shuttle began to circle a large city which lay at the southern tip of an inland lake. Three minutes more. The ship nosed toward the spaceport.

"Why don't you do something?" Mryna screamed. "What are you waiting for?"

The shuttle settled into a metal rack. The lock hissed open. Mryna shrank back against the wall, looking out at what she would destroy—what she had already destroyed. A dignified, portly man came panting up the ramp toward her.

"No!" she whispered. "Don't come in here."

"I am Senator Brieson," he said shortly. "For ten years Dr. Jameson has been telling us from the Guardian Wheel that we should adopt a different educational policy toward Rythar. Your scare broadcast was clever, but we're used to Jameson's tricks. He'll be removed from office for this, and if I have anything to say about it—"

"You didn't believe me?" Mryna gasped.

"Of course not. If a plague carrier escaped from Rythar, we would have heard about it long before this. The trouble with you scientists is you don't grant the rest of us any common sense. And Jameson's the worst of the lot. He's always contended that the sociologists should determine our Rytharian policy, not the elected representatives of the people."

Mryna broke down and began to cry hysterically. The senator put his hand under her arm—none too gently. "Let's have no more dramatics, please. You don't know how fortunate you are, young lady. If the politicians were as addle-witted as you scientists claim we are, we might have believed that nonsense and blasted your ship out of the sky. You scientists have to give up the notion that you're our guardians; we're quite able to look out for ourselves."

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