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HERBERT

A SCIENCE FICTION NOVEL BY  
**MURRAY LEINSTER**  
AUTHOR OF **OPERATION TERROR**  
AND  
**CREATURES OF THE ABYSS**

# THE OTHER SIDE OF NOWHERE



**BERKLEY MEDALLION F918**

# THE OTHER SIDE OF NOWHERE

Murray Leinster

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## Chapter 1

He wasn't quite six feet tall, though he looked more than that. Perhaps it was because he was a merchant-space officer of some experience. Perhaps it was because he'd been born and raised on a planet where the gravity was 1.7 normal and he felt light and springy where other people drooped. Or it may have been because he'd been on many ships and many worlds and knew his way about. In any case, he was eating a steak in a warehouse-district restaurant when he heard about the *Rim Star*. It sounded good, but he made sure it was straight before he acted on it.

It checked, so he headed for the spaceport, though it was well after midnight at the time. His name was Braden and his papers certified that he should be of great value to any ship which secured his services. He didn't put much faith in documents, himself, and maybe this skipper wouldn't, either. But papers were necessary.

He ignored other theoretical matters. The best thought on getting a berth, for example. It was said that approaching a skipper at an inconvenient time was unwise. The very best thought held that no skipper would take on a new mate if approached when he was busy loading ship, or asleep, or otherwise fully occupied. But there were angles. For example, unless a ship is going to be aground for a long time its officers and crew will keep to ship-time regardless of local customs. They may sleep while the world around them bustles in bright sunshine. They may breakfast at sundown, or have supper at what the spaceport clocks say is noon. It saves trouble. So the fact that the spaceport was dark and desolate at this hour needn't mean that it was a bad time to hit the skipper for the vacant mate's berth.

Braden showed his papers at the spaceport gate and went in. He didn't have to ask directions. The *Rim Star* was the biggest ship in several star-clusters, and he could spot her enormous, clumsy bulk by the starlight, half a mile away across the tarmac. In between there were a medium-sized freighter and a toy-sized yacht, and a pile of stacked crates and boxes that had been unloaded, but not yet warehoused, from a ship now gone away. There was a huddle of loading-cranes, their long booms seeming to droop mournfully in the darkness. There was the general atmosphere of gloom that a spaceport has on a slow night when nothing is happening.

Braden went briskly toward the ship. Behind him there was a faint, low, rumbling sound. That was the spaceport city. Even in the small hours a city rumbles to itself. Its inhabitants don't notice, but it is startling to a spaceman to hear murmurings and rumbles and noises which have no meaning. In space, every sound inside a ship has its significance, and there are no outside sounds at all.

The piled-up cargo cases loomed high. They mounted to a peak in one place, and in others they were heaped on each other in what seemed pure confusion. There were boxes with starlight on them bright enough for their markings to be read, but also there were caverns and places of daunting darkness around the base of the shipload of freight.

As Braden drew near it, two men came out from among the cases. They stood in front of him, waiting. Simultaneously, three other men came out from other hiding places and moved to positions behind him. They didn't speak. They simply quietly encircled him; those ahead waited for him and those behind him moved to overtake him. This was not an action of the spaceport police. It looked like a holdup, but not entirely, at that. Five men are too many for a holdup. One with a blaster is enough. This looked like something else - a cold-blooded intention to do harm, a purpose which was implacable and had been settled in advance.

Braden took note of the facts. He didn't look for an explanation now. That could come later. But he estimated the situation. On his home planet the acceleration of gravity was 54 feet the first second, instead of 32. Anybody who grew up there had reflexes keyed to a high-speed environment. Thus Braden had an advantage in both mental and physical reaction time. Also, he knew that if trouble is bound to come, the advantage lies with the man who starts it.

So he went on, his footsteps audible and confident. He moved briskly toward the distant *Rim Star*. The two men ahead of him closed in. Those behind him moved up. Their actions should have been frightening, but Braden's footsteps did not change tempo. He went onward as if not noticing. Then, just before the two men in front of him crouched to rush him, he rushed first. Not at both of them, of course. He leaped at the man on his left with a ruthless and calculated ferocity. His full weight knocked the man off balance and he brought his fist up with the strength of all his shoulder muscles behind it. Those muscles had been developed on a heavy planet. The blow landed accurately on the point of the man's jaw. Braden didn't wait for him to fall. Keyed to fast action, he seemed to himself to float almost in slow motion as he leaped again, on the man at his right this time, and before any of the three others could realize what was happening. This was no time for sportsmanship. Braden grabbed the second man, kned him ferociously, and then swung and slung him - part missile and part shield - against the other three. The gasping man took the blow one of his companions aimed at Braden. He blocked for an instant the attack of a second. And Braden, coming around from the side in a specific flank attack, used his peculiar gifts in selfdefense as such gifts have to be used - offensively.

No word was spoken. The whole thing happened too fast. The five men had intended to do their work with blackjacks or something similar. They'd assumed the initiative would be theirs. The three in back were ready to attack from the rear someone already attacked from the front. But they were attacked, instead. Braden took them from the side, one after another, with only fractions of a second in between. He was not gentle. His tactics were murderous.

The last man went down and starlight glinted on a knife. Braden kicked, twice. The knife went clanging away after the first kick. The man wailed after the second.

Then it was all over. Braden's attackers were victims of the technical device known as surprise, and he surveyed them in the starlight. He was breathing hard, but he'd worked scientifically on men who were shocked and surprised by being attacked instead of attacking.

"Now what the hell," demanded Braden savagely, "what the hell is this all about?"

A voice mumbled, feebly and despairingly:

"It ain't him! Oh, migawd! It ain't even him!"

There was a pause. Then Braden said, annoyedly,

"Oh. It was a mistake. I suppose that makes it all right."

He turned and went on toward the *Rim Star*. What he had done was not exactly the behavior the authorities would have advised, perhaps. Maybe he should have called the spaceport police and turned the five men over to them, making the distinctly improbable statement that they'd seemed about to attack him so he'd subdued them. The police would be dubious and he, Braden, would waste time arguing with them. Ultimately the five would be dismissed for lack of evidence.

So he went on his way. He passed the toy-sized yacht where a light burned outside the air lock to guide a skimmer-driver bringing the yacht's owner back to his ship. Braden went on past the freighter, resting quietly on the tarmac with a pool of deep black shadow underneath it. The truly enormous bulk of the *Rim Star* loomed ahead.

A light showed briefly. It was an exit port on the huge vessel. The light was partly obscured; then it brightened, and then went out again as the exit port closed. A man had come out. Presently Braden heard footsteps. They were heading for the spaceport gate from which Braden had just come. The other man would pass close by. Braden called:

"You from the *Rim Star*!"

The other man hesitated, and then slowed and stopped. He was a dim figure in the starlight. His voice sounded suspicious.

"What do you want?"

"I had some trouble," said Braden, "with some characters hiding in that pile of freight. They're still there. If you want to avoid trouble. I suggest that you steer wide of it. That's all."

A pause. The other man said, "Thanks." Another pause. "You're heading for the *Rim Star*?"

"Yes," Braden answered. "There's talk she's shorthanded. I just heard it."

"She is," said the dim figure. "I just left her."

"Sign on?" Braden asked.

"No," said the figure. He sounded amused. "I'm her owner. I was talking to the skipper."

"How about the stuff that's going around?" asked Braden. "The story is that she's going to Handel's Planet with the girders for a grid among other cargo, and she'll have to land on rockets. No grid there to let her down. Right?"

"That's right," said the dim figure in the darkness. "And they say it can't be done." Then his tone went ironic. "The story also says that she'll crash and I'll collect insurance on her. Did you hear that?"

"Sure!" said Braden. "I hear she's shy a mate, too. The last one's in hospital. Somebody beat him up... I've papers for a mate's berth."

"She's waiting for a mate to get clearance," said the other figure. "Satisfy the skipper and you're set."

"Thanks," said Braden. "I'll try to satisfy him."

He started on toward the huge mass of the *Rim Star* when the other man said curtly:

"Tell me something... About the story that the *Rim Star* will crash for the insurance. Do people believe it?"

"Some," said Braden. "I mean, parts of it. You believe stuff about people being crooks when you're down on your luck. You say you're honest and they aren't and that's why you're broke. It's your alibi."

"True enough," said the figure in the starlight. He paused again. "The skipper's my father-in-law. I wouldn't be likely to send him off to be killed just to collect insurance. He says the ship can land. On rockets. He should be right.... If you satisfy him, you've got the mate's job. But that's his business, not mine."

"Naturally," agreed Braden. "Remember those characters by the pile of freight. They could be nasty. They were waiting for somebody special. I wasn't him. You might be."

The man in the starlight said drily:

"I've got a blaster in my pocket." He moved on toward the spaceport gate.

Braden went on toward the big ship. As he drew nearer, her huge size became evident. She was 1500 feet long from her blunt bow to her rounded stern. She was 200-odd feet in diameter - as thick as a twenty-story building is tall. Beneath her there was utter and absolute darkness. No glimmer of light came from anywhere on her hull. She was wholly without grace of line or structure. There is nothing in the galaxy that looks more improbable than a spaceship, either aground or in space. The *Rim Star* was preposterous. She looked clumsy. There was no beauty in her anywhere.

Braden found the exit port - not a cargo door, but a small opening. He signaled his presence. Half a minute later there was a click, and a voice came out of a speaker over his head.

"Well?" the voice asked.

"My name's Braden. I was mate on the *Cerberus* and others. Paid off a month ago. My certificate's in order. I hear you're shy a mate. If that's right, I'm available."

The voice from the speaker rumbled inarticulately for a moment. Then it said:

"Wait. I'll have the steward let you in."

There was a click, and silence. Braden waited in the total darkness beneath the *Rim Star's* monstrous shape. He looked out at the stars. They were unfamiliar, but unfamiliar constellations are matters of course to a space officer. Forty light-years of distance changes any pattern of nearby stars to the point where no pattern any longer exists. But there is the Milky Way, and certain bright clusters, and more notably those dark nebulae which blot out the star-systems behind them. Braden could have used such skymarkers and by eye located this world of Nelm within, a reasonable number of light-centuries. It occurred to him that somebody scanning a sky of strange and unnamed stars might very well come to believe in the fabled Other Side of Nowhere, because anything seemed possible when the sky was new. But it was, of course, pure superstition. It attempted to explain the occasional inexplicable disappearance of ships in emptiness. But Braden didn't believe in it. It was a tall tale - absurd.

The port door opened and a man with straw-colored hair peered out. His skin seemed normal enough. He might have tried a rejuv job and it hadn't worked. He looked at Braden.

"Braden?"

"That's right," said Braden.

"I'll take you to the skipper."

Braden stepped inside. The door closed behind him. He saw that the man with the straw-colored hair was the ship's steward. The steward led the way up a short flight of stairs and through an opening into a corridor that led both ways. He went on. The floor of the corridor became a ramp. Presently there were steps, then more ramp, then more steps. There was no sign of life anywhere. The two men went through a long, curving, rising tunnel which went round and round without any apparent doors or other openings. There were, of course, hinged plates here and there in the corridor wall. Naturally! There were monitor-boxes, too. But the corridor obviously circled the huge emptiness which was the cargo space of the ship. This was normal for the *Rim Star* was a bulk-cargo carrier and her cavernous holds occupied almost all the interior of her structure.

The men climbed and climbed. Once they passed the marked doorway to a lifeboat blister, and once they passed a double door on the corridor's inboard side. This would allow the removal and replacement of the units that combined to form the ship's Lawlor drive, if inspection aground called for substitution. Otherwise there were no openings. The hinged plates, of course, gave access to catwalks among the ship's framing-members. There were no portholes, obviously. And there was no life.

The *Rim Star* consisted of a group of enormous cargo spaces enclosed in a double skin, with all controls in the bow. The parts of the ship to be used by human beings were minute compared to the volume available for freight. She'd been built to carry grain in bulk to the twin worlds Themis and Thetis when it was impossible to grow grain there for the human population. But some years back a mutant wheat had been developed which thrived on the previously inhospitable planets. It had actually pushed back the native vegetation. Wheat was now sown on both planets to crowd out the useless native plants and thus clear ground for human-use crops. In consequence there was no longer any need for the big ship and she couldn't pay her way. In fact, the *Rim Star* appeared no longer to have any reason for being.

All this was no secret. But the ship did exist. She was designed to be handled by no more than six crewmen, plus steward and skipper and mate. There had seemed no possible use for her, until her skipper invented one. It looked promising to some people, and dubious to others. But Braden hadn't yet reached the point at which he considered disasters as rather more likely to happen than not. The *Rim Star* needed a mate. She would be heading toward a part of space where he'd never been. He didn't think about abstract probabilities or the dangers of trying new things. He'd come to try to get a berth.

Finally the steward opened a door and said: "The captain's in there."

He closed the door behind Braden, who found himself in a room empty of everything but ordinary furniture. There was another door ahead. Braden went through it. Still another door.

"This way," a voice rumbled.

Braden went through the third door. An enormously fat man sat in a huge upholstered chair. There was a glass on the table beside him. He put down a book - by its title and cover a historical novel about cowboys, centuries ago on Earth. He looked at Braden through fat-puffed eyes.

"Certificate," he rumbled. He held out a hand.

Braden handed over his papers. The skipper looked at them.

"The *Cerberus*, from Canberra to Nelm," he rumbled. "Skipper, Holden. How does he swear?"



Rather surprisedly, Braden mentioned the *Cerberus'* skipper's most adhesive profane expression. The *Rim Star's* skipper grunted. He looked at another discharge.

"The *Ganymede*, Honda to Canberra," he rumbled again. "I know her skipper. What's he like?"

Braden grew interested.

"Scar under his chin, sandy hair," he said. "About six feet tall."

The *Rim Star's* skipper grunted again.

"One more. The *Hansford*. In the control-room there's a pin-up. Remember it?"

Braden considered. These were not usual questions for a skipper to ask an applicant for a mate's job on his ship.

"It's a vision-screen girl," he said after a moment. "The name is..." he hesitated, and then said, "Derr Carmody." The skipper handed back the papers.

"You'll do," he rumbled. "Pay is scale. Report on board tomorrow morning. Ten, local time. Fetch the crew with you."

He pushed a button. Then he said almost genially:

"Are you ducking something? Your coat's slit. Looks like a knife did it. Sharp edges. Happened lately."

Braden looked down. There was a fresh knife-slash in his coat. Obviously, it had happened over by the pile of freight in his encounter with the five men.

"I didn't notice it," he said, annoyed. "Just now, on my way here, some characters tried to jump me. It must have happened then."

The skipper blinked at him.

"Well?"

"I jumped first," said Braden. "They weren't very good. One of them said afterward that I was the wrong man. I don't know of anybody who'd want to jump me, so I suppose it was true."

The skipper blinked again, and then he chuckled. He shook when he chuckled.

A door opened and the steward appeared. The skipper said genially, "This is the steward." He waved a fat hand. To the steward he said, "Let him out. He's the new mate."

He chuckled again and looked approvingly at Braden. "You may meet those characters again before you think. I don't like popular officers. A popular officer is a poor one. You'll do!"

He waved his hand in dismissal. He hadn't stirred from the huge upholstered chair. But he was still chuckling as Braden followed the steward from the room.

They went down the slanting corridor with the alternating sloping floor and the flights of stairs. Halfway down, the steward said:

"Beg pardon, sir, but... what made the skipper choose you? I'm curious."

"I'm trying to figure it out myself," said Braden. "But I got the job."

"Yes, sir," said the steward. It was not customary for the steward on a cargo ship to practise such extreme deference. "I was wondering, sir, because he's interviewed a good many others

and only chose one who's since - been taken ill, sir. But he turned down a great many. Some of them were very steady men, married, sir, and with excellent reputations. And some of the younger ones he didn't even consider. He turned them down after one glance at them. But he chose you at once. It's strange, sir."

Braden said nothing.

"Very strange," repeated the steward. "Even the crew were chosen on a system I don't understand. I consider the men he chose very dubious characters, sir. In fact..."

"What?"

"It's quite possible, sir, that the men who tried to jump you were the men the skipper has signed on for his crew. I said the last mate chosen was taken ill. He was beaten up, sir. He's in hospital now."

Braden was silent for a moment. Then he said detachedly:

"I told the skipper, not you, that the men had tried to work me over. Does he know that you eavesdrop on him?"

"In case of trouble, sir," said the steward earnestly. "Only in case of trouble! A precaution, sir. I wouldn't presume..."

"Don't," said Braden. "If I'm the mate, don't eavesdrop on me. I don't like it. I won't like it."

"Yes, sir," said the steward.

"And when you tell the skipper about this conversation," added Braden, frowning, "don't forget to add that I also don't like tricks to find out if I'm loose-tongued and ready to discuss my private business or his. I don't like such things!"

"Oh, yes, sir!" said the steward. "I'm sure the skipper will be pleased, sir," he added. "Very pleased!" He paused a moment. "Considering a certain part of the cargo, sir, in particular."

They reached the bottom of the circular ramp-and-stair combination. Braden asked no questions about the certain part of the ship's cargo. It was not his affair. Especially, he would not ask questions of a steward who would probably repeat every question to the skipper.

Here was the exit port at the bottom of the short flight of steps. Braden opened it for himself.

"Ten o'clock, sir, local time," said the steward. "The skipper will be expecting to lift off by noon, sir. The passengers will be notified."

"Passengers?" demanded Braden. He stopped short.

"Yes, sir. Quite unexpected, sir. The shipping agent only notified the skipper this afternoon that there would be passengers. We've accommodations for a few, sir. Very few. Six cabins and a saloon, sir. Often there are people bound for a planet that has infrequent ship service and they make the trip by freighter. It's often a quicker way to travel."

Braden shrugged. It was not surprising that even a bulkcargo carrier like the *Rim Star* should have accommodations for passengers. The big fast liners that went singing through the void did not like to make small way-stops. They were moving hotels, with decks upon decks of passenger cabins and amusement areas. It was costly for crack liners to break their runs to put off a very few passengers. Many worlds could be reached most practically by finding a freighter bound for them.

"Very well," said Braden curtly. "I'll be back at ten."

"Yes, sir," said the steward respectfully.

He closed the exit port behind Braden, and Braden was in the abysmally black shadow of the *Rim Star*.

He frowned as he headed back toward the spaceport gate. It is not the business of a ship's officer to investigate everything out of the ordinary on a ship he's just joining. His obligation is to do his ship-duty well and honorably, and nothing more. If this skipper chose a mate because he could answer questions about other skippers and their ships, it was his business only. If he preferred unpopular officers to amiable ones, again it was only his affair. But if he chose and knowingly kept on crewmen who lay in wait for other prospective crewmembers heading for the *Rim Star*...

Braden's frown became a scowl. He moved out from the *Rim Star's* shadow and headed for the spaceport gate. There were a number of unorthodox things about the *Rim Star* besides her purpose and destination. But he'd learned that a man can go unscathed through undesirable and annoying and even unjust experiences if he keeps his self-respect. And a man keeps his self-respect largely by being competent in his work.

So it did not occur to him to back out because the coming journey would probably have some unusual features. He'd asked for the job, he'd gotten it. Now he would do his work. That was his entire obligation. If the *Rim Star's* skipper chose his crew from among probable criminals and selected a mate for his knowledge of pin-ups and his probable unpopularity... Braden considered, from a professional viewpoint, that if he did his work competently such things wouldn't matter.

In most cases he would have been right.

He passed the pile of freight, keeping eyes and ears open as he went by. It was this extra alertness that enabled him to hear a very faint, arresting noise. It was a bubbling sound that should not come from a human throat, but couldn't come from anywhere else.

Braden hesitated for a long moment, and then went to investigate. Thirty yards from the pile of freight, he found a figure moving feebly on the ground. It had been jumped and beaten, horribly and brutally pounded. It twitched and writhed, and made suffering, meaningless sounds.

Coldly, Braden made sure that movement wouldn't add to the man's injuries. Then he picked him up and carried him to the spaceport gate. He laid him on a bench the gate guards used for lounging.

"Get an ambulance," he commanded. "This man's been worked over. I found him on the ground back there."

The guards looked, and moved fast. One called for an ambulance while another gave what first aid he could. A third guard said, his voice hushed:

"He came through the gate less than half an hour ago. He was signed on the *Rim Star*. Space crewman first class. Had his papers, too."

Braden's nostrils widened a little. Five men had tried to jump him, maybe an hour ago. That had been a mistake. He wasn't the man they were after. This man probably was - at least he belonged on the *Rim Star* and was headed back to the ship when all this happened to him.

"He'll probably tell you that he was jumped by five men," said Braden. "That many came after me earlier, out there, but I wasn't the man they wanted. He must have been."

He turned and went away. He was still within earshot when the ambulance arrived at the gate, but he went on about his business. It was common sense to do so. He was mate of a ship; his first duty was due her. He couldn't describe the five men who'd tried to manhandle him, or prove that they'd worked this man over. And it was at least half-past three in the morning. He had to get ready for duty on the *Rim Star*. When he'd left his room earlier, he'd had no departure in mind. He'd have to register at the Space Shipping Office as mate of the big ship. He'd have to round up the crewmen who were still ashore. Obviously, all this ought to be simple if he started early enough.

He went to his room and packed, including the pocket blaster which nobody was supposed to take into space on a merchant ship, but which no prudent officer would fail to be without. When he finished packing, there were no more than five hours before he was due to go on duty. He slept two hours, for he had the ability to wake up whenever he chose.

After he got up, he went to the Space Shipping Office. Because the *Rim Star's* skipper hadn't reported his being hired as mate, he had to be raised by communicator to verify the appointment. He did. But another man was also listed as mate.

"He's in hospital somewhere," said Braden. "I'd guess he was jumped and beaten up."

The Shipping Officer used the communicator again and found the man who had first been accepted as mate on the *Rim Star*. He admitted with profanity that he would not sail on the *Rim Star*.

"And any man is a fool who does!" he rasped.

Braden's name was substituted for his on the official records. The Shipping Office was meticulous about such matters. Space traffic had to be watched closely. History told about piracies and worse before the modern strict regulations went into effect. Braden got the list of the *Rim Star's* signed-on crew. There were six names listed. Five of the men gave the same spaceport boardinghouse as the place where they could be reached when wanted. Braden put his finger on the sixth name.

"I think this man is in the hospital," he said. "It happened last night or early this morning. Which will mean overtime pay for the men who have to do his work."

Again the Shipping Office checked. Again it took time. Yes, the sixth man had been brought to a public hospital from the spaceport gate about 4 A.M. He'd been badly beaten. There were two fractures. So the Shipping Office noted that the *Rim Star* would take off with one crewmember short, and therefore the pay of the rest of the crew would be raised accordingly. This was all recorded, and any discrepancy would eventually come to light and would follow the *Rim Star* implacably wherever she went.

Braden went to pick up his crew. They were gone. The boardinghouse keeper stolidly insisted he knew nothing. Braden began to search spaceport restaurants and dives of various kinds. Two and a half hours to duty-time. He drew blanks and more blanks. Two hours left. He went down the long line of joints toward the spaceport gate. When only one hour was left, he found a message waiting for him in a particularly greasy eating-place. If the *Rim Star's* mate came in looking for his crew, he should call the ship.

Braden called, and the steward answered.

"About the crew, sir," he said respectfully, when Braden asked curtly what the call was about. "It occurred to me, sir, that you might have trouble finding them, so I took the liberty of hunting them up. They're waiting for you at the spaceport gate, sir."

"Very well," said Braden. "Hereafter, though, I'll do my own work, if you please!"

He hung up, fuming. There are many ways to undermine an officer's position on board ship. One is to do his work for him. It seemed to Braden that there would be much more than the usual amount of friction before things settled down on the *Rim Star*. For valid psychological reasons it is wisest to sign on a crew for one voyage only, and get a fresh crew for the next. Long, tedious weeks and months in space have the same effect as the same time spent in close confinement in a jail. With nothing to see and only routine duties to do in space flights, when most men go aground they only want never to see their shipmates again. When they start on another voyage, they bristle in anticipation of forming similar new hatreds. So an officer has to establish his authority at the beginning and guard against anything that could be taken as weakness. Men on the verge of going ship-happy from confinement can be unbelievably petty and have to be ridden hard. It isn't wise to let anybody take over any part of an officer's duties.

Braden took a skimmer to the spaceport. There were five men waiting for him at the gate. They looked very much like other space crewmen. They eyed him with the painstakingly blank expression of men being sized up. It was a familiar experience to Braden. There was a man with scarred and battered features, but no new signs of conflict. A hard-faced man with a small new cut on his chin. A man with a purple bruise on his cheekbone. A lean man with sharp eyes. A chubby man with an expression of insistent innocence. Braden decided that he'd met them by the pile of freight the previous night. He suspected that the sixth crew-member had proved himself uncongenial to the other five and was in hospital as a result. They looked like that kind of crew.

"I think," said Braden deliberately, "that there's no use in speeches. You'll find out about me aboard ship, and what I don't know about you I'll find out after we lift off. You've got your ship-bags. Come along!"

He led the way. The loading-cranes had moved now, and the very tallest of them seemed to be topping off the *Rim Star's* cargo with the largest single piece of fabricated steel that Braden had ever seen. At a guess, it would be the bottom-tier girder for a landing-grid. It would form part of a gigantic steel framework, no less than half a mile in diameter and nearly as high - one of those structures that made space commerce possible. One such structure rimmed the spaceport here, and ships came sedately down from the sky, cradled in the force-fields it generated. Later they would rise skyward again, thrust out into emptiness by the same powerful force-fields.

Before landing-grids were invented, ships could lift off only on rockets or on the Lawlor space-drive. But rockets required enormous amounts of fuel to get them out into space, more fuel to carry that fuel, and still more to carry that. Lift-offs and landings on space-drive created such ferocious turbulence in the atmosphere - such fierce local hurricanes - that no structure could remain standing within miles of a heavy ship's lift-off point, and clouds of dust blanketed all growing things for a distance of over fifty square leagues. Single exploration voyages could be lifted off in this way, but real space commerce would have been impossible without landing-grids.

Obviously, no newly colonized planet could be considered complete without a grid. Supplies and materials for the first new colony had to be hauled by drone ships which were towed to position and then landed on rockets. All this was inordinately costly, and there were

accidents. But if the *Rim Star* could land under control, she could carry in one trip nearly everything needed for a new colony, including the grid. If she could do that, the huge ship would cease to be a white elephant and would once more be profitable to own and operate. But the landing had to be tried before it could be counted on.

The small group of crewmen followed Braden toward the ship. The toy-sized yacht had gone away, and the medium-sized freighter was discharging cargo. A meatship from the llano planet Chagan seemed to smoke faintly, with hoarfrost on its plating and icicles forming on its lower parts. It had made a very good breakout from overdrive and had come to ground before even the unshielded sunshine could warm it above the freezing point of water.

Two skimmers came in the gate and floated swiftly across the tarmac. Four inches of clear space showed between their bottom ducts and the floor of the spaceport. They sped past Braden and the crew with the smooth celerity of frictionless things. They reached the *Rim Star* and settled to the ground.

Figures got out of the skimmers. They watched as baggage was put aboard the ship. Then they went aboard her and inside, and the port was closed. The skimmers left. Nothing of any marked importance seemed to have happened. But two of the distant figures were women. Their faces could not be seen, but their figures were lithe and young.

Braden muttered under his breath. Then he heard a strange sound. The five members of the *Rim Star's* crew were laughing. There was nothing to laugh at, but still they laughed. They looked at the now-closed port, and at each other, and they laughed uproariously at something exquisitely humorous that only they knew about. If they were laughing because there were women among the *Rim Star's* passengers, it did not promise an orderly and peaceful voyage. But there was little that Braden could do about it. He could change his mind and stay behind, instead of going on the voyage. But somebody else would serve as mate - perhaps someone the crew would approve, as they hadn't the skipper's first choice. For him to back out would do no good. The five crewmen, still laughing unpleasantly, would go. And the passengers.

He ground his teeth. There was a lot out of the ordinary in this voyage. He began to suspect a number of things. But the *Rim Star* was his ship now, since he'd taken the berth as mate. And the first and fundamental duty of a merchant-space officer is to his ship.

## Chapter 2

The steward with straw-colored hair let them into the *Rim Star's* personnel lock. Braden regarded him without approval. He said curtly:

"Take these men to their quarters, Steward, and impress on them that though you may be the steward of this ship, I'm the mate. It might be a good idea to remind yourself, too!"

"Yes, sir," said the steward deferentially. "I will, sir. I'm sorry that in trying to be helpful I offended you, sir."

Braden scowled. He went up the circling succession of ramps and stairways to the top of the ship. On the way, now, he took more careful note of the long ascent. This time he particularly noticed the hinged panels which would open upon catwalks between the enormous holds of the ship. He observed the monitor-boxes in detail. They would faithfully report to panels in the control-room the physical conditions where they were located, and each of them could be used as an intercom in case of need. The catwalks behind the hinged panels would allow any part of the ship's skin to be reached from inside.

The ship was truly gigantic, though she carried a crew of only six men. Now there'd be only five, with two officers and the steward. On duty, every man would be remote from his fellows. There was, of course, no engine-room crew because Lawlor space-drives had no moving parts to be tended. A ship's drive was inspected by highly trained technicians at spaceports, and that was that.

Out in space, the ship would have the feel of a silent, tremendous prison, moving through emptiness on some errand of her own. It seemed incredible that so huge a structure could be controlled by so small a number of human beings. A tour of duty would be a period of isolation, and there should be no sound or movement anywhere in ninety-nine per cent of her volume. Her corridors should be echoing empty. Guiding her would be the concern only of computers and integrators and other devices sealed safely away, never to be touched except in port and by specialists. Men on board so vast a mechanism would tend to feel insignificant.

But as Braden went, frowning, to report himself on board, he was not thinking of such matters. He was reporting according to orders, two hours before lift-off. He had no time to familiarize himself with all the minor points which made this ship an individual and which a mate should know much better than the palm of his own hand. The skipper was responsible to the owner for the management of the *Rim Star*, but Braden was responsible for everything by which the managing was done.

He reached the upper corridor-straight where the ascending route was curved; better-lighted, with glow lamps everywhere instead of thirty feet apart as in the center of a corridor's ceiling. He came to the officers' area and saw a cabin door with MATE painted on it. He opened the

door and dropped his ship-bag inside it. He went on and tapped at the outermost of the three doors he'd passed through on his way to the skipper the night before.

The skipper's voice rumbled.

"Braden, sir," said Braden stiffly. "Reporting aboard."

The rumbling again.

"Any special orders, sir?" asked Braden.

The skipper did not tell him to come in, but Braden heard him rise. He opened the door of his cabin. He was a huge man.

"What special orders do you expect, Mister?" He blinked at Braden, through eyes almost closed by fat. "Don't you know your work?"

"I do, sir," said Braden, "but it's less than two hours to take-off. That's when I was ordered to report. If I'm to assign duty to the crewmen and make the regular check in the control-room, I won't have time to go over the ship as I should. So I'm asking for orders."

The skipper rumbled deep in his throat.

"The steward can assign duty to the crew," he growled; "and he's checked the ship. I told him to. He's perfectly capable, Mr. Braden! Been with me on two long voyages. You check the control-room. That's your special order!"

Braden flushed angrily. The skipper added sardonically:

"You can put it in the log, Mr. Braden! Put it in the log!"

He closed the door and Braden's hands clenched. Checking the controls was the most necessary of all the duties of a mate before a ship lifted off. But everything was necessary! A spaceship is practically a gigantic robot, and inspections and tests are the price of its proper operation. It can be designed to respond to an extremely large number of stimuli on the "if-this-happens-do-that" order, but it can only respond to happenings that can be predicted. In an emergency that has not been foreseen, any automatic device is helpless. But Braden was angered at the steward's having done the work that should have been done by him, that is part of a mate's duty.

He went to the control-room. He met nobody. Naturally, for in a ship nearly a quarter of a mile long, a crew of six men - or five - is spread thin. Passengers do not count, for they stay in their cabins and the steward sees that they are fed. So far as the mate is concerned, they can be ignored.

The control-room walls were almost solid banks of instruments. They ranged from hull-temperature repeaters to CO<sup>2</sup> readers from every compartment and section of the hold; from the extraordinarily complex communication system which was completely useless in overdrive, to the screens which, out of overdrive, showed the stars of the galaxy in their places. There were the controls for the ship's emergency rockets which had never been fired since the builders delivered the ship, but which were to land her on Handel's Planet at the end of the voyage. There were levers for lights and pumps and firefighting in case of need; and there were dials, and rows of tiny lights which glowed green when what they reported on was functioning correctly, but flared crimson if there was trouble.

Braden began a conscientious, infinitely painstaking verification of the ship's condition as shown by her instrument banks. Some things could be corrected in space if they went wrong. Thus an improperly seated cargo door could be sealed, or an air leak stopped. Even



malfuction of the air-renewal apparatus could be corrected easily enough. But if the meteor-detection equipment went wrong during lift-off not much could be done off ground. A jammed scanner could be serious before the ship went into overdrive. The most infinitesimal precession of a direction-gyro could be tragic after. The ship's drive, though, was in duplicate and was sealed, with only one unit used at a time. That had been inspected by the airport specialists, and Braden checked the certification.

It took the best part of the less than two hours at his disposal to complete the whole job. When he had finished he pressed the log-button and dictated the results of his inspection, giving the exact readings of some hundreds of dials, with check-readings under simulated changed conditions, the certifications of space-stowage by the spaceport crew, the read-off mass of ship and cargo together, and an enormous mass of deadly dull but necessary information which had to be recorded before lift-off. When he finished he pressed the port recorder-button and the log to date was transmitted by microwave to the spaceport record file in a matter of seconds. The skipper's order to omit part of the inspection outside the control-room - normally required to be made by the mate - was included at the end.

There was no glamour in such work. It was routine. But the taking of some thousands of tons of cargo on a journey of a light-century and more, and its delivery at the end of it, were bound to involve routine. The unexpected and the unprepared-for are highly unpopular in space. Furthermore, the Space Patrol disapproves. The Patrol insists that forecastle tales about the Other Side of Nowhere do not explain the absolute disappearance of well-found ships in space. It blames such cases on the omission of detailed and meticulous inspections before a ship lifts off - and the evidence is on the side of the Patrol.

The log-tape rewound and stopped. Braden threw off the switch. The skipper came into the control-room.

"Check-up complete, sir," said Braden.

The skipper rumbled acknowledgement. He glanced around the serried rows of instruments. He flicked on the vision screens. - There were no ports to see through, of course. Cameras are better than the human eye. - The spaceport looked strange from this height. The landing-grid itself was higher, but the other ships on the tarmac looked small, like toys. The trains of cargo trucks winding here and there - empty trucks to be loaded again, and loaded ones to be unloaded - looked like children's Playthings.

"Five minutes to lift, Mr. Braden," rumbled the skipper. "Cargo doors checked. The crew's at lift-off stations. If you want to call someone to bid them a fond farewell..."

"There's no one, sir," said Braden. "Maybe the passengers should be told, though."

"Tell them if you like," growled the skipper. "I'll have nothing to do with them. Didn't want them. Groundlings should stay aground!"

Braden pushed the general, communicator button.

"Passengers, attention!" he said curtly. "The ship is about to lift off. You can watch through the vision screens in your quarters, if you like. That is all." He lifted his thumb from the button. "Yes, sir. Anything else?"

The skipper rumbled. Apparently he rumbled as a necessary preliminary to speech; he made sounds first and then formed them into words.

"I don't know you, Mr. Braden," he said sardonically. "I never saw you before or ever heard of you. But this I say; you'll find this like no voyage you ever made before!"

"So I understand, sir," said Braden. "We're carrying the biggest weight ever lifted in one ship and we're to land that biggest weight by rocket. So I'm told."

The skipper grunted.

"I didn't have that in mind. You're plainly a very conscientious young officer, Mr. Braden. If you didn't bring a blaster aboard - against all rules and regulations of the Space Patrol - I shall think it remarkable. And if you did..."

"Yes, sir?"

"Officially, I shall deplore it. I warn you, Mr. Braden, I run this ship my own way!"

Braden said matter-of-factly:

"That's your privilege, sir. Meanwhile..."

"Not disturbed, eh? Sure of yourself, eh? Staunch character?"

"Not necessarily, sir," said Braden. "You're right about the blaster, though. I do have one."

The skipper made a sound that Braden could not interpret.

"In that case, Mr. Braden," he grunted, "I advise you to carry it."

The sound came again from the skipper. It was oddly like a chuckle. But then the field-detector buzzer made a humming noise. The force-fields of the spaceport grid were closing about the ship. The hull-temperature indicators flickered as the fields touched and shifted. Eddy currents formed and warmed individual plates, and moved to other ones. The fields at first were small - 100-kilowatt energies and upward. But the *Rim Star's* mass became centered in the complicated, intangible powerfields. The ship was enveloped by an invisible web of energy. Somewhere over at the edge of the spaceport, men with control-levers in their hands watched instruments and fed power to the grid-coils. The input to the grid went up from 10,000 - 20,000 kilowatts to 50,000.

Then multiples of megawatts. The ship stirred. She wavered.

She lifted.

Slowly at first, she rose to the half-mile height of the circular steel structure which enclosed the spaceport, which actually *was* the spaceport. The irregular ring of bare steel girders drifted downward. There was suddenly a horizon. The *Rim Star* had risen above the grid. It was possible to look for miles beyond the city's roofs. There were forests, very far away. There were hills. A river, not visible from the spaceport, flowed in unreasonable curves across the suddenly visible landscape. The ship continued to ascend. The city beneath shrank. The river dwindled and the hills diminished beneath the ship as she rose.

She went up and up. Presently the sky darkened and then the horizon was not flat but curved, and a little later the planet's surface was not bowl-shaped but visibly the near side of a tremendous globe. And the sky became even darker, and infinitesimal sparkles of light began to appear in it.

Now the ship rose at an ever-increasing rate. There was the tiniest possible jog when the ship's own gravity came on at lowest intensity. It would adjust as the ship went ever farther out, and no more than a similar sensation would be felt when the grid-fields cut off.

The skipper rumbled to himself. Then he said:

"Very good, Mr. Braden. I've taken over here. Now you can check the work the steward did for you. I'm sure it's competently done, but you can make certain - with your blaster available!"

His air was definitely sardonic. Braden said, "Very well, sir," and left the control-room. Outside, he found himself scowling. He hesitated for a moment and went to the cabin in which he'd dumped his ship-bag. He was annoyed with himself. On the face of it, it was absurd to anticipate trouble before the ship was even in clear space. If any began - and on a long voyage trouble is always possible - the proper course is always to bring it to a head before the troublemakers are ready for it. In such a case seeing a bulge of a certain shape in an officer's pocket very often quiets the most nerve-racked and ship-happy of crewmen. But at the beginning...

Braden scowled as he loosed the draw-cord of his bag and put his hand inside.

Within a minute, he had the bag empty. His clothes were folded as neatly as when he'd put them in. There was only one sign that his bag had been touched.

His blaster was gone.

His jaw clamped and he went cold with rage. He could report the theft to the skipper, for it was a distinctly ominous matter. The actual purpose of the voyage included taking a risk that had never deliberately been taken before, but the skipper was apparently welcoming trouble in addition. He was no ordinary merchant-ship skipper. Braden had been challenged by his manner. To report within half an hour after lift-off that his blaster had been stolen would probably amuse the skipper.

There was, plainly, only one thing to do, and that was to say nothing about it. A blaster in the forecabin would call for action under any circumstances. Braden must take that action before it could be expected. Meanwhile the ship rose and rose. Braden should check the items assigned to the steward to do - against all reason. He must go on as if he did not know about the blaster's theft until the time came for violent action to recover it.

He ground his teeth as he repacked the ship-bag. He put it where it had been before. As he went out of the cabin, his hands were clenched into fists.

He started the check-over that should have been made while the ship was still aground. Outside, the planet just left would be a distinct ball, with seas and continents and polar icecaps. It would hang unsupported in space, which was unbelievable even to a man who saw it from a ship that was leaving it. It dwindled and dwindled, which seemed equally improbable. It was no less inconceivable that the *Rim Star* had lifted and was lifting from the planet on fields of force projected from a spaceport which was not even a speck on the now-minute world.

Outside, of course, the huge ship did not even look like anything made by men. She was bulbous, ungraceful. Floating in emptiness, she looked like a preposterous shape in preposterous motion.

Presently she swung, aimed herself, and moved visibly in a new direction. Now, from close by, her meteor-detectors could be seen to twinkle, scanning the arcs of emptiness before her. Her drive produced no external effect - no wake, no plume of rocket-smoke. She was driven by the Lawlor units that are not used for lift-off from a planet because of the monstrous winds they create. But they'd been used to cross interplanetary distances in the first solar system. When overdrive was developed and a ship could be enclosed in a force-field which changed the physical constants of interstellar space, the same conservative Lawlor drives continued to operate. But the speed attainable in overdrive increased beyond imagining.

It was not wise, though, to go into overdrive in the ecliptic plane of a solar system. A ship had to get well away from the most probable orbit of celestial debris before building up to so high a velocity.

The *Rim Star* drove on and on and on. Since she had aimed herself to leave the plane populated by comets and celestial debris, she seemed to be imbued with purpose. She still did not look like anything man had created, but rather like some monster creature swimming abstractly toward some destination of its own choosing.

It was two hours out from lift-off before Braden had completed the check of those last items he should have seen to before leaving ground. He'd found each member of the crew at his post. He regarded each one with a bristling disapproval which was expected. Each one answered such questions as Braden put with precision and apparent respect, but the feel of things was wrong. The five blank-faced crewmen said nothing and did nothing that he could cavil at, but they shared an air as of hidden amusement, of secret laughter. Braden suspected that they knew about the theft of his blaster, but didn't know he knew it yet.

He'd left the last of them and was on his way to the passengers' quarters when he realized what was really basically wrong about the way the crew acted. A ship's crew scatters when she ends her voyage. Men do not sign on together for long voyages out of friendship. When a ship leaves port, the members of her crew are usually strangers, bringing neither personal hatreds nor personal loyalties to their joint imprisonment in a spaceship's metal hull.

But these men were different. If they were the same ones who'd jumped him in the spaceport, they formed a unit - organized and tested and confident of each other. Their solidarity did not come from membership in the same ship's crew. They'd waylaid Braden by mistake - it was almost certain - and then waylaid another man but not by mistake, after him. That man was now in the hospital instead of aboard the *Rim Star*. Somebody, too, had jumped the man who'd been mate before Braden. Probably these same men.

When Braden went into the passengers' quarters he'd added things up. He looked like a thundercloud. The passengers weren't yet as settled as they'd be presently. The steward smiled brightly at Braden when he walked into the passengers' saloon.

"Ah, Mr. Braden!" he said warmly. "The passengers want to talk to you, sir! I told them my authority is limited to doing things to make them comfortable. But you can pass on their idea, sir."

Braden said unpleasantly:

"What is the idea?"

"Just a moment, sir. You'll want to talk to... Ah, here he is! Mr. Duckworth, this is Mr. Braden, mate of our ship. Second in command, you'd say. He'll hear your request, Mr. Duckworth, and at least take it up with the captain."

The man called Duckworth was small and bustling, with an air of fretful impatience. He gave Braden a professional smile.

"We want to take pictures on the *Rim Star*, Mr. Braden," he said crisply. "While we're traveling. That is, we are a production unit going on location to Handel's Planet to take background shots and some action, set-pictures and so on, for a broadcast tape story about the Other Side of Nowhere. Miss Derr Carmody is the star. Mr. Fortescue plays opposite her. And the *Rim Star's* a splendid set. We can use her interiors for a good many scenes before we get to Handel's Planet and have a good lot of footage all wrapped up. I asked the steward to explain

this to the captain and arrange things so I can look the ship over and plan my shots. I might want members of the crew - off duty-time, of course - to act as extras. Possibly we could work you and the skipper in."

His manner was assured, confident. There was a stirring, and one of the two women passengers came out of a cabin. Braden recognized her. There'd been a pin-up of her long ago in the *Hansford's* control-room. But that was a picture of her when she was young. Now, Braden knew detachedly, she'd had a rejuvenation job and probably persuaded herself that nobody guessed it. It wouldn't show under tape make-up, though.

"Derr," said Duckworth confidently, "meet Mr. Braden. He's first officer of the ship. He'll arrange for us to shoot the scenes we need on the ship. Mr. Braden, Miss Carmody."

Braden nodded acknowledgement. Derr Carmody gave him a warm and luminous but completely professional smile.

"Oh, yes!" she said. She tended to coo. "It's so good of you, Mr. Braden!"

Another passenger popped into view - a middle-aged man with a harried look and disconsolate expression. Still another young man, with the expression of someone who knows he will take a good picture if somebody aims a camera at him. Then a girl - quiet, not happy, not glamorous. At another time Braden would have excepted her from the category of women he'd rather not bother to talk to. Now, though, he had a lot on his mind. He nodded curtly when introduced to the disconsolate middle-aged man, a cameraman named Hardy. He nodded again, impatiently, when the young man who looked like an actor was introduced. His name was Fortescue. The quiet girl's name was Diane. She wasn't an actress, but a cameraman, like the harried Hardy, and Duckworth explained proudly that they were specialists of a very high order in camera work. They could get incredible pictures under conditions most cameramen would find impossible. They could make tape cameras sit up and beg. Hence the small location-party for a big picture. But they needed to make some scenes on the *Rim Star*.

"I don't think," said Braden ungraciously, "that you'd better count on picture-making for the present. This isn't a passenger ship. Passenger activities aren't encouraged. Without the skipper's express permission you may not leave these quarters."

"But we need to!" the director said indignantly. "The traffic agent assured us we'd have the run of the ship. Within reason, of course, but... we've scheduled this production! We've a deadline to meet! We've got to do some shooting aboard ship!"

Braden shrugged his shoulders and went out. The steward followed him. Braden swore when the door to the passenger cabins closed behind them.

"See that they stay put," he said angrily to the steward. "We can't have them roaming around everywhere!"

"Indeed not, sir," said the steward anxiously. "I'm very much concerned, sir. I'm terribly afraid the captain was indiscreet in choosing the crew, sir. I don't like them!"

Braden looked at him. Hard.

"It's their manner, sir," insisted the steward. "You expect newly signed-on men to be truculent, sir, when they first come aboard. They try to browbeat each other as if they wanted to establish who's to be boss of the forecabin right away. But these men are quiet, sir! Right at the beginning! They act as if they know each other and don't have to settle anything like that. I don't like it, sir! In fact..."

He hesitated, and Braden said coldly,

"Go on!"

"It... wouldn't surprise me, sir," said the steward in a lowered tone, as if he didn't want to be overheard, "I wouldn't be surprised if there were... were... I hate to say it, sir, but there might be - knives aboard."

"It would surprise me," said Braden coldly, "If there weren't. Arms in space are quite illegal, but I've never known a ship yet whose officers didn't have arms to use in case of need, or a forecandle in which there wasn't some sort of weapon. It's the possibility of weapons - law or no law - that keeps forecandles from becoming cages of animals when nerves get tense."

He turned away. There was a click and the door to the passengers' quarters opened. This was just after Braden had informed the passengers that they must never come beyond it. He turned angrily. Fortescue had come out. His face brightened when he saw Braden.

"Mr. Braden!" he said anxiously. "May I speak to you a moment? I hoped I'd catch you before you'd gotten too far away!"

"I just told you," said Braden formidably, "that the passengers are to stay in their quarters without exception!"

"But it's important!" insisted Fortescue anxiously. His face had lost its expression of being ready to be photographed. He looked genuinely uneasy.

"All right," said Braden. He nodded dismissal to the steward. After the steward had left, he said, "What is it?"

"I want to argue a bit, Mr. Braden," Fortescue said uncomfortably. "You seemed to think we won't be able to use the *Rim Star* for a set in the picture we're slated to make. If I may explain..."

"The skipper will decide," said Braden impatiently.

"But we took passage on the *Rim Star*," said Fortescue urgently, "just so we could take the scenes the script calls for! When we land on Handel's Planet we'll take the ground shots, and then we're scheduled to be lifted by space-boat to one of the ships, that guide the drones there! We have to take these scenes on the *Rim Star*, Mr. Braden! You've no idea how important it is!"

"I know," said Braden, "how important it is that you in your quarters!"

"It's Miss Carmody's career!" protested the actor. "She was famous, once. Then she lost out. Finished! Now she's got a chance to hit the top all over again. There's never been a tape about the Other Side of Nowhere! What if it is only a tall tale? Everybody's heard of it, but nobody's shot it! The script's magnificent! It's her chance... And mine too, of course, because I play opposite her. I'm explaining this so you can make the captain see how important it is! I want you to know what it means!"

"There are things," said Braden grimly, "that are a lot more important to me than that just now!"

He turned away.

"I should have known!" Fortescue said bitterly. "Dammit, I should have known!"

Braden went on his way. As a matter of routine he should report the condition of the ship to the skipper but he was angrily aware that the skipper didn't care whether he reported or not. But

the removal of a blaster from his ship-bag was something the skipper should know about. It was important. As a merchant-space officer it would be dereliction of duty if he didn't inform the skipper of it.

The control-room door was shut. He tapped on it, saying,

"Braden, sir!"

"Come in!"

He entered. The skipper was seated at the tape coder, tapping the dots and symbols which would be instructions for the ship's astrogation apparatus. At the moment the ship was driving herself on the preliminary course that would take her beyond the abstract plane surface on which the sun's satellites should have their orbits. Scanners now watched for meteoric masses. They would warn in plenty of time for avoidance, if it became necessary. Once in really clear space, the skipper would aim the ship with infinite precision and turn over the controls to the astrogation unit. It would handle the ship from then on. Everything in the ship was a machine which did what it was expected to do, barring accidents. Only the tape coder was a tool which men used to make the ship - as a machine - carry out their instructions.

"I've a report on the state of the ship, sir," said Braden formally.

The skipper flipped the log-switch. The tape began to move.

"All hull and interior equipment is functioning normally," said Braden. "The crewmen are at their posts and on the alert. The ship, as such, is operating perfectly."

He paused, and the skipper flipped the switch to OFF.

"By your look," he rumbled, "there's something else and it's tricky. I'll have you tell me off the log before we decide whether it goes on record. What is it?"

"Somebody," said Braden grimly, "went into my cabin and took my blaster out of my ship-bag."

The skipper blinked, and then chuckled. He shook all over with amusement.

"The steward," said Braden grimly, "overheard every word you and I said last night. Taking me down to the exit port, he asked me questions - oh, with great deference! - that showed he'd been eavesdropping. I accused him of it and he admitted it." He paused. "I told you that I had a blaster aboard. I told *you*. Nobody else. But twenty minutes later I went to get it and it was gone. I lay it to the steward."

The skipper shook, rumbling with laughter. Braden was raging.

"Mr. Braden," said the skipper genially, "luckily your mishap isn't in the log. It would be serious to have on your record your admission that you broke the law by bringing a blaster aboard! It would be taken very seriously if we made port! So I shall ignore it officially. You can, of course, try to get your blaster back. That is your affair. But there is one thing! You will not bother the steward! He has shipped with me on two voyages before this one! I value him! Your dealings with the crew are your business. I will not interfere. But you will leave the steward alone!"

He chuckled, rocking back and forth in the coder chair, which was so inadequate for a man of his bulk.

"Go get your blaster back, Mr. Braden, if you can do it without disturbing the steward. But I specifically order you to leave him alone!"

He turned back to the coder, pecking out the tape orders that would send the *Rim Star* more than a hundred light-years to the near neighborhood of Handel's Planet with not less than two breakouts from overdrive on the way. He copied the symbols, using one finger, squinting wisely at the typed sheet from the spaceport course-room.

"The ship's operating perfectly, sir," said Braden. "I'd like to speak with all the crewmen at once. When can I call them from duty-posts?"

The skipper turned. Then he swung about in his chair. He considered, chuckling again.

"I give you ten minutes now, Mr. Braden," he rumbled. "Ten full minutes. I will stay valiantly on debris-watch while you impress our sturdy crewmen with the idea that you are not to be trifled with!"

He watched with a sort of genial malice while Braden pushed the general communication button and said:

"All hands attention. All forecandle hands to the forecandle at once. Repeat: All forecandle hands to the forecandle at once." Then he said, "I'll see what can be done, sir!"

He went out, bitterly angry. The situation was much more serious than one blaster pilfered, though that was serious enough. There was trouble ahead. He must try to bring it to a head before the troublemakers expected, and in a way they would not anticipate.

He headed for the crew's quarters. On a ship as large as the *Rim Star*, the difference between the design of a spaceship and a seagoing vessel is enormously accentuated. A ship designed to travel on an ocean ignores the weight of her fabric, but everything is cramped to make it possible for the smallest object to be pushed through a resisting sea. A spaceship subordinates physical size to mass. If landing-grids worked efficiently on spheres, spaceships would all be simple globes because the largest possible object with a given mass is a sphere. There is no need to economize on size in a spacecraft; hence interstellar ships are roomy beyond the imagination of a groundling. One consequence is that a man can be very lonely on a fully manned freighter. He is a very small pea in a very large pod.

Braden was alone, a long curved corridor stretching out before him. His footsteps were completely silent. There was absolute stillness all around him. He regarded the situation with aversion. He was the mate of the *Rim Star*. The skipper's behavior was anomalous. Instead of the suspicion with which a normal ship captain views every deviation from the normal, he had thrown discipline out the air lock even before lift-off. He'd allowed the ship's steward to perform the duties a mate is most jealous of. He was amused that his crew had tried to prevent Braden from joining the ship. He'd been indifferent when a previous mate was sent to hospital - very probably by his crew - and was followed - almost certainly the work of the same individuals - by the man who should have been sixth of the unrated members of the ship's company. The skipper was amused that a blaster was loose on the ship. He'd ordered Braden not to interfere with the steward when it was absolutely certain that the steward had eavesdropped on him. He...

Braden broke stride when a thought came to his mind. After an instant, though, he went on. No. It couldn't be that the skipper believed that the control-room was fitted up with a listening device, and had spoken as he did because he believed he was overheard! That would be unthinkable! No skipper could possibly allow such a thing! No skipper...

Braden went to the group of roomy, separate cabins required by law and common sense alike. Considering the monotony and the long, long journeys involved, men simply couldn't stand enforced continuous close contact with their fellows.



He turned in to the crew's quarters.

All five of the signed-on hands were there, waiting for him. They looked at him with blank expressions, but there was a feeling of laughter in the air. The very expressionlessness of the five men mocked him. They'd come aboard and dumped their ship-bags as he'd done. They'd been on duty ever since. They were no more settled than he was, except that unquestionably they had a common purpose and a very clear idea of how they were going to accomplish it.

"I called you men here," said Braden without preliminary, "because I don't like a lot of things about the way this ship has been set up for a long and dangerous voyage."

He didn't mention his missing blaster. They expected him to demand it forcibly, so he ignored it.

"The five of you tried to jump me last night," he said acidly. "And I was a little bit too gentle with you so you were still able to jump another man - the man you thought I was - a half-hour later. I think you've got ideas. I don't like those ideas. I think you've been cherishing them too long. I want to change them."

He looked from one to another. Although one man's features were scarred and battered, he showed no signs of recent conflict. A hard-faced man had a new cut on his chin, and another man had a purple bruise on his cheekbone. A chubby man had an expression of insistent innocence and there was a lean man whose eyes were sharp.

Braden rated them in his mind. Men who are isolated for long periods form themselves into groups according to certain patterns. There is an automatic assignment of roles. One man is always the leader. Another one is the docile butt of jokes. Still another does what the others tell him. Then there are second leaders and third leaders, and so on. The man with the battered features had gotten that way because he was told to do the fist-fighting for the rest. The chubby man was the squirming, flattered victim of their jests.

Braden pointed at the lean man with the sharp eyes. "Empty your ship-bag," he ordered curtly. The man stared at him, astounded.

"Empty it!" repeated Braden.

"What's this?" demanded the man. "I been on plenty of ships, but nobody ever..."

Braden hit him. The four other men started. It is strictly contrary to law for a merchant-ship officer to hit a crewman. The sharp-eyed man went down and Braden turned to the chubby man with the innocent expression.

"Empty your ship-bag," he ordered coldly. "Now!"

The chubby man stared. His mouth dropped open. He looked helplessly at the others.

Braden hit him. And then he pointed at another man. But the one with the battered face roared and charged. The other two lunged ...

But Braden had a strictly personal advantage. He'd been raised on a high-gravity planet, and consequently he had high-speed muscular reactions. A small boy has to move faster to catch a ball in a 1.7 G. world than to catch one under normal gravity weight-conditions. Since, as a boy, Braden had played under such conditions, he moved faster than average when he had to.

So he did not need to fight in conventional fashion. He snatched up a ship-bag and used it as a flail, knocking the man with the battered face halfway across the cabin into crashing contact with a wall. The ship-bag burst. He snatched up another bag as he saw a blaster come tumbling out of the spilled contents of the burst bag. Braden heaved the second bag at the legs

of another man and jumped the last man with ruthlessly battering fists. In all this he followed the sound rule that one should never do the expected in a barroom-style combat. He'd hit without warning, twice. He'd used a ship-bag - not an intimidating weapon in itself - and cracked a man's head against a wall. He'd tripped another man with a second bag - the man had certainly expected almost anything else. He'd fought the last man along strictly orthodox lines because that man just dimly realized that Braden didn't fight in any standard fashion.

The man who had been tripped was crawling toward the blaster from the burst bag when Braden put his heel on the outstretched hand. The man howled.

Braden picked up the blaster. He raised his heel.

"Pick out your ship-bag," he said gently, "and empty it. On the floor. Now."

He had the blaster bearing, but he spoke without fury. The crawling man cursed. The blaster moved. The man emptied his ship-bag. Braden picked up a blaster and a knife. He matter-of-factly ordered another man to dump his ship-bag. He obeyed. The fighting at an end, Braden seemed to dismiss it as of no importance. He simply made each man dump his possessions on the floor of the oddly misnamed forecandle. He pocketed the three blasters and four knives revealed by a cursory inspection of the contents of the ship-bags.

"Think over what I told you," he said coldly. "I think you've had ideas I don't like. Change them to ideas I do like, and we'll probably get along. That's all."

When he closed the forecandle door behind him and walked away, he still hadn't mentioned his own missing blaster. But none of the crewmen had it. Besides, consideration of the overall situation implied a pause. But Braden had done all the pausing he intended to do. From now on he proposed to manifest very active officer-like behavior.

### Chapter 3

In the corridor outside the forecastle, Braden stopped. The skipper had strictly forbidden him to bother the steward, even though there were good grounds for believing that he'd taken Braden's blaster within minutes after overhearing that he had one. But it was not a good idea to have a blaster loose on a ship that was heaving out on a journey of a hundred and some-odd light-years. It was especially undesirable when the new crew of that ship acted like a tightly knit unit with a definite purpose in mind. It was even more undesirable when there were passengers aboard. When two of them were women, it couldn't be permitted. So something had to be done about it. Legally, if Braden took action the skipper disapproved, the skipper could do nothing but charge him with insubordination when the ship reached port - in practice, at any rate. And it seemed to Braden that worse things could happen, so far as the passengers were concerned.

He reached a cabin door marked STEWARD. He did not knock but opened it quickly and as quickly went inside. He was prepared for almost anything, but he found nothing. The steward's cabin was almost empty. It was a very comfortable snugger. Stewards usually do themselves well and, unlike other crewmen, they are apt to stay with the same ship for voyage after voyage. So they tend to accumulate more possessions than will go into a shipbag.

There were a few books. Braden knew some of them by their bindings. They were books a man might accumulate if he hoped some day to command a spaceship. On the other hand, they were also such books as a man might pick up out of curiosity about the operation of a ship in which normally he would have no part. There was a *Practical Astrogator* and a fourth-sector *Space Directory*. There were books on freight stowage and spaceport regulations and other subjects covering areas of activity a steward did not really need to know about. The assortment looked innocent enough, even admirable.

But Braden had a prejudice against the steward. He stood just inside the door, surveying the cabin. The bunk was neatly made up, its pillow deftly fluffed and in place. The tidily emptied ashtray was conspicuous. Uniforms were hung carefully on hangers instead of pegs. Everything indicated that the steward was a man with a steward's soul - tidy and meticulous and bookish.

It might be true, but Braden didn't believe it. His eyes narrowed as he stood looking, thinking hard. If this exaggerated precision were a fake to convince the skipper, nevertheless the steward would have developed the habit of it in two long voyages. And where would a tidy-minded man hide a blaster he'd just taken from another man's ship-bag - which he'd then delicately repacked - when he needed to hurry somewhere else in the ship to establish an alibi? To the passengers' quarters, for example?

Braden took three steps forward and reached under the utterly neat pillow on the utterly neat bunk. With gratified astonishment he pulled out his blaster and put it in his pocket. He

restored the pillow to its old-maidishly precise arrangement. He went out, closing the door after him. He was still wryly surprised as he made his way back to the ship's control-room.

The door stood open. The skipper was in the act of putting the trip-tape in the instrument which would pass on the astrogational instructions to the astrogating unit itself. The operation of the ship would then become practically automatic between solar systems. The skipper turned his head when Braden entered.

"I said I'd give you ten minutes, Mr. Braden!" he rumbled severely. "You've taken twelve!"

"Yes, sir," said Braden. "I've another report for the log, sir."

The skipper turned his whole body. He blinked at Braden.

"What's that? Let's hear it."

"I found," said Braden curtly, "three blasters and four knives in the crew's ship-bags, sir."

The skipper blinked again.

"Come, come!" he rumbled genially. "You disappoint me, Mr. Braden! I'd no idea you'd go about searching other people's possessions! It's most illegal! Only by my orders, given for good cause, should you invade the privacy of the crew! And you should have had my order in writing before searching a man's ship-bag or his locker!"

"I didn't search them, sir," said Braden grimly. "The men emptied them themselves - all but one. That broke open."

"Ah!" said the skipper, somehow waggishly. "I wouldn't mind betting, Mr. Braden, that you applied pressure to make our gallant crewmen do that! It is still probably most illegal!"

"I asked them to, sir," said Braden. "And they did it. Every bag but the one was opened and emptied by its owner. The owner was responsible for the one exception. He got in the way of it, sir."

The skipper's mood suddenly changed. He regarded Braden almost with hostility.

"Now I'm sorry that I signed you on for this voyage, Mr. Braden! You're interfering with a series of events I've looked forward to!"

Braden shrugged.

"I should like to put in the log, sir," he said politely, "that I've informed you that the crewmen had forbidden arms in their possession and that, considering our passengers, in my opinion it is extremely dangerous to proceed with the voyage with the present crew aboard."

"You'd like that in the log, eh?" said the skipper. "And your advice about the action I should take?"

"I advise, sir," said Braden, "that the *Rim Star* return to port and turn over the crew to the local authorities, and then sign on a new crew without any previous plans for - perhaps I should say insubordination. That's my formal opinion, given you because you asked for it. I'd like to put it in the log."

The skipper glowered at him. Then he turned and pushed a button. Braden made an involuntary movement. He scowled.

A harsh, rasping sound came from a speaker in the ceiling of the control-room. Through the door came resonant repetitions of the din. They seemed like echoes, but they were actually

replicas of the original voice, emitted simultaneously by loud-speakers in every corridor and compartment of the ship. The effect was sepulchral.

"Attention!" boomed the speakers. "Prepare for overdrive. Overdrive coming in five seconds. Five-four-three-two-one..."

The universe seemed to reel. The images on the vision screens vanished completely. Braden felt the familiar, intolerable combination of nausea and dizziness and the feeling of falling in a contracting spiral which constitute the sensation of going into overdrive.

He swore. In overdrive, of course, a ship is effectively relieved of many of the hindrances affecting ships in normal space. In an overdrive field the physical constants of space are changed. The change is exactly the opposite of that made by the interatomic, intermolecular force-fields between the particles of transparent substances. In unstressed space, the speed of light is roughly 186,000 miles per second. In the positively stressed space between the atoms and molecules of glass, its speed is roughly only 120,000 miles per second. That is why lenses can do what they do. In the highly positively stressed space between the atoms of crystallized carbon - diamond - the speed of light is only 75,000 miles per second. But an overdrive field stresses space in what might be called the opposite direction. In negatively stressed space - in overdrive - the speed of light increases to incredible figures. In negatively stressed space, mass does not increase with velocity. It diminishes. Therefore the limitation of space travel to the speed of light or less does not apply.

As a consequence, in the first second of overdrive the *Rim Star* enclosed herself in a cocoon of negatively stressed space and traveled as far as starlight does in five minutes. As her mass decreased, her speed went up. In the first minute she traveled as far as light in five days. From there on, increase of field-strength had a lesser effect; but on long, straight, uninterrupted runs a full-powered ship could hurtle across the galaxy at the averaged-out rate of a light-year of distance for each ninety minutes on the ship's clocks. The skipper had put the *Rim Star* into overdrive. Now he said, rumbling formidably,

"As you see, Mr. Braden, I do not take your advice. It may be excellent, but I do not take it. You may complain about my refusal when we reach port. But I suspect you doubt we'll reach port if I am stubborn. Eh?"

Braden shrugged. The skipper did not ask if he'd recovered his own blaster. He didn't ask what had been done with the others he'd reported. But he pressed another question.

"Has the cat got your tongue, Mr. Braden? Do you think we won't reach port? Dear me!... Do you know why I chose you to be mate of this ship?"

He glowered at Braden.

"No, sir, I don't," Braden answered.

"I chose you," the skipper said, "because your papers list no next of kin to be notified should any accident happen to you! If I'd known you were so zealous a second-in-command I'd have ignored that admirable fact and continued to look for a mate with the qualities I prefer! And the qualities I prefer, Mr. Braden, include a complete absence of zeal! I said *no* zeal, Mr. Braden! No energy applied to alter matters I prefer to have go on as usual! No interference with the normal and comfortable operation of this ship!"

Braden said stiffly:

"How about the passengers?"

The skipper had seemed sardonic enough, before, but now he flared into anger.

"To the devil with the passengers! I've nothing to do with them! I haven't seen them! I won't see them! What happens to the passengers is their business! They took passage on this ship! I knew nothing about it! I am not responsible for their being here, and I will not be responsible for them now that they are here!"

"Two of them," said Braden, "are women."

The skipper reddened with fury. "That's their bad luck!" snapped the skipper. "And I'm on watch now, Mr. Braden, and you are not! I suggest that you get the devil out of this control-room!"

"Very well, sir," said Braden.

He turned and went out of the control-room. He liked the way things were shaping up less and less. It is the first duty of a merchant-space officer to consider the safety of his ship, which includes getting her to her destination. But he is also expected to take great pains regarding the welfare of any passengers who may be on board. He is expected to be solicitous of the crew. And in all these special duties he must maintain strict discipline and a proper respect for his superiors in authority.

Braden headed aft - downward - with four blasters and four very wicked sheath knives on his person. One of the blasters was his own. He hadn't reported its recovery because the skipper had ordered him to leave the steward alone. He had. He'd only not left the steward's cabin alone. He'd simply taken his blaster from under the steward's pillow.

He passed the galley, which was entirely unlike the food preparation arrangements in surface transportation. Here there were no stoves, no succulent odors of cooking foods, no dishwashers, practically no refrigerator. Instead, precooked meals, designed to look appetizing, were stored in nested plastic containers behind glass doors. Preparation of a meal consisted of putting this container or that in warming-cabinets, another container into a chilling unit, the dessert perhaps into a quick-freezer. The kitchen was odorless and hence put no burden on the ship's air-freshening system. Meals were served by quickly snipping the sealed plastic covers and placing the food on the table.

The steward was busy in the galley, preparing to serve the passengers. As Braden went past, he looked up and smiled brightly. He went back to his work with a fine air of absorption.

Braden stopped and went back to the door.

"Steward," he said coldly, "you were right about the crew having arms."

The steward looked up from his work and shook his head sorrowfully.

"I'm very apprehensive, sir," he said. "Things look bad, sir. I can't imagine how the word got out!" When Braden merely stood silently, he continued. "About the money, sir. For Handel's Planet. The men aground there were getting restless. It's not a lively business, unloading drone ships that come down by rocket, with every pound weight costing a fortune. There's no recreation. So it was decided to pay them off in cash. With money in his pocket a man can always amuse himself, sir. So we're not only carrying the grid and other equipment, sir, we're carrying money for the men to jingle in their pockets. There'll be some very fancy gambling after working-hours when that money's in circulation! The men will get action for their money. They'll have reason to go on working. But the fact that we're carrying some millions in cash for that purpose shouldn't have been allowed to leak out. That's bad, sir! Very bad!"

"Oh," said Braden.

He went on toward the passengers' quarters. He was much more than suspicious of the steward, but this statement might be true. He hadn't heard the rumor before he signed on, but it might have been common knowledge. If so, it was an excellent reason for five men of a certain type to sign on the *Rim Star* to get to Handel's Planet. But such an explanation was not consoling. Quite the contrary!

Braden found himself wondering skeptically if the steward would have been quite as chatty if he'd known of Braden's recovery of his blaster, and where it had been found.

Braden went into the passengers' quarters. Fortescue was fumbling with the vision-screen controls, trying to get an image. One doesn't see outside, in overdrive. There's nothing to see. The ship is surrounded by a shell of negatively stressed space which lets nothing come through. A ship in overdrive is practically in a private cosmos the size of its overdrive field.

"I hate to say it, Mr. Braden," said the actor amiably, "but we need the vision screens repaired. They're off."

"They'll come on again," Braden told him, "when we get where we're going. Not until then." He looked about.

"Where's Duckworth?"

It appeared that Duckworth was checking the cameras as Hardy and Diane unpacked them. When Braden would have left, Fortescue said amiably:

"Comforting man, that steward of yours! I had the quivers - this is my first trip in space, you know - and he stopped them. He said a trip in overdrive is like a term in jail. Is that right?"

"When you're lucky, yes," said Braden.

"I can't imagine anything more consoling," said Fortescue with a grin. "I took this job because I needed it, and of course if Derr makes a comeback I'll get a break. But... did you ever hear of an accident-prone person, Mr. Braden? A man who's always in accidents? Things that happen around him all the time in defiance of probability?"

"They used to call them Jonahs," said Braden.

"I'm not accident-prone," said Fortescue cheerfully. "Accidents don't happen around me more than around other people. But I'm excitement-prone. If I take a walk down the street, there's a hold-up or a suicide, or a manic-depressive switches cycles and starts to walk through crowded traffic on his hands. Or maybe a man catches his wife out with another man and tries to kill him, or a woman catches her husband out with another woman and tries to kill her. You've no idea how wearing it is, Mr. Braden!"

"No doubt," said Braden. "But..."

"I'm a tranquil person," said Fortescue amiably. "I like to smell flowers and read poetry. When in a mood for thrills, I may take a cup of especially strong tea. Last week I had a really bad day! There was a zoo scene being taped and I was looking on - I had nothing to do with it - and a Tralian wombat broke loose. Nobody was hurt, but it was a near thing. Enough to give anybody a heart condition. So after they caught the beast I left, and I was walking down the street, still feeling shaky, when suddenly everybody began to yell at me. Somebody was lowering something heavy from a window high up, right over my head. And one strand of the rope had snapped and they were trying to get the object down to the ground before the other strands snapped. And they did, about five feet along, and where I'd been just two seconds

before! I scurried for my hotel. I wanted no more excitement! So I settled down resolutely to have a quiet evening - and smoke began to pour into my room and there were loud screams of 'Fire!' "

He paused dramatically, and then grinned again.

"It was a wastebasket. A cupful of water put the fire out. But that was a wearing day! Almost typical, though. So you can imagine how relieved I was when the steward said that there's never any excitement in space. When he assured me that our journey would have all the thrills of a term in jail, I loved him like a brother!"

"We'll try," said Braden grimly, "not to disappoint you."

He went into the cabin where Duckworth, the director, was fussily supervising the unpacking of tape cameras from their cases, to be set up on tripods. The cameraman with the harassed expression - Hardy - and the girl Diane seemed to be getting the equipment ready in spite of his help. Duckworth turned when Braden entered.

"Ah, Mr. Braden! I suppose it's all right about making those shots. We'll want to putter around a bit and find a good light-balance..."

"It's not all right," said Braden. "Will you come with me for a moment?"

Duckworth stared, but then he followed Braden. Derr Carmody came out of her cabin. She smiled regally at Braden.

The mate led Duckworth into the corridor outside the passenger space. The skipper's rooms might have a hidden microphone in them, and so might the control-room, but all the ship couldn't be bugged. There was too much of it.

"What's the matter?" demanded Duckworth. "Don't tell me the captain isn't willing for us to shoot those scenes!"

"I didn't ask him," said Braden. "Something much more serious has turned up. It's developed that the crew signed on for this voyage with something more than their wages in mind. There's treasure aboard and it looks as if they hope to seize the ship. They're disarmed at the moment - so it seems - but it's not likely that they'll stay that way. I came to ask what weapons you've got. Can you defend yourselves if the skipper and I manage to hold the rest of the ship? I mean, defend yourselves against attack?"

Duckworth gasped and turned white. He explained agitatedly that his was a tape-drama production unit, not in search of adventure. They'd come on the *Rim Star* to shoot the ship-scene sequences for a play about an area somewhere in space where all physical laws were reversed. They were prepared to make special-effects shots.

"How about defending yourselves?" asked Braden. "It seems that the skipper and I can only depend on each other. If we have to look after you too, it won't be easy!"

Duckworth gestured in exasperation. He was a producer and director, he protested. He staged adventure dramas. He and his associates were passengers! They were theatrical people. They'd secured passage on the *Rim Star* with the implied guarantee...

"Subject," said Braden harshly, "to the hazards of space. Ship officers have the right to demand help even from passengers in time of emergency. One's coming up. How much help can you give?"

Duckworth swallowed.



"Any weapons?" demanded Braden. "They're waved around most of the tape plays I've seen! What have you got?"

Duckworth stammered, not wholly from fright but more from shock. Groundlings on ultra-civilized planets go in for melodrama as a pleasurable spectacle. They don't imagine being in danger themselves. Duckworth had to change the whole course of his thoughts in order to answer. He'd never considered facing real danger. It was almost impossible for him to readjust and think in terms of possible conflict with criminals who were not playing dramatic roles.

But he managed to answer eventually. Yes, they had weapons for their tape-drama production. They had blast-rifles and blast-pistols. But they were stage weapons. They looked like real blasters, and sounded like them. When they were fired, very convincing blaster-bolts shot out of their muzzles. But they were really only fireworks instead of deadly small vortexes of ball-lightning. In short, the tape-drama production unit was completely unarmed.

"I've a few pocket blasters for you," said Braden dourly. "You'll have to do the best you can. Who'll have the nerve to use them?"

Duckworth winced. He'd never fired even a stage weapon. Fortescue had played dramatic parts and could probably handle a weapon, more or less. Hardy could too, perhaps.

"If I.. really had to count on somebody," said Duckworth rather desperately, "it would be Diane. If you've got just one pistol to pass out, give it to her. She won't use it unless she has to. She's a very fine girl. Worth two men like Fortescue - or me."

Braden growled. When a man admits that a woman is a better man than he is, he may be honest but he should be ashamed.

"Call her out here," he commanded. "And Fortescue."

He paced up and down the corridor while Duckworth went into the passengers' quarters and came out again with the actor and the girl. Braden grimly told them what he'd told Duckworth. Fortescue looked pained. Diane looked steadily at Braden until he'd finished.

"We'll get out the stage blasters," she said quietly. "If there's need, real ones and stage ones going off together ought to be almost as effective as if they were all real, because they'll be surprising."

"But I'm afraid of Derr," Duckworth said unhappily. "When she hears about this..."

"We won't let her," said Diane decisively. "She'd make a production out of the whole business. Everybody else, yes. But not her."

"Here are three blasters," said Braden. "Keep them handy. Maybe nothing will happen for days. Maybe we can stall off the whole business indefinitely. We'll try. But..."

He explained, curtly and with precision, how the emergency light system could be turned on. Where there were emergency supplies of food and water. How the passengers' compartment could be isolated from within, with its own air supply. He found that he was giving the explanation to Diane.

"Nothing may happen for days," he repeated, "and it's possible nothing will happen at all. But there's one thing. He hesitated, and then said angrily. "I've profound doubts about the steward. Don't take his word for anything. Especially no message that you can start shooting pictures. Especially no word from the skipper or me that would make you leave your quarters or be separated. If I've a message for you, I'll bring it. If the skipper has one, demand that he give it in person. Understand?"

Then he said urgently:

"I can't possibly have any designs that wouldn't be countered by the instructions I've given you. Stay together. Always be armed. Keep watch. You can't be anything but safer that way! And stay in your quarters!"

Later, he puzzled over his own urgency to make them - especially Diane - believe what he told them. It wasn't usual for him to reason with anybody. As the mate of the *Rim Star* his duty was to get the ship to her destination. He'd tried to have the skipper return and sign on another crew, simply to make her arrival at Handel's Planet more likely. He'd fought the five crewmen in the forecabin in an attempt to prevent any chance of a mutiny. But right now...

"I told you, Mr. Braden," Fortescue said wryly, "that I'm excitement-prone. Exciting things happen all around me. And I'd been looking forward to the sort of quiet life one has in jail!"

"Maybe," said Braden, "we can still arrange it."

But he didn't expect to. He left the passengers. He passed the steward in the corridor, part way up toward the bow, heading for the passengers' section with meals for five persons on a rolling cart. The steward gave him a cordial smile and went on.

Braden went to his cabin. In substance, the skipper's order to get out of the control-room meant that he was to stay out of it until his time on-watch arrived. But once the ship was in overdrive there should be nothing to do but watch the instruments. Their readings were automatically recorded on the log-tape every so often. In between, any registration even fractionally off normal would set off a signal that would wake a man dozing in the control-room. If that went unheeded, there'd be a general alarm audible all over the ship. A vessel the size of the *Rim Star* actually required no larger crew than the smallest of yachts. The minimum crew for any size of spacecraft was the smallest number of men who could endure uneventfulness and each other's society for a long time.

Braden surveyed his own cabin. He still had a blaster in his pocket, after partly arming the passengers. He wasn't welcome in the control-room. He'd done all that could be done for the moment about the crew and the intentions of its members. Now he had nothing to do.

He unpacked his ship-bag and put its contents in the lockers and cupboards provided for the purpose. He could, of course, take a nap. Ability to sleep is useful in space; it passes the time. Reading is also valuable. But Braden was in no mood for either.

It occurred to him that since the skipper's quarters should more than probably be considered to be wired for eavesdropping, and since the control-room might be, it was conceivable that even the mate's cabin might be bugged. At least it would be useful to know.

He began to search. His action was out of all reason. Ships aren't wired for bugging. There's no sense in it, there can be no purpose to it. But the skipper's private quarters almost certainly were bugged. So, though it was irrational, Braden continued his search.

He found thread-thin wires coming out of the corner of a shoe-locker near the floor. They were almost invisible, for they had been painted over. Actually he saw less than an inch of paired unpainted wires in the locker at floor-level. But once he'd found those, it was possible to trace them.

He had the miniature microphone in his hand when the door of his cabin opened. He jerked his head toward it. The skipper stood there, frowning portentously. But when he saw the thing in Braden's hand, he opened his mouth to speak, then closed it, his eyes fixed on the tiny object.

Braden held it so he could see it clearly. Braden's own expression was ironic. The skipper made a preliminary rumbling noise and then stopped. He gestured; Braden shrugged and turned his eyes back to what he'd found.

He examined it in detail while the skipper stood absolutely silent, watching. In a matter of minutes Braden had made the microphone inoperative. He did not cut the wires; hence any test of the circuit would show it was working. But the microphone would no longer transmit any sounds from the cabin. Anyone listening in would guess, most likely, either that the cabin was empty or that something was accidentally pressing on the microphone and keeping it from transmitting.

The skipper nodded and waited until Braden had put everything back as before. Then he spoke, after the usual rumble.

"Very smart, Mr. Braden! Very smart! If you'd asked me, I'd have advised exactly that! You mentioned that I was overheard in my own quarters, which I knew, and you may have guessed at the control-room. If so, you were right. I was about to ask you to take a walk with me, for a confidential talk. But now we can talk here."

Braden got up from the floor where he'd disabled the microphone.

"Glad to have you, sir. Will you take a chair?"

The skipper grimaced. He sat down gingerly, like a man who has learned that not all chairs are to be entrusted with his weight.

"It won't take long, Mr. Braden. I begin to think well of you. I have written out an order which is completely useless, for you to carry out in case of emergency."

"Yes, sir," said Braden.

With an effort, the skipper removed from a pocket a bit of paper that had been folded many times. He handed it to Braden.

"You will be careful, Mr. Braden, not to let anyone know about this order. Keep it carefully - not that it will do any good. The substance of it is that if I should die or be disabled in any way that would remove me from active control of the ship, you are immediately to get the passengers into a spaceboat, smash all controls in the other boats and the ship - if possible, of course - and abandon ship."

Braden stiffened. An officer's first duty being to his ship, he should not abandon it except in the most extreme disaster - which it was his responsibility to prevent.

"That," the skipper rumbled sardonically, "is charity on my part. I am taking a great risk in giving it - and I do not like to take risks. So I will explain the situation aboard the *Rim Star*."

He looked at the door. Braden went to it, stepped out, and examined the corridor outside. It was empty. He did not like this order. It ran counter to every instinct and every rule and to all the traditions of space. He stepped back into the cabin.

"Very good!" said the skipper. "It is more important than you may dream, Mr. Braden, that I should not be overheard. I take this risk for your sake and that of the passengers - whom I have not seen, and whom I fervently hope I will not see! The reason is that it is almost inconceivable that the *Rim Star* will ever reach Handel's Planet. I have arranged matters that way for good and sufficient reason."

Braden stiffened. This violated everything he believed in as a merchant-space officer. It was unbelievable that a ship captain would do such a thing. But there'd been enough of the

extraordinary on the *Rim Star* already, to make it believable if it explained what had happened up to now.

"This ship," said the skipper sardonically, "belongs to my son-in-law. He has suffered losses, and the *Rim Star* is nearly all he has left. But she is insured. If she is lost, so long as I am lost with her he will really lose very little - and I will be dead if the ship is lost! He will have money to reestablish himself with, instead of owning only a white elephant like this... You have to understand this to understand the rest. I would not willingly injure my daughter, and my son-in-law does not know what I plan."

Braden nodded, not to indicate understanding or agreement, but for the skipper to go on.

"My purpose," said the skipper flatly, "is to destroy the crew. Not the ship. If I can, I will complete the voyage - I hope with your assistance, Mr. Braden! But I shall destroy the crew!... Have you ever heard of the *Melpomene*, Mr. Braden?"

Braden thought hard for a moment, then shook his head. He was deeply suspicious. He was enraged at being involved in what might prove to be wrecking a ship for the insurance.

"She vanished in space five years ago, Mr. Braden," said the skipper evenly. "There were the usual rumors that she had blundered into the Other Side of Nowhere - which does not exist. The fact is that she was the victim of her crew, of pirates." He paused. "I have a married daughter now. But I did have another daughter. She and my wife were passengers on the *Melpomene* when the ship was taken by pirates."

Braden went to the door again, found the corridor still empty, and came back.

"The crew, Mr. Braden, rose up and killed the officers. In time they killed the passengers... In time! I say this because against all probability the wrecked *Melpomene* was found two years later. There was no publicity at the time, because reminding people that such things can happen discourages them from travel. It injures the passenger business! But it was plain that the officers were killed first, and the passengers - at least the women passengers - considerably later. But this was not publicized. Business might suffer!"

The skipper's tone was the quintessence of bitterness.

"I was told," he said bitterly, "so the identification of their bodies could be certain. My wife and my daughter were murdered. One crewmember was killed - but all the officers and passengers were. There were, of course, very exact descriptions of all the crewmembers and passengers on file. I spare you the details I cannot spare myself, but it is very clear that the crew rose up, that there was some fighting during which one crewman and all the officers were killed, and that then the ship and her passengers were in the pirates' hands. It is also clear that after an interval the passengers were murdered and the crew escaped in a space-boat with the loot obtained from the *Melpomene*."

The skipper stopped for a long minute. Although a huge man - even his eyes were rimmed with fat - he did not look humorous. He looked deadly.

"I had descriptions of the crew," he said with a sort of icy precision. "I had doubts from the beginning. I kept an eye open for them. After the wreck of the *Melpomene* was found I hunted for them. Once or twice I thought I saw one of them, but I found the steward more than a year and a half ago. I was reasonably sure about him, but I could be mistaken. Eventually I got him on my ship. I made the post of steward attractive. I pampered him. I trusted him foolishly. I gave him privileges. He became the skipper's pet. But... I could be mistaken. One man alone, though he fits a description perfectly, may still not be the man described. But six men together,

each of them fitting the description of a member of the *Melpomene's* crew - That is something else!"

Then he said:

"Look out the door."

Braden obeyed. He came back and shook his head to indicate that the corridor was empty. The skipper went on icily.

"The steward picked these five others for this particular voyage. He has been with me for months. He has practically run the ship. He is convinced that I am a fool. I told him - it was reasonable to tell a man I trusted implicitly - that there would be treasure aboard... some millions of credits in cash. And he found a crew. Many men would not be willing to sign on for this voyage because there is no landing-grid at the other end of it. But he found men! And every man matches the description of a member of the *Melpomene's* crew. Six men match six descriptions! Tell me if their behavior bears out my belief! Tell me what they signed on for!"

Braden said wryly:

"I think you're very likely right, sir. But there is still a chance, however small..."

"Granted," said the skipper heavily. "I could be wrong. So I am waiting - and I shall wait - until the instant they make it perfectly clear that I am not mistaken. My plans from that moment on do not concern you, Mr. Braden. You might..." the skipper rumbled scornfully... "you might be shocked by them!"

"On the other hand," said Braden, "you might be killed."

"True," said the skipper. "I would be sorry for that! But surely you can't doubt that I've prepared for that! Once in every twenty-four hours, Mr. Braden, I press a little button. If during any twenty-four hours I do not press it - and the steward does not know about it, Mr. Braden - there will be no *Rim Star*. She will be blown to atoms. Therefore, if I am killed or disabled, I have ordered you to put the passengers into a space boat and abandon ship. It is a kindness on my part."

"Except," said Braden, "that a space-boat has an extreme range of five light-years. The odds aren't too good that there'll be a habitable planet so near - let alone a colonized one - if I have to leave the ship suddenly. Not in this part of space!"

The skipper rose to his feet.

"That's a better chance than you'll have otherwise, Mr. Braden. I've done all I can bring myself to do. I have risked everything I've lived this long for, out of charity for passengers I have not seen and will not see!"

He moved toward the cabin door. Then he paused and said evenly,

"You are quite right, Mr. Braden! I am a murderous monomaniac. But in my place you would be, too!"

## Chapter 4

The *Rim Star* swam on magnificently through space. She was an enormous hollow steel shape. Her holds comprised all but a tiny fraction of her volume. They were packed with cargo intended for Handel's Planet. The invoice would begin with some thousands of tons of fabricated steel, designed to be erected as a landing-grid. But the rest of the cargo was varied. There were hundreds of tons of food and drinkables. There were cranes and jungle plows and bulldozers. Roofing and a smelter and antiseptics. A plastic-making unit and machine tools, and antibiotics expressly prepared for the microscopic flora and fauna of a colony in a new world, and metal billets and explosives. The *Rim Star* carried all the ten thousand and two different kinds of objects and supplies needed to set up a self-supporting city on a brand new world no less than scores of light-years from its nearest sister-city.

The ship drove on, and nothing happened. Nothing. In overdrive it was necessary only that somebody be in the control-room prepared to meet an unimaginable emergency, plus someone at this place and that, in case an unpredictable event required the kind of decision that any man can make, but no computer can possibly arrive at. The steward prepared the meals and delivered them to the passengers and the forecastle and to the skipper and to Braden. Braden did his work - kept watch in the control room, and checked with the passengers to make sure that nothing in the least out of ordinary had taken place. The members of the crew stood watch in turn, as required. They behaved with exemplary docility. Once, to be sure, the steward reported with extreme deference that there had been some discussion among them. Were they actually being credited with the pay due them because the crew was one man short?

They were.

Two days passed. Four. Six. Seven. The *Rim Star* would be eighty-two light-years from her port of departure if she broke out of overdrive and viewed the stars that would then surround her. She did not break out. She remained in overdrive. The steward was brightly and cheerfully obsequious. It was impossible to discover from anything in his manner that he had stolen a blaster from Braden's ship-bag and hidden it under his pillow, and that it had been taken away and Braden apparently had it again. Braden observed nothing in the actions of the crewmen to show that they remembered he'd roughed up the lot of them in the forecastle and taken away from them the weapons illegally in their possession. Each of them was liable to a prison term because of the blasters and sheath knives in the ship-bags. They might have been expected to be sullen, or else to be extra alert and attentive to duty in an effort to wipe out the offense.

They didn't. The ship ran smoothly and orders were obeyed with precision, but it was a precision that was almost mocking. The routine and tedium went on for watch after watch and day after day, but in the eyes Braden felt upon him derisive anticipation was the least

unpleasant of the emotions they expressed. Face to face, naturally, no man looked other than blank and entirely impersonal. But sometimes Braden noticed far different expressions.

On the eighth day, loud speakers throughout the ship made a warning din, and a booming voice said:

"Attention! Breakout coming! Breakout coming! Prepare to come out of overdrive in five seconds. Five - four - three - two - one..."

The universe seemed to reel, and a person's body and especially the stomach seemed to try to turn inside out. There was an instant's intolerable dizziness. Then the vision screens in the control-room lighted.

There were a thousand million stars, and a close-coupled binary sun off to the starboard. One of its components was a giant yellow sun; a smaller white star circled it so closely that both were visibly distorted. A thin, wavering voice came from an outside receptor speaker.

"Checkpoint Alyx," said the metallic voice. "Checkpoint Alyx. Report. Report." A pause. "Checkpoint Alyx. Report. Report."

The voice wavered rhythmically, from strong to weak and back again. This was a Space Patrol checkpoint at one of the crossroads of space. Ships bound on other than local runs came out of overdrive at such checkpoints to verify their course and position. It was not unlike the practice whereby primitive sailing-ships made landfalls to correct their longitude on voyages over the oceans of ancient Earth. But here there was another purpose.

The log-tape began to run swiftly through its guides. The *Rim Star's* log began to be broadcast at extremely high speed. In seconds all the technical data of the ship's voyage up to this instant was spreading through emptiness. It would be recorded by the clumsy Space Patrol robot check-ship which orbited this particular sun. It broadcast taped requests for such reports, and it recorded them. In due time - at intervals of standard months - its reels of records would be picked up by a Space Patrol tender-ship and taken to a Space Patrol base. Ultimately somebody would listen to them. Oddities would be noted and if necessary investigated.

The idea was, of course, that any ship could be traced for as much of her journey as the checkpoint robots had recorded. Ships that vanished would be known to have traveled so far - not that the information helped to find them. But any peculiar condition or any possibly dangerous situation could be localized and investigated.

Thus the giant robot which was the *Rim Star* reported to the other robot which was the checkpoint recorder of ships' logs. Then, on the *Rim Star*, robot sky-searchers identified the pattern of the stars as they should be seen from this location. They reported to the astrogation robot of the ship. The aiming-point for the next checkpoint would be determined, and the ships' blunt nose would swing and center upon it. There were other spacecraft nearby. Two, or ten, or a hundred ships might pass Checkpoint Alyx in a single standard day. The *Rim Star's* outside receptors picked up whinings and buzzings, and the metallic voice that continued to say monotonously: "Checkpoint Alyx. Report. Report. Checkpoint Alyx. Report. Report."

Then something clicked, somewhere in the ship. In sealed-off compartments, to be entered only when aground and then only by specially trained technicians, the computers and memory-banks and observation instruments and information-integrating devices had finished their work. This was indicated by that click. The *Rim Star* had come this far and reported. Now she would proceed to the next place where she should report. The booming voice, resounded throughout the ship:

"Attention! Prepare for overdrive!" Each syllable was repeated at the same fraction of an instant all over the huge freighter. "Overdrive coming in five seconds. Five - four - three - two - one..."

There came the unspeakably unpleasant sensation of going into overdrive. It would be intolerable if it lasted. The vision-screen images vanished. The thin and wavering checkpoint call ceased to arrive. It had been faint when it reached the *Rim Star* because the Patrol ship was half a light-hour from the spot where the *Rim Star* had broken out to normal space. But within minutes the Patrol craft was light-weeks behind, and the *Rim Star* had whisked away in her cocoon of negatively stressed emptiness. With the ship gone, the wavering call continued, but it did not matter to the *Rim Star*.

It seemed that the breakout and check were of no importance at all. But Braden found himself growing more tense after the ship was back in the unspeakable isolation of overdrive, light-years from any star or world or even other spacecraft. The *Rim Star* was now a week in time and an illimitable distance from her starting point. Her log was on record. It contained absolutely nothing to indicate anything undesirable about the crew. The skipper had kept Braden from logging the discovery of weapons in the forecabin. Nothing recorded or transmitted to the Space Patrol files indicated anything in the least out of the ordinary on this voyage, other than the ship's destination and her intended method of landing there. If the crew had been on the wrecked *Melpomene* and had been tricked into shipping on the *Rim Star* to repeat that crime, there was no evidence outside the ship to hint at it.

This was sound reason for the crew to have been on their best behavior until the first checkpoint was past. If the *Rim Star* did vanish from space, there would be no reason to suspect her crew unless somebody noticed that the description of her crew matched that of the *Melpomene's*. Which was unlikely. The crewmen had acquired something on the order of an alibi in advance.

Braden went to his cabin. He found his dinner set out on the cabin's folding table. It was just such a meal as many families throughout the galaxy consider the only ones possible - precooked and carefully planned for quantity production, with the necessary enzymes and amino acids added. The steward had probably eavesdropped on what conversation there'd been in the control-room, and timed the preparation and delivery of the dinner so it would be at its most appetizing best when Braden came off duty and reached his cabin.

But Braden was not in any mood to be pleased by such attention. He'd been unable to speak frankly to the skipper in the control-room because it was bugged. There'd been only the one time since he came aboard when the skipper had talked frankly to him, fully assured that he could not be overheard. Braden had had no chance to argue then, to reason later, or at any other time to protest as the ship's mate that a legitimate voyage shouldn't be used as the means of satisfying a personal vengeance.

He hadn't even been able to arrange a signal by which one or the other could give warning of something suspicious. For eight days they had had to consider that every word might be overheard. It was a strain. And now was the time when piracy or mutiny - they were the same - was really likely, and it was Braden's job to prevent it.

He'd picked up his knife and fork when he really became suspicious. It was because he was thinking of the steward, that neat, brightly smiling, obsequious individual who seemed as unlike a mutineer as any man could be. His manner was solicitous and deferential. But he had picked the crewmen - and they were not mild and law-abiding characters. The man they'd beaten on the spaceport tarmac...



But the dinner smelled good. It was appetizing-looking, and the steward had prepared it with great care. But Braden was suddenly and unreasonably and violently suspicious.

He tasted each dish very gingerly. He could detect nothing out of the way in the first one, or the second, or the third. They were very appetizing indeed. They were almost spicy. But he put only the smallest morsels in his mouth. He took a spoonful of coffee.

It was not right. If he'd drunk it after he'd eaten, as he usually did, the keenness of his sense of taste blunted by a succession of dishes some of which were slightly spiced, then he wouldn't have noticed anything. But he did, now. It had a somewhat musky flavor, infinitely faint, that did not belong in coffee.

Blood drummed in his ears. Then he reached in his pocket, brought out a notebook and wrote something on a page. He stood up suddenly as if remembering something, and went back to the control-room. The skipper himself had just sat down to the dinner brought him by the steward. Duty-watch in the control-room didn't call for continuous attention, it only required that someone be there.

"I thought of something, sir," said Braden. "I think I omitted to make a note about the air-freshener unit, sir."

He stood before the skipper, holding his notebook open. The skipper glanced at it.

"Very well," he rumbled. "I'll check it and attend to it."

"Wouldn't it be better, sir..."

"No!" said the skipper peevisly. "I'm tired of looking at your silly face, Mr. Braden! Get out of the control-room! Go to the devil!"

He returned to his plate. His knife and fork made appropriate noises.

"I'm thinking of the passengers, sir," insisted Braden while he looked at the skipper's hands.

"Then go and ask them if they noticed anything wrong about their air!" snapped the skipper. "Get... out, Mr. Braden!"

Braden still waited. The sound of the knife and fork was perfectly normal, but the skipper was making those sounds without eating at all. His eyes blazed with triumph. He'd read what Braden had written on the page of his notebook: *"My coffee drugged. Yours?"* He tasted the coffee gingerly, and spat it back into the cup. He nodded to Braden and almost swelled with satisfaction at the knowledge that now at long last he was about to have in his hands both the proof of guilt and the men who would pay for the murder - and worse - of his wife and daughter.

Braden left. Making sure his blaster was handy, he went down the long curving corridor of alternate ramps and stairs. He came to the passengers' quarters, nearly a quarter of a mile from the control-room. He knocked and went in.

Diane smiled at him. He'd made it a point to visit the passenger section at least once each day; but his reception, except from Diane, was growing less and less cordial as time went by and nothing unusual occurred. Duckworth fretted about the waste of opportunity to make the spaceship shots for the epic about the Other Side of Nowhere. He was no longer sure that Braden was telling the truth, but he was not yet doubtful enough to rebel.

The steward, of course, had been with the passengers much more often than Braden. He'd been sympathetic. He'd murmured about the orders that confined them to so small a part of the ship. He'd spoken to Derr Carmody with extreme respect and seeming admiration. And Derr

Carmody had been a star, which is an addiction-forming experience. Having once been a personage of very great importance, she found the withdrawal symptoms of lessened fame very severe. She wanted at least to prepare to resume her one-time greatness. Her own group aboard ship was not big enough to supply the adulation she'd once had and almost frantically craved again.

Braden looked worriedly at Diane. The passengers' dinner, most tastefully arranged by the steward, had been placed on the table. Derr Carmody had seated herself. She regarded Braden with some haughtiness.

"Well, Mr. Braden?"

"Good, so far," admitted Braden.

"Mr. Duckworth is becoming impatient." The star of the picture-to-be looked severe. "And I am not satisfied at being delayed like this! There are scenes to be shot before we reach Handel's Planet! You will tell the captain that if he does not take back his ridiculous order..."

Braden blinked.

"You mean, about all of you remaining in your quarters?"

"What else?" she asked with annoyance. "No other ship on any good space-line would treat me - *me!* - so stupidly!"

Diane shook her head at Braden. Fortescue said quickly, and smoothly:

"We've explained to Miss Carmody that you are working on the captain, to persuade him to change his orders."

Braden blinked again. He'd been concerned with deadly realities. This absorption in taking pictures of imaginary events seemed startlingly unreal. Of course he'd assumed that since his cabin as well as the skipper's and the control-room were wired for tapping, there would be great care about what was said. But he hadn't realized that Derr Carmody couldn't be trusted to grasp a situation. She'd play it dramatically, instead.

"You will tell the captain," said the star imperiously, "that I will not submit to this any longer! I am bored! My art demands that I work! I have instructed Mr. Duckworth to ignore the captain's orders if they are not changed immediately!"

Braden drew a deep breath. Things were in a very bad state, and the lid was about to blow off. But the skipper had prepared for something just like this. He'd planned it for years. He had some trap contrived. To make this known before the trap closed could be catastrophic.

"I'll tell you," said Braden. "Let me look at the cameras and lights. If they won't block a corridor that must be kept open, maybe I can persuade him."

"I'll show you," said Diane quickly. "They're in here."

She led the way into one of the cabins. He put his lips close to her ear and whispered:

"Something's about to break! The coffee is doctored! Maybe some of the other food, but the coffee is, without question!"

She went white. Then she said, her voice astonishingly natural:

"These are the lights, Mt. Braden. You can read off the wattage on them."

She put her finger to her lips and pointed to a spot behind the doorframe. There was something very tiny there. It could have been taken for a hardened drop of paint. She pointed

again, and he saw twin raised lines where thread-thin wires had been painted over; they would never have been seen if they hadn't been searched for very, very carefully.

Braden took her hand and pressed it. Aloud he said:

"This stuff isn't bulky. It shouldn't block a corridor. I'll talk to the skipper. I can promise nothing, of course." Then he whispered: "That coffee mustn't be drunk! Nor the food eaten!"

She nodded, watching his face. He showed her the butt of his blaster and looked a question. She nodded, very pale. They went back to the saloon.

"I'll speak to the skipper," Braden said politely.

"Tell him," said Derr Carmody imperially, "that if he does not change his orders I will defy them!"

He went to the door. Diane followed him. Braden was sweating. Outside, he said hurriedly:

"The skipper's determined for some reason. But I don't like it!" Then he added furiously, "The woman's a fool!"

Diane smiled faintly.

"She's my mother. And I'm a cameraman because she wouldn't want to have to compete with her daughter as an actress."

"I'll apologize later," he told her bitterly. "But now I'm trying to keep things lined up for whatever the skipper has planned. Keep watch! And stay armed!"

"We will," she said steadily. "Some of us, anyhow."

He went away. When he looked back, she was still standing in the doorway, watching him. He motioned for her to go inside. She smiled rather shakily and obeyed.

He trudged up toward the bow of the ship again. There would be a pause now. He could see it very clearly. On the *Melpomene* there'd been fighting, and one of the pirates - or mutineers - had been killed. There'd be no such risk, this time. A meal had been served simultaneously in the control-room, and in Braden's cabin, and to the passengers. The mutineers would be waiting, now, for the hidden microphones to tell them when only they remained conscious on the ship. As long as there was any movement they would make no motion. So he could make his way safely back to the skipper, to get his orders for action consistent with the skipper's plans.

He was deeply disturbed because he was neither with Diane, to take part in defending her, nor acting in combination with the skipper. Had Braden been in the skipper's place, he wouldn't have let matters go this far. Days ago he'd have called the steward into the control-room and taken him prisoner, bound and gagged him. He'd have called the other crewmen in, one by one, in the hope of breaking the mutiny by taking action first. Prisoners could be put in an air lock, with food shoved in to them from time to time; and the ship could be run by just the skipper and himself to the next checkpoint or even to Handel's Planet, where help could be provided by space-boat from the colony itself.

That would have been Braden's answer to the threat, but it would not have satisfied the skipper. Planetary laws were elaborate. Accused criminals were always considered innocent unless proven guilty, and there was no way to prove these men guilty. There were no witnesses against them from the *Melpomene*, because all of them had been killed. Therefore, if the six men were turned over to the law, they would probably be freed.

Braden thought of Diane, as she stood looking after him in the doorway. He suddenly realized, grimly, that if he had been the skipper, he might have killed the steward when he was first sure of him. But that would have been unwise. He'd have been imprisoned for the steward's death, and the other five men would remain unpunished.

It was no easy problem to solve, and this was no time to be trying to solve it. The skipper had planned his vengeance and he'd have it even if it meant the destruction of the ship. Furthermore, if harm came to the skipper, there would be no more than twenty-four hours of life left for anybody on the *Rim Star*. There was nothing to be done but work with the skipper, for the passengers' sake. And already that meant Diane.

At this moment, the crew was waiting eagerly for assurance that everyone but themselves - the skipper, and Braden, and all the passengers - were unconscious and completely incapable of offering resistance. It wasn't likely that they intended simply to cut the throats of these others. At least five of the men had reason to dislike Braden, and they'd gleefully anticipated expressing that dislike at some future time. And now was the time. The steward would want, at the very least, to gloat over the skipper's folly in putting himself at the mercy of men who'd shown no mercy to his wife and daughter. And there were the passengers... and the crewmen's glee when they saw that some of the passengers were women...

This piracy would not be a simple case of murder and theft. It would be more - and worse. Braden felt a wave of pure rage sweep over him - rage so monstrous that he seemed entirely calm.

It was just as well. He was about to pass his cabin when he saw that the door was open. He looked inside. The steward was there. He looked up. He'd been regarding the apparently untouched meal.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said unhappily. "You haven't eaten your dinner, sir. Was anything wrong with it?"

Braden considered. It was startling that the steward was acting as if nothing were wrong, as if nothing were known. But... so far, nothing was! And in the icy fury that gripped Braden, it was somehow worth while to let things stay that way for the moment. The steward had doubtless come here expecting to find him unconscious in his chair, ready for a negligent murder or for more diverting activities later.

"There's nothing wrong with the meal," said Braden in a voice so natural that it astonished him. "But going into overdrive always upsets my stomach. I have to skip a meal after it. It doesn't matter."

He entered the cabin and sat down in his armchair.

"By the way," he said conversationally, "things seem to be going along all right. You said you were suspicious of the crew. But you seem to have been mistaken. They have done their work well enough."

The steward smiled brightly.

"So they have, sir. But I'm not satisfied even yet. Of course I've complete confidence in the skipper, sir. I've told him what I thought, and he told me I was a fool. But I'm sure he's taken precautions."

Braden nodded. It was ironic. In an unfunny way it was amusing to talk to the steward like this, when murder was in the air and Braden knew that the steward was debating whether a blaster shot would be premature. He could see a small bulge in the steward's pocket. It would

be a blaster. The steward had expected to find Braden unconscious, and now he had to kill him. But he thought Braden didn't know. Braden, though, was sure he could kill the steward first.

"May I ask, sir," said the steward, "if you've ever talked to the passengers about the Other Side of Nowhere? It seems they plan to do a tape play about it, sir."

"I know that much," Braden said. "Sit down. I'm off-watch."

The fact that one of them must presently kill the other at a signal of disturbance from outside, made it fascinating for Braden to watch the steward seat himself a bit deferentially, as if he were happily aware of the honor done him.

"I've been wondering, sir," he said with relish "if you've noticed that they have it all wrong. It's actually a sort of fourth dimension, sir, but they have the idea it's simply fantastic - whatever they choose to put into it."

Braden made himself comfortable. His blaster, he decided, was handier than the steward's.

"The story varies," he observed. The fury he felt was so intense that it numbed him. "Some of it's nonsense," he said. "A place where all physical laws operate in reverse... That's hard to believe."

"I don't know, sir," said the steward sagely - and this within minutes of a murder - "I'm not so sure it's nonsense. The scientists, sir, say that there's such stuff as contraterrene matter. They've made atoms of it in cyclotrons and such, sir. It has neutrons and negatrons in the nuclei, and positrons in orbit outside."

Braden nodded. He would have heard any sound anywhere in the ship. His ears had never been so keen.

"You see, sir," said the steward eagerly, "a planet of matter like that couldn't be landed on. It's the opposite of normal matter. It wouldn't attract a ship of normal matter. It would have anti-gravity! It would repel it! And if a ship drove against this anti-gravity to make contact with a world like that... why... when it reached atmosphere the contraterrene air would cancel out the normal matter and the ship would vanish in a monstrous explosion with all its matter-energy freed!"

Braden nodded.

"You should have been a scientist," he said as if admiringly, while he thought that shortly the steward would be a corpse.

"And it would not only have anti-gravity, sir," the steward went on enthusiastically, "but it wouldn't have the same time-direction. What's the future to us, sir, would be the past on a contraterrene planet! On such an anti-world, sir, time would run backward! And it's all so logical! There's matter, sir, here in our space. It's little knobbls of energy, as we know. You might call it plus energy. But if there's plus energy here, sir... why... somewhere there must be minus energy, to make things balance! Every action has its reaction, sir, of equal moment and opposite sign. So every atom must have its anti-atom, of equal charge and opposite sign! There's talk about it, sir, in forecastles. Some men say that a ship of normal matter couldn't be operated in contraterrene space. They say that her controls would all work backward. But I say, sir, that normal matter will always obey normal laws!"

The steward beamed at Braden. Braden was strangely amused at being lectured on the physics of hypothetical anti-matter by a man who intended to murder him at the first convenient and safe moment. But he did not smile.

The steward said apologetically:

"I didn't mean to take up your time, sir. Mayn't I fix you something to eat that would be more to your taste than this, sir?"

He gave every evidence of regret.

"Truly I'm sorry, sir! If your stomach's upset from going into overdrive, perhaps some fruit juice, sir? Or perhaps a really hot cup of coffee?"

Braden heard something. He could not make out what it was, but it seemed like voices. And it was not normal for there to be the sound of voices in the corridors of the *Rim Star*. She was too big a ship, and there were too few people on board.

He stood up slowly. The steward got to his feet instantly.

"I really think, sir, that a fine cup of coffee..."

"I think not."

Then Braden heard the rasping bellow of a blaster. A voice - a man's voice - shouted. A woman screamed.

Braden whirled and struck out savagely at the steward. He literally did not think of his blaster. Diane was in danger, and he struck out brutally at the man who at that moment stood between him and the door that led to her.

The steward's blaster was halfway out when Braden's fist landed. He crashed against the wall. Braden saw the blaster and snatched it. He should have taken time to incapacitate the steward longer than it would take him to recover from a knockout. There came another blaster rasp. Others. Almost a fusillade. The woman screamed again.

Braden went plunging back to the passenger quarters, a blaster in each hand, his fury taking over from the unnatural calm he'd felt and filling him with a horrible hunger for the life of anybody who tried to harm Diane.

## Chapter 5

At the bottom of the corridor, Braden saw the streak of intolerable brightness that was a blaster bolt. It slanted across the corridor and hit the steel wall. There it disappeared, scorching the paint where its charge heated the metal. A man howled. Running figures appeared and vanished, and additional intolerably bright flashes followed them. A woman screamed and screamed and screamed.

Braden raced down the curving corridor, his mind a blank except for rage that anybody had dared think of harming Diane. But the crewmen - or at least four of them - were in flight at the moment. They'd been pursued by lightning flashes which regrettably, it seemed, were fireworks instead of deadly blaster bolts.

Panting, he came to the passengers' quarters. The crewmen were out of sight now. Fortescue stood in the doorway with a blast-rifle in his hand. Since Braden had supplied only pistols, Fortescue's rifle would be a stage weapon, of moral value only until what it was became known. Then it would have no value at all.

Fortescue jerked up the rifle, then lowered it as he recognized Braden. He was deathly white, but he tried to grin.

"Get inside!" snapped Braden. "Only peek out! And not at head-height, either!"

He went through the door to where a woman still screamed.

It was Derr Carmody in hysterics, with Duckworth and Hardy trying to quiet her; Diane watched with composure. There is hysteria and hysteria. Sometimes it is the honest crack-up of a personality under intolerable stress. Sometimes it is the result of habitual tantrums staged to achieve one's desires. In this case it is an automatic reaction which puts on others the responsibility for any situation unpleasant to the supposedly delicate nature of the person affected. It is "temperament." This woman's hysteria was something in between. There was real terror involved, as there'd been real danger.

"What's happened?" Braden snapped. "Anybody hurt?"

Diane told him, her voice unsteady. They hadn't dared tell her rejuvenated mother during the past week that mutiny by the whole ship's crew was expected. Nor even now had they dared tell her that the coffee on the table had been doctored to make them unconscious while the ship was being taken over. Since other parts of their meal might possibly be fatal to any idea of defense against the mutineers, Diane had seemingly carelessly knocked over the coffeepot. She'd spilled not only the coffee but ruined the entire meal.

Her mother denounced her in a fine, incoherent temper tantrum which was a combination of great-actress temperament and maternal scolding. No one dared protest and - in view of the microphones - no one dared explain. As a climax, Derr Carmody stalked off to her cabin in a

towering rage. There was silence. None of the rest had anything to say. Time passed. Somewhere, someone listened in on the passengers' quarters. There was silence. The crewmen eagerly started to move toward the supposedly helpless people. On the way down the corridor they talked freely. It could not matter. They believed that everyone not a member of their group was completely insensible. They babbled, and were heard. When they reached the door of the passengers' quarters, they crowded in, grinning.

Hardy, the cameraman, sent a stage blast-bolt between the heads of two of them before the door was wide open. On the instant Fortescue fired; his shot hit the ceiling. Diane fired.

A man bellowed, and Derr Carmody appeared in the doorway of her cabin. She saw crewmen in the doorway and blasters in action. She saw Diane fire again as a crewman incredulously held up a forearm whose sleeve was burning luridly. He cursed. Derr Carmody screamed.

Diane fired again. So did the others. The crewmen fell over each other getting out of the doorway. Derr Carmody continued to scream. Fortescue plunged to the doorway and sent unfortunately harmless stage blaster bolts after the fleeing mutineers. He was doing it with a splendid air. It made a fine scene.

Then Braden appeared.

Duckworth and Hardy took Derr Carmody to her cabin. The door closed. Her screams were muffled. In a little while, her audience lessened, they diminished.

"So far," said Braden harshly, "so good. But not so good, at that. If this works in with the skipper's intentions, it's very good indeed. But I don't know how he's made out. He was warned, though."

He wiped cold sweat from his forehead. He began to shake because Diane had been in danger and he wasn't there to fight for her.

Diane, still very pale, regarded him matter-of-factly.

"What do we do now?" she asked.

"I don't know.... Look!" said Braden desperately. "I'm afraid to try to take you to the control-room. We could be butchered! The skipper and I... we'll hunt them down. If they come here again we'll hear the shooting and we'll come. Barricade yourselves. They can't get in before we can get here. And they'll have to tackle us first, anyhow. They thought they wouldn't have to fight anybody!"

The outcries from Derr Carmody's cabin had by now diminished to what sounded like yelps in between frenzied sobs.

"I'll do that at once," Braden said, again desperately. "I don't like it, but... they won't try too hard at first. Just... don't let them surprise you! I'll be back...."

He turned and ran toward the bow and the control-room. It was not what his instincts ordered. They demanded that he hunt down the mutineers, regardless of danger, and kill them one by one for having dared think of harming Diane. He despised himself for acting like a thinking human being when he wanted to wreak infinite violence upon his enemies. He despised himself again for thinking of a space-boat and getting Diane away from the *Rim Star* where she would be safe. Safe against everything but the fact that it was unlikely he could ever get a space-boat to a habitable planet in this part of space.



He came to steps and went up them three at a time. He remembered bitterly that he hadn't showed them how to hold a mirror out of the doorway to see the corridor, with no danger greater than a smashed mirror. He recalled that he hadn't put the passengers' quarters on emergency lights. The mutineers might cut off the lights and close in on them in the dark. He'd showed Diane how to find the switch, but she might not remember.

He raced along a sloping curved ramp. He was risking the corridors, but he could take the chance. A running man is a bad target. Also, there was still confusion among the crewmen. The steward might still be out cold. Those who went to the stern had been defeated. What the skipper had done was uncertain, but he must have done something....

Braden panted and ran, ran and panted. Around him the giant ship was completely silent. Nothing to be heard or seen showed that anything out of the ordinary had taken place. The ship herself was an impersonal steel hull more than a quarter of a mile in length and as thick as a twenty-story building is tall. She contained exactly thirteen people, some of whom now must murder the others or be executed for having tried and failed to capture the ship.

He found himself becoming panicky because he was going away from where he felt that he was needed. He abruptly lost confidence in the skipper's undisclosed plan for handling the mutiny he'd invited by having the steward bring those particular crewmen on board the ship. A space officer should not have done that. Things could go wrong. They almost had! If Braden or the skipper had drunk that coffee, everything would be lost.

He was about to pass the galley. He raised a blaster to readiness, but the galley was empty. He ran on, panting, and saw the door of his own cabin. The steward... The door was open and his cabin was empty. The steward had recovered and had left the cabin.

Braden swore - he should have killed the steward. Here were the skipper's quarters; he went past them. There was the control-room door, and it was open. "It's Braden!" he panted, and fairly dived inside the room. If there were an ambush, calling out his name would seem to be a warning to the skipper, and they'd expect Braden to stop for an answer. But if the skipper were inside, the fact that he'd come in at a headlong run would be assurance that it wasn't a mutinous member of the crew. He burst into the control-room, blasters ready to kill as many men as possible if he'd been ambushed.

It was empty of all life.

But there was a dead man on the floor.

It was the crewman with the sharp eyes, the first man Braden had had empty his ship-bag in the forecabin. He lay on the floor, his head at a completely impossible angle to his body. His neck was broken.

Silence. Stillness. Braden listened with impassioned intensity. If the skipper was dead, he had to get the passengers to a lifeboat and take to space regardless. The skipper'd said the ship would not outlive him by more than twenty-four hours. If he was alive, the two of them must hunt down the mutineers ruthlessly, killing them any way they could. So he listened for a sound that might be the skipper.

Something whirred, and he whirled to face it. But this was one of the times when all the readings of the ship's innumerable instruments were recorded on the log. The log-tape whirred between its guides. There was a tiny humming sound. It stopped. The state of the ship was on tape, so far as the ship alone was concerned. But it was somehow shocking that the ship, the *Rim Star* - the enormous thing which had been created by men and was tended by men and which men almost thought of as animate - it was somehow shocking that the ship was oblivious

to men. A dead man on the control-room floor called for no record on the narrow strip of tape which was the great ship's memory. The dead man did not matter. Nor did Braden, nor the skipper, nor Derr Carmody nor even - incredibly - Diane.

Braden shook his head to clear his mind of such irrelevancies. Then he heard a tiny squeaking noise.

The door of a locker opened. The skipper was wedged in it. He squirmed out. His expression was blank. He seemed filled with a bitter astonishment. But he made a gesture that commanded silence and pointed urgently at the door. Braden went to it and looked out, down the corridor.

The skipper went down on his hands and knees close by the control-board. A huge fat man, he looked grotesque in such a position. He crawled under the knee-space, breathing heavily. He scraped at something and backed out, with a miniature microphone and hair-thin wires in his hand. He jerked the wires, and they broke. He threw the tiny object on the floor.

"A damned bad business!" he said querulously. "But no more eavesdropping, anyhow! I'm... frightened, Braden! This man came in here. No knock. No word. He just came in. Thinking me unconscious, he had some cord in his hands to truss me up so I'd be helpless. He was composed and businesslike. I lolled in my chair, pretending to be sleeping. He came over to me and felt in my pocket. He took my blaster and put it in his own pocket. Then he began, very professionally, to wrap cord about my feet. I took him by the throat, Braden. Gently! I didn't want to kill him. Not as easily as that! I took him by the throat, and he jerked my blaster out of his pocket. So I snapped his neck."

The skipper wiped sweat from his face with his hands.

"But he'd pulled the trigger, Braden! He'd pulled the trigger, and my blaster didn't fire! It didn't go off! I've looked it over and... and somehow, some time, the steward got at it and it's all smashed inside! It's useless! I... I was never without my blaster, Braden! I can't imagine when he got it! I've been disarmed without knowing it, Braden!"

Braden said urgently:

"The passengers have four pocket blasters and some things that look like blasters and sound like them. We'd better join forces with them and start fighting."

"No!" protested the skipper. "I... I hid, to think. You saw it. There's something more important than that! Much more important! Don't you see? If the steward got at my blaster, what else has he got at? Has he guessed all my plans? Has he known all along what I was doing? It would be like him, Braden! I'm... I'm frightened!"

Sweat beaded his face again.

"I've... got to find out!" he panted, almost whimpering. "It couldn't be! But that man over there - he didn't come in here to cut my throat, he came to bind me so I'd wake up helpless... Maybe because they knew I'd planned to trap them, that I got the steward to bring them aboard as a crew. Maybe they wanted to laugh at me as they laughed at..."

Then the skipper's throat clicked shut.

"I'll find out!" he said hoarsely. "I'll come back!"

As if blindly, he went out of the control-room, his hands clenching and unclenching. He turned into his own quarters.

Braden was unbearably tense for several seconds. There were now four crewmen instead of five; they and the steward had to kill everybody else on the ship or be destroyed. Even though they could not be everywhere in so gigantic a vessel, the skipper should not go about unarmed.

Braden thought of Diane, and a vast, impatient urgency filled him. In a situation like this, initiative is everything. When trouble comes, the advantage is always with those who start it. The crew had tried to take the ship without using arms. They'd failed. Now if two raging men began to hunt them they'd be rocked back on their heels. The skipper and Braden should take ruthless and violent action. They should put the fear of hell into the crewmen; keep them confused; wipe them out as they were found. It was their duty as merchant-space officers, and they should do their duty now, while the choice of action lay with them.

But the moment for action was passing quickly! The passengers were barricaded in their quarters, and the two ship's officers were doing nothing either to increase their safety or to prevent the mutineers from recovering from the setbacks they'd suffered, which must give rise to simple desperation. Now there could be nothing but absolute victory for the crewmen or absolute defeat. And victory for them would mean much more than defeat for their antagonists.

Braden was bitterly aware that piracy is not undertaken solely for profit. There are men to whom criminality is satisfying in itself, men who experience a kind of ecstasy in acting against all honor and decency and mercy. Braden had met them. They find joy in hatred, and bliss in malevolence, and pleasure in causing disaster to others. The power to injure gives them satisfaction. They are subject to a strange, inverted ambition. So the seizure of the *Rim Star* would be only partly for the treasure aboard. The act would mean indulgence in enormity... in atrocity. Braden hated men who could act on such motives.

He raged, pacing helplessly in the control-room while time passed. Time in which the crewmen could recover from their first failure and realize the stark necessity of success - for them.

He heard a sound behind him and whirled. It was an emergency intercom buzz from one of the boxes on the wall of a passageway. He threw the switch and the steward's voice came on.

"Calling control-room. Captain, sir?"

The voice was smooth and suave and obsequious. The steward didn't know where Braden was. He didn't know whether the skipper knew about the shooting in the passengers' quarters. He didn't know what had happened to the man with the sharp eyes who lay in a shapeless heap on the control-room floor. But he could ask. He hadn't definitely intended to murder Braden. He hadn't done anything that proved he had that intention in mind. He could insist that the suspicions of the crewmen he'd expressed were justified, that he'd been completely loyal; and he could claim total ignorance that any of the food he'd served had been doctored.

"Captain, sir?"

His voice was openly uneasy. It was good acting.

"What the hell do you want?" demanded Braden.

"Oh! Mr. Braden!" The voice expressed infinite relief. "I'm so glad you answered! There's the devil to pay, Mr. Braden! I'm afraid you believe I was mixed up in it. Terrible things have happened, sir!"

"So I've noticed," said Braden.

"The crew has mutinied, sir! They've armed themselves somehow, and... I don't know what their plan is, sir, but it's terrible!"

A pause.

"I'm afraid they're searching for me, sir! To kill me! I'm hiding at the moment, but I don't know what to do! May I speak to the captain, sir?"

Braden waited an instant. Then he said:

"He's not available."

It could mean that the skipper was not in the control-room. It could also mean that he was dead. Braden would have answered just that way, with just such a pause, in either event, or if he'd gone to the control-room and found it empty. The answer was designed to give no information whatever - not even that one of the steward's men lay dead at Braden's feet with his head at an impossible angle.

The steward's voice acquired just the right touch of the frantic.

"But what shall I do, sir? I need someone to tell me what to do!"

"I can't give you any orders," said Braden curtly.

He flipped the switch to end the talk. Seconds later the intercom buzzed again. He did not answer. The steward wanted information and he hadn't gotten it. He should be greatly disturbed. He had no working hidden microphone in the control-room now. The skipper had tom it out. Its absence must appall him.

Braden made a gesture of pure rage. The control-room was important. From it all manner of dials and indicators reported innumerable facts about the ship's condition, and switches and levers directed innumerable operations. Fires could be fought from it. The air-supply to any compartment could be adjusted or shut off. The temperature, the gravity, the corridor lights, the holds - even compartment doors could be closed simultaneously all over the giant ship. But he could use none of these in the absence of the skipper and in ignorance of the skipper's plans.

There was no word or sign from him. Braden became half-mad with impatience. There should be action, now!

Then there was a sound in the corridor and he plunged to the door, his blaster ready. It was the skipper.

He came out of the door to his quarters and stumbled into the control-room. His face was gray. He seemed to have shrunk. In a bare ghost of his former rumbling voice he said dully:

"Dog the door shut, Mr. Braden. I must have some time. That devil... that devil knew! Ah-h-h! He knew! He's been laughing in his sleeve all the time I've been pampering him - toadying to him - in the hope of having him get his fellow pirates aboard and in my trap! Shut the door!"

Braden said urgently:

"I can see down the corridor, sir, when it's open. We'll have warning if they intend to try anything against us."

"No.... They've heavy-duty rifles now! Dog the door shut! I'd a hinged plate in my cabin, Mr. Braden. There's a way - between the ship's inner and outer skins - to where I had the... bomb that was to make it certain they couldn't win. I thought only I knew it. But that devil found it! And I had... weapons there too. It was in my mind... Close and dog the door, Mr.

Braden!" Then, almost hysterically, "Make sure the door hasn't been tampered with! Make sure it can be locked!"

Braden made certain that the door would stay fastened against any attempt to open it. The skipper was working frantically to loosen the lever that would release emergency air into the ship in case of an air leak. It could be worked by hand because in such a case only hand-operated controls would work. He got the lever clear. It was immediately evident that it was not only a control lever but could serve as a wrench. He fitted it to the end of a bolt in the wall under the CO<sup>2</sup> repeaters. He heaved on it, panting.

"I had a bomb there, Mr. Braden! So they couldn't win! So they couldn't win! So the ship would be blown to atoms if I didn't press a certain button within twenty-four hours of the last signal. And that devil found it! He cut the detonator to little bits! Now nothing will set it off!"

The bolt squeaked and yielded a quarter of a turn.

"I'd thought of everything!" panted the skipper, still heaving on the wrench. "It was... it was perfect! I... even had weapons there in case I had to hunt down any of them who wriggled out of my main trap! Heavy-duty rifles, Mr. Braden! I didn't want to use them. Quick death... ah, they deserve so much more than that! But I was ready even to kill them quickly if I had to! I'd save the ship if I could..." he heaved again... "even if I had to kill them quickly...."

The bolt moved again. Braden, close by the door, said harshly:

"I hear movement in the corridor."

"No matter. It will take time for them to break in."

Something crashed against the door. There was no summons to surrender - mockery as such a summons would be. The crash came again and the door shook. The skipper heaved on the long-handled wrench once more. The bolt turned.

"In here," panted the skipper, "... place to carry money... jewelry... such stuff." He heaved again. "I always hoped... to find the *Melpomene's* crew. So I... put things here. After... I found the steward I... prepared - I thought - more adequately.... Damn him! But this was... from before his time."

He turned and grimaced at Braden. Bending down, he began to loosen the bolt with his fingers.

"Sporting rifles in here," he wheezed. "Ultra-high voltage. Special license. Shipped for a hunter who was killed by some beast before they arrived. They'll stop any beast! It's a pity... it's a great pity to kill these devils so quickly!"

He stood up. He pulled and a plate swung out, the CO<sup>2</sup> repeaters swinging with it. There was a space behind it. It was a perfect hiding place for treasure or weapons which someone might be tempted to steal if they were put in any of the ship's holds.

Then the skipper gave an inarticulate cry. There were grease marks on the floor of the closet. There had been weapons there. The partial outline of a blaster was marked in grease on the floor-plate. The skipper cried out in horror and grief and rage.

The cabinet, the closet, the place for storing treasure or weapons, was empty.

There was a harsh rasp beyond the door. Then the smell of burned paint and hot metal. A point on the metal door of the control-room turned dull-red, then glowed cherry-red. The former crew of the *Melpomene* had abandoned trickery as a means of destroying the skipper and

everyone else in authority, for they'd run into trouble when they tried it. So now they had resorted to undiluted, ravening, arbitrary force.

With heavy-duty weapons they could melt down the door if they chose. They did choose. And four men who could play the enormous energies of heavy weapons before them could not be faced, not even for the half-second needed to fire a blaster at them.

An incandescent spot appeared on the steel door and melted through. There was a shower of coruscating sparks. The hole widened... extended. Two blast-rifles were working on it. Two more spots glowed red.

This was a strictly workmanlike preliminary to the destruction of Braden and the skipper.

Another hole melted through.

## Chapter 6

Braden pulled down a lever on the control-room wall. It was about a quarter-inch thick and as long as his hand. It was one of hundreds of similar levers arranged in rows in a four-foot-square section of the wall. They were the levers that controlled the fire-fighting fog apparatus in the corridors and compartments of the ship. This one turned on the fog just outside the control-room door.

A dense, thick, opaque, drowningly thick fog spouted from openings in the ceiling. Water, thinned by wetting agents, poured out of tiny nozzles. The pressure was so great that the moisture broke into droplets of microscopic size. They did not fall. They floated. They spread. They turned the air into something palpable, heavy, that was somewhere between a gas and a liquid. No fire could burn in it. No man could breathe it. It looked like heavy smoke. It felt clammy.

Braden fumbled at the pivoted metal dogs which had held the control-door shut against all impacts. Steam came through the melted openings in the door. He flung the door wide, and the heavy white stuff in the corridor flowed in like an infinitely viscous liquid.

"Come on!" snapped Braden. "Hold your breath!"

He thrust his blaster into a pocket to protect it against the fog and plunged out into the white opacity. He stumbled over something which made noises like escaping steam. It was a blaster, shorted and ruined, its batteries melting down as they discharged.

He ran, holding his breath like a man dying. He felt rather than heard, that there were blundering figures fleeing ahead of him. The skipper followed him, guiding himself with his hand against the wall. Braden knew that his face was wet. His hair became saturated and water flowed down his neck. He felt as if he were wading rather than running, and he began to worry intensely that his blaster, even in his pocket, might become soaked and useless, or worse. He tripped on another blaster busily destroying itself on the floor. He almost fell. He needed to breathe. He was desperate for air. He'd strangle...

The white mist grew brighter. His head came out of the white stuff and he gasped in breathable air. The corridor here was filled from wall to wall with the fire-fighting fog which flowed very slowly away and ahead of him. He saw stirred-up trails of the vapor, like the swirling of mist above chilly water on a warm day. The stuff looked like milk. The crewmen were far ahead, still in flight, stirring up the stuff as they fled.

Braden snatched out his blaster and fired, just before the curve of the corridor wall hid them.

There was a scream and a great turning of vapor into steam. Then nothing.

The skipper blundered into view, seeming to rise out of a thick white nothingness that streamed down about his head and shoulders with infinite deliberation. He gasped and filled his lungs as he waded toward Braden.

"I think," said Braden, "that somebody got hurt. Whether any were killed is something else. Are you all right?"

The skipper mumbled, his face ghastly. Water-soaked and stunned by the disaster, he could derive no courage from this setback to the mutineers. He had been outguessed and outthought. He was in a state of shock.

"They'll still have weapons," said Braden. "They got those you stored by the bomb, you tell me. But they also got the ones that were in the hiding place we found empty. You had blasters enough to kill them with, but now *they've* got them to use on us! But they're off balance for the moment."

The skipper made a hopeless gesture.

"Mr. Braden," he said thinly, "I can't hope to kill them now as I wanted to. But... I will kill them somehow! You..."

He stopped. His forehead wrinkled pathetically.

"You haven't my reasons," he said helplessly, "but you have done very well, Mr. Braden. I would like to.... spare you what is going to happen in this ship. You are... you are concerned about the passengers. I would like for your sake to have them escape. But..."

Braden's muscles tensed suddenly.

"I've two pocket blasters," he snapped. "But... there are the space-boats! You told me to take to a boat!"

The skipper's eyes were despairing. It took seconds for him to understand. Then his despair turned to blazing hope.

"Come, Mr. Braden! You do very well indeed!"

He instantly reassumed the role of leadership. It was inevitable. A man does not command spaceships for half a lifetime without acquiring the habit of taking charge of every situation he finds himself in. Now the skipper waded forward, his confidence abruptly returned. He came to a panel in the side wall. The fog was only knee-deep. The panel must give access to one of those almost-unused passages between the inner skin and the hold-plates of the *Rim Star*. They had no part in the operation of the ship while in space. They were used only for inspection and for access to places that needed painting or repair.

The panel in the wall swung out. Beyond it there was a narrow catwalk that had metal handrails. It reached out across emptiness. Lights burned feebly at relatively great intervals in a web of angular struts and braces designed to maintain the rigidity of the ship. The lights burned on unseen for years on end.

Braden closed the rarely used panel. The skipper led the way, head erect, all his self-confidence returned.

There were, of course, three space-boats - three lifeboats - in their proper blisters in the *Rim Star's* skin. Any one of them could carry all the normal ship's company; but there were three, because anything that could require abandoning the ship would almost certainly require the destruction of a good part of it first. Hence the boat-blisters at widely separated parts of the hull.



Other forethought was involved in the matter of the space-boats. They could not, of course, be fueled and provisioned for journeys of indefinite length. A fully loaded space-boat had a maximum range of just about five light-years. In some parts of the galaxy this practically assured its ability to reach a colonized world - in the denser star-clusters especially. But there were sectors in which the best hope was to find a merely habitable world. So there was emergency equipment for a castaway landing - seeds, tools, instructions for agriculture, and even data on recognizing smeltable ores. And in case of hostile animal life - it had long since been evident that there was no other race like man in the galaxy - in case of dangerous beasts, there were weapons. Castaways would have material, arms, and information for survival.

It was the weapons that instantly restored the skipper's spirits. He strode along the narrow catwalk, their handrails barely allowing his bulk to pass. He rumbled premonitorily:

"Mr. Braden, I think..."

The ship's gravity went off. Both he and Braden became weightless. Braden grabbed at a handrail when he found himself floating. The lights went out, and though they were faint and widely separated, their loss was horrifying. A mooing, hooting, dismal noise filled the air. It was the maximum-emergency signal that would be set off from the control-room in case of imminent disaster. All through the ship, compartment doors swung shut, scaling the ship into scores of airtight compartments. The doors were actually collision doors. Gravity came on again. There was the crazy, intolerable sensation of coming out of overdrive, and in a few seconds the equally intolerable sensation of going back into it. The collision doors opened, the lights came on, and gravity went off. The doors immediately closed once more. The mooing noise stopped. Gravity went on and instantly off, the lights flickered insanely, and again the ship came out of overdrive.

The lunatic sequence of events continued, but presently the tempo seemed to slow. Braden clung to one handrail of the catwalk. The skipper clung to both rails. The phenomena came at greater intervals - but not consistently - and at long last seconds intervened between them. Then half minutes. Then they stopped.

"Shorts in the control-room," said Braden. "The fog rolled in and wetted the contacts. Seems to be over now, though."

The skipper rumbled. The ship was back in overdrive, the dim lights shone steadily, and the men's feet rested solidly on the metal plates of the catwalk.

"No doubt," growled the skipper. "I've an idea, though, that those devils believed for a moment that we'd gone into the Other Side of Nowhere. Eh? Too bad it wasn't true! But they'll realize it was shorts, as you said. Too bad!"

He went on along the catwalk. Braden followed. His brain nibbled at the skipper's remark about the Other Side of Nowhere. This tall tale had become folklore; nobody knew how it started. But all over the galaxy there were absurd tales of ships blundering into an impossibly wrong sort of space where before was behind and below was above and ships reacted insanely to their controls. One heard it in great detail about certain definite ships, but those ships always denied it. They said they'd heard the same story about other definite ships. But they denied it, too. No man ever claimed to have been on a ship when it happened, but the story persisted like other fabulous tales that can never be run to ground. Authorities on folklore said it was a fragment based on a science-fiction story centuries before - a story called "The Other Side of Nowhere", by a forgotten writer named Leinster. But it was discussed in all forecastles, and a great many crewmen believed it obstinately.

The *Rim Star* was again driving through emptiness at multiples of the speed of light, and conditions in her interior returned to normal. The incident had been frightening, but harmless. It was not likely to cause the crewmen to reform. The time had passed for that.

The catwalk ended at a second metal panel in the wall of the other corridor between the two ends of the ship. The skipper unlocked the panel from inside and stepped confidently through. It would have been incautious, had the *Rim Star* not been so huge.

There was no alarm. A taller door, marked as being that of a lifeboat-blister, was almost opposite. The skipper opened it boldly. Braden followed him through it. Another door inside made the entrance into an airlock. They went through that door also. A feeble light glowed here. They were in the blister.

They looked at the space-boat. Its size was proportionate to that of the *Rim Star* - 60 feet long and 15 feet in diameter; it looked like an even clumsier miniature of the parent ship. At that, it was larger than the ships that first traveled between the planets in the first solar system, and even the first interstellar trips were made in ships that were only a little larger. Perhaps a tenth of its volume was available for human use. The rest held stored food and other supplies, and the disproportionately large drive that was necessary. It was strictly for emergencies. The inspection seal on its port seemed to be intact.

The skipper touched the seal. It gave. He stared at it and then went inside the boat. Braden waited. As of now, the mutineers were better armed than the skipper and himself in the ratio of a riot squad to two peaceful citizens.

There was stillness. The silence of space is absolute. The silence of a huge ship, traveling light-years in hours, is no less absolute. It seemed to Braden that he could hear the beating of his own heart and even the blood rustling in his ears. Once he thought he heard the tiniest of all possible sounds - metal striking on metal somewhere. But it was infinitely faint, and it was very far away, and it was not repeated.

The skipper came out of the space-boat. His hands were empty. His features had lost all their life again. He said in a thin, breathless voice:

"I'm beaten again. The weapons are gone. And... the boat's drive is wrecked. When I saw the weapons gone, I looked. The boat can be launched, but the drive's smashed. It can't be driven anywhere. The passengers can't have even that much chance for their lives."

The dim light of the lifeboat-blister showed that he was raging. And somehow it seemed to Braden that the crewmen's pains to prevent the passengers' escape by lifeboat was a maddening form of mockery, of derision, just as the removal of the weapons was. The skipper was not only outwitted but he was being laughed at! And to be laughed at, in addition to murder and worse that was to be anticipated - it was intolerable!

Braden grimly handed the skipper a pocket blaster. His action was almost derision in itself, considering everything. But the skipper took it.

"Not much, Mr. Braden," he said fiercely. "It's not much! But it's enough to go into business with! The business of killing pirates! Come along with me and we'll wipe them out! Kill them! Move in on them in force! A pity for them to die easily, but..."

Braden interrupted.

"You're forgetting the passengers!" he said sharply.

The skipper was like a man faced with something he couldn't endure. He couldn't admit that he was beaten. He had to pretend what he knew was not true. A man can die in proof of his own incapacity.

"Mr, Braden, I've this!" the skipper said. He tapped the pocket blaster Braden had just given him. "Thanks to you, I've got this! And when I'm finished with those devils, your passengers will be as safe as if they were in their mothers' arms!"

He did not believe it, but he had to pretend that he did, or he was lost. It was better to be killed, believing it, than to admit defeat.

"The odds are bad," snapped Braden. "They're impossible! Only two of us..."

"One, Mr. Braden!" said the skipper fiercely. "I know this ship, Mr. Braden, as I know the chin I shave each morning. I'll take care of the crew alone!"

It was absurd. It was utter folly. And the skipper knew it. But he would let himself be killed rather than admit to himself that he'd been caught in his own trap and that only death remained to him.

"Somebody," said Braden grimly, "has to think of the ship and the passengers. I ask for authority to look after the ship while you go hunting mutineers - if you must."

The skipper rumbled. Braden told him, curtly, what he meant to do about the remotely possible safety of the passengers. He did not so much ask for authority as declare flatly that he was taking it. There comes a point when subordination is pure folly.

"Very well. Mr. Braden," growled the skipper. "Take the watch until relieved. I'll get along better with the ship off my mind. I give you full responsibility for the passengers. Use your best judgment for the ship and for them while I attend to the crew!"

He thrust past Braden and went out into the corridor. There was no sound. Braden followed him a moment later. He'd vanished.

Braden, frowning, opened the door to the catwalk by which they'd come here. He fastened it behind him. To all intents and purposes he vanished, too. He did not expect ever to see the skipper alive again.

One instant after closing the corridor-plate, he had left the catwalk. He was in the maze of struts and girders which, with very occasional catwalks, filled the space between the ship's holds and her outer skin. He saw a gigantic steel precipice which was a cargo hold. There were other holds the size of monster warehouses. Each could contain a large part of what a new colony of thousands of people would need to become self-supporting. Between them there were myriads of braces - weblike labyrinths of steel struts and strength-members.

Together they made the ship firmer and less flexible than a similar mass of solid steel.

Braden began to climb downward through the bewildering masses of metal. There was silence, and only the dimmest twilight in the web-like space. There were only feeble yellow lights. Those nearby were blanked out by girders as he moved on, and those farther away twinkled. He scowled as he descended. This behavior was contrary to all his instincts. If he followed his impulses, he'd join the skipper in a furious attack on the mutineers. A little while ago, that would have been the rational thing to do. But no more. Yet he yearned hungrily for freedom to do battle, whether with fists or blasters, instead of thinking coldly of what was wise and practical and sensible.

He tried to hurry. The crewmen didn't know what had happened to one of their number, and they couldn't have any clear idea of what had become of the skipper, but they couldn't fail to know what Braden must do. He would have to join the passengers and try to do something for their safety. The steward would surely realize that. Unless the crew had panicked - a temporary state, at best - he'd be leading them now to clean out the passenger space before Braden could obtain what added strength the male passengers might give him. It would not be much.

Braden saw the complete impossibility of defending the passenger section. The mutineers had lost at least two heavy-duty weapons in the fire-fighting fog, but they had more. There would be no weapons in any of the spaceboats now, and the skipper had had powerful blast-rifles in the control-room cache. The crewmen would be extravagantly equipped for murder. They could melt through walls if necessary, to kill the passengers. And they should be on the way sternward now.

He was driven to desperate haste. Once he slipped and his hand jerked loose from what he was holding on to, and he fell. But the struts and girders were like tree limbs in their distribution. He fell no more than a dozen feet before he caught himself, though he felt as if his arms would be pulled from their sockets. Then he went on again.

He growled. He wished bitterly that the *Rim Star* were like those old-fashioned ships now relegated to minor runs between solar systems. Those ships' drives were considered engines and engineer-officers cobbled them, and swore that they were superior to the new-fangled automatics. Men felt greater loyalty to those ships and believed them better than any others in space. They would fight for them. Mutiny would be unthinkable.

But the *Rim Star* was a machine. Her drive-units were failure-proof. They were sealed in an armored compartment after inspection by specialists aground. The astrogation system was no less non-human. The *Rim Star* was a complex, soulless device which was wholly indifferent to the human beings aboard her. She drove on blindly.

Braden heard an ominous sound. A blaster - a hand weapon - made a snarling noise. It was nearby - higher, and closer to the bow, but certainly within a few hundred feet. It could be the skipper. He might have attacked the mutineers with a hand-blaster in an utterly hopeless attempt to kill them before they could kill him. A tumultuous uproar of heavy weapons answered. But it kept up too long to be simply a suicidal attack for the purpose of getting killed. There were blasts at odd intervals for several minutes. It could be that the skipper had sniped at them from a cracked-open corridor-plate and then retreated to the dimness in which Braden moved now. There were other blasts from heavy rifles, as if the mutineers were trigger-happy and expected further sniping.

Then there was heavy firing, and somehow it sounded final, as if the men who fired were certain that they had killed their enemy - the skipper. If so, everything was up to Braden.

Braden almost flung himself downward. The crewmen, though, would be marching down ramps and steps which successively circled the whole ship. They could move faster forward, but probably not downward as swiftly as Braden could.

He came to a catwalk which should be the right one. Breathing hard from his exertions, he made his way to the corridor-plate. As he opened it and stepped out, a pellet of blindingly white light flashed past him. He heard a blaster snarl.

"Stop!" he snapped.

He was within ten yards of the doorway to the passengers' quarters. Duckworth had been on guard. He saw Braden appear and fired. He missed. It was wise to miss with only a stage weapon. Braden went past him, angered.

"That shot tears it!" he snapped again, as he went in. "But shoot first if anybody comes!"

He was in the passengers' saloon. Diane had snatched up a hand-blaster. She gave a little gasp of relief at the sight of him. Fortescue had grabbed a stage rifle when he heard Duckworth shoot. Hardy faced the door grimly, a hand-blaster halfway drawn. Derr Carmody seemed to be half-fainting, her hand to her lips and her eyes filled with terror.

"Come along!" said Braden sharply. "Everybody up! The crew's on the way here. The skipper's killed one of them, but they're heavily armed and they're coming to kill you. Everybody up!"

He gave them no time to ask questions as he hurried them out. There were two spiral corridors from end to end of the ship. The mutineers would come along the corridor to the right, so he shepherded his charges to the left. There had to be two passageways, for safety's sake alone.

They passed the place where a stairway went down to the exit port. The exit was at the bottom of one of the giant fins on which the *Rim Star* stood upright in port. Braden had an idea and seized on it.

"Go on ahead," he commanded. "Right with you!"

He raced down the stairs. The personnel port, of course, was an air lock. Braden hauled open the inner door, jammed it against being closed, and held his pocket weapon within inches of the door that remained between himself and interstellar space. He held down the trigger, and swore at the smallness of the effect it made. Heavy-duty weapons had burned through the control-room door as if it were butter.

But presently - it seemed an agonizing length of time - a small place glowed red... cherry red... incandescent. And then the ship's air-pressure blew out the semi-liquid metal and screamed out through the small opening into the space beyond. It was not a large hole, of course - actually less than an inch in diameter. But air rushed out and Braden raced up the stairs again. He reflected dourly that this was the kind of trick the steward might think of. Smart. And safe. He didn't like it, but it was necessary.

He reached the top of the stairs and there was the mournful, mooring, dismal sound of the maximum-emergency signal. A monitor-panel somewhere had reported a drop of air-pressure here. Collision doors closed all over the ship, dividing it into innumerable airtight compartments.

"Quick!" snapped Braden. "Run!"

He drove them on. Derr Carmody stumbled on the stairs. He picked her up and ran with her. Already the air was thin. There was a considerable volume of air to escape from this compartment, but there was need for haste.

The corridor ahead was blocked by an automatically closed collision door. But there was an escape section, to be worked by hand. Braden opened it and rushed the others through. He panted out orders. Diane grasped what he meant and ran on ahead. Only Fortescue stayed behind.

"Anything I can do?" he asked uneasily.

"Get them to the next door. Fast!" commanded Braden.

Fortescue ran on ahead, disappearing around the curve of the corridor. Diane called. Braden punctured this door also with his blaster. It was a smaller hole than the one in the outside lock door. Air whistled through, ultimately to stream out free into space.

Braden caught up with the others. Again he opened the escape section and got them through.

"They can't follow us now," he said savagely. "I created an air leak. One compartment's empty of air and another is emptying its air into the first. But now we've got to move faster than ever. We can't go back the way we came, and they can head us off by way of the bow."

There was sweat on his forehead. He'd asked to be given the responsibility for the ship and the passengers, but it involved flight, hiding, trickery, instead of the violent action he preferred. He disapproved of himself as he rushed them onward. One closed-off section after another. Derr Carmody gasped that she had to rest... the stairs... the ramps. She had to rest.

"We haven't time!" Braden raged at her. "Keep going or be left behind!"

He knew he wouldn't do it, but the threat might keep her going. The corridor seemed interminable. Where there were no steps, there was ramp. It was a matter of climbing, climbing, climbing.

He drove them on. Their behavior could have been predicted. Just as a group of men, long isolated, form group-patterns of behavior that tacitly assign different roles to each man, so a group of men and women establish a pattern in a time of emergency. Here Braden was obviously the leader, and Diane was automatically his chief lieutenant. Fortescue was prepared to do loyally whatever he was told. Duckworth might be a third leader in case of need, and Hardy... Braden somehow left Derr Carmody to Hardy. In an emergency Hardy would always be the one man who saw details the others did not notice, and stolidly took care of the weakest. Who, of course, would be Derr Carmody.

"There's a lifeboat-blister ahead," said Braden brittlely. "We're making for that."

There'd be no attempt to escape in a lifeboat, of course. The mutineers had wrecked one space-boat drive. They undoubtedly had wrecked this one, too. The skipper had said, when he found the weapons gone from the boat, he'd looked at the drive and found it smashed. The boat could be launched, but once in space it would automatically become a derelict. Anybody in it would suffer a slow death as the air supply gave out. It was more than probable that this boat also was a booby trap. But the crewmen would have a perfectly operating space-boat for their own escape when they left the *Rim Star*, taking the treasure in the big ship's cargo hold.

The fleeing passengers came to the lifeboat door. Braden dashed in. Since he had no hope at all, there was no bitterness in finding the inspection seal broken and the arms rack empty. There was not even shock in the verification of his belief that the drive would be useless and not repairable. But he could make use of the boat, nonetheless.

He did. He sent it out to space. The *Rim Star* echoed with the "Boat-away" signal, which informed anyone left behind that the ship was being abandoned. The useless empty lifeboat left the *Rim Star*; a derelict which would drift in space until the crack of doom; no human eye would ever see it again. But the mutineers would believe that the passengers and Braden - and perhaps even the skipper - were in it.

Braden waved his companions on. They did not understand what he'd done, but were huddled together, waiting for him to tell them what to do. Derr Carmody was threatening hysterics again because she didn't like the situation she was in.

"If we aren't killed in the next five minutes," said Braden, "we may live on for some days. Go on! Hurry! To the next collision door. Make it fast!"

They hurried. Up more stairs and more ramps. Duckworth panted, but toiled on gamely. A collision door. They went through it. More stairs and ramps. Another collision door. Then Diane turned a white face to Braden. There was the sound of muffled voices ahead.

Braden drove the passengers on with a pantomime of drastic threats. At best it would be horribly close. But they did reach the destination he'd chosen before he'd left the skipper. There was a normal double doorway, with two doors set in it, on the inboard side of the corridor. It was the door used by spaceport technicians aground to go aboard to examine the Lawlor drive-units and the astrogation equipment. It was a large doorway, in case units of either piece of equipment had to be replaced.

Braden opened the doors and rushed his group through. Before the last one had disappeared, however, the sound of voices grew suddenly louder. The men had come through the collision door ahead. They were not fifty feet away. But the corridor was curved. Braden was inside and had the doors almost closed at the last conceivable instant before he'd have been seen.

He drew back and held his inadequate pistol drawn and leveled. If they opened the door he'd try to shoot them all, belly-high, before they could level their vastly more powerful weapons and kill him.

Sweat stood out on his face. For if he killed every crewman but was killed himself, Diane would die. Without a trained man in the control-room, the passengers could never get the ship to ground even though she was wholly in their hands. The *Rim Star* could go blindly to her destination and come indifferently out of overdrive there. But her passengers would not know how to call the unfinished new colony. They might be only a light-hour from Handel's Planet when the ship's taped instructions came to an end. But the ship could drift on aimlessly, in orbit or not, for the rest of time, and the passengers could do nothing to save themselves.

The mutineers went on past where Braden waited. When the sound of voices dwindled and then were cut off at the next collision door, Braden closed the wide doors completely and fastened them. He was shaky. But no crewman thinks that the door to the ship's drive is ever meant to be opened, for the drive is never touched in space. Never.

But Braden led the way to the drive-compartment, that sacrosanct cell of thick metal which holds the drive and astrogation units. He knew how to get into it, for on another ship, aground and years back, he'd watched the technicians check her automatic equipment. He couldn't

have done the checking himself, but he knew how to get in to where it was done.

Hardy was the last of the passengers to enter the compartment, and Braden closed the door behind him. The lights, useless except at inspection time, showed the clumsy-looking, lumpy, ungainly object that moved the *Rim Star*. A composite of many sections bolted together, it was about twelve feet high and twenty feet on a side. Beyond it was the astrogation complex, the main part of which was a cabinet four feet by six. The innumerable wires and cables leading to it merged to form a six-inch cable which entered it. As it left it, the wires separated and led in orderly confusion to an enormous instrument bank intended solely for testing. There were vision screens and dials and switches, the whole apparatus more complex than that of the control-room itself. And all this apparatus was simply to make sure that the astrogation units contained not even so much as one defective microscopic transistor. If a unit showed any signs of trouble, a duplicate unit immediately began to function. This test apparatus would locate the unit replaced by the substitute, in case the substitute itself ceased to function.

Braden looked discouragedly at the complicated wiring. He'd have to use it, for there was nothing else to do. But he was miscast as a technician; he preferred a simpler and more natural role.

"Nobody thinks of coming here," he said evenly. "I've left the crew to find which lifeboat left the *Rim Star*, and they'll think we were in it. So long as we don't show ourselves, and they don't hunt for the skipper here, we should be able to work in peace."

Duckworth stared at him, shocked and bewildered. "Work?" he asked blankly. "What can we work at?"

"We can work," said Braden matter-of-factly, "at taking back the ship."

The *Rim Star* stayed in overdrive. There were stars by the myriad where the huge ship could be said to be, but their light did not penetrate the overdrive field. Nor did any light go out. The *Rim Star* was wrapped in a cocoon of stressed space. She had no measurable effect on anything as she speeded from one place to another, for she went too fast. If starlight had glittered on her traveling at the speed she'd attained - trillions and quadrillions of miles per second - she would still have been invisible. No one light-wave was fast enough to strike her and be reflected. In a perfectly rational sense she could be said not to exist in normal space, because to be real an object must have an effect. It must do something that can be detected. The ship did not stay in any one particular place long enough to affect anything. Perhaps a collision with a dwarf star might invalidate that reasoning, but nothing of the sort had so far been observed. Nor could it occur. Inside her own force-field the *Rim Star* was a blind, unshapely, insensible mass which was real only to herself and to her contents. There was no day or night. There seemed to be no time.

Frowning, Braden surveyed the job and then began to do what he had planned. He picked out Hardy to help him since, as a cameraman qualified to keep a tape camera in repair, he should have some idea about electronics. But Diane proved to be even more capable.

The three of them began an exhaustive and exhausting study of the bank of testing instruments. They identified the circuits of the vision screens. The test screen in the drive compartment would show, in normal space, exactly what the bow-plate of the control-room revealed. The next screen checked what the port-side control-room screen should show. Others verified stern and starboard plates in the control-room. Here a testing instrument reported on the Lawlor drive relay, and there a dial registered the megamperes - in hundreds - which flowed to produce the overdrive field. Here one could read whether the ship's gravity units were properly adjusted. There...

Tracing circuits was a very tedious business; there was no clear connection with the situation in the ship. Men whose purpose was piracy and murder - plus atrocity if that became practical - controlled the ship. But in the heavy steel cell supposed never to be entered outside a spaceport, Braden and Hardy and Diane traced circuits, identified functions, and informed themselves about the methods used by specialists to certify that the *Rim Star* was spaceworthy. It seemed wildly irrelevant to the situation they were in.

Derr Carmody whimpered. She was ignored. Duckworth fretted, and Fortescue seemed to view the universe with a wry acknowledgment of his uselessness. But presently the three of them drew together and talked wistfully about the production of tape dramas. They were not qualified to think in detail about anything else. Soon they were planning epics and spectaculars and heart-interest narratives to be shown upon the screens of all the worlds if they could ever be able to produce them. Always, it was understood, the star part was tailored for Derr Carmody.



Eventually she was battling jealously if a good scene or an effective line were assigned to another imaginary character in these imaginary productions.

But all this was after Braden made his first trip out of the drive-compartment. Conditions, already uncomfortable, became hair-raising because nothing happened.

The skipper, for example. He knew where Braden proposed to hide the passengers. He should have come there at least to consult about joint action when action became possible. But he did not come.

There was the question of food and water. Braden went out, on the second day, to obtain them and to see if he could find any sign of the skipper's survival.

When he went out, the ship was utterly silent. She drove on, but the mutineers could have been dead and the skipper with them, for all the signs of life there were. The temptation to make a search was extreme, but Braden resisted it. He took food from one of the space-boats. As he was carrying it back to enter the drive-cell, he heard a faint, faraway, irrational thump. Then he heard another. He swung ape-like along the intricate patterns of the strength-members and put his ear against the wall of No. 1 hold... Nothing... He clambered down to No. 2 hold. There was movement inside.

He listened, his ear against the hold-plates. The mutineers were shifting cargo. They would be hunting among packing-cases and crates for a certain unmarked box which held some millions of credits in interstellar currency. It had been stowed among crates of preserved food and hardware and bottled beverages for a labor-force canteen. It was simpler and safer to ship a really valuable item this way than under special guard. The mutineers were completely confident that the ship was in their possession. They were hunting for the money. When they found it, they would be rich. Meanwhile they were working leisurely. Confidence as great as this should mean that the skipper was dead. But, of course, they might believe that he'd gone with Braden and the passengers on the hopeless lifeboat trip that Braden had faked for their benefit.

Braden went back to the drive-compartment, back to the uncongenial task of unraveling the circuits leading through the test apparatus to the astrogation equipment and the drive. The mutineers obviously had a destination in mind where they could unload their loot - by space-boat, no doubt - and then abandon the *Rim Star* to her eternal career as a derelict. This destination must be somewhere along the *Rim Star's* legitimate course. Quite likely, a new trip-tape would be put into the astrogator control after the *Rim Star* broke out of overdrive at Handel's Planet itself. It would be convenient.

Braden felt a certain contempt for the crewmen, because they would take away only a fraction of the value they destroyed. If they were lucky, they might load into a lifeboat half of a tenth of a thousandth of the value of what they'd send drifting endlessly in emptiness. They believed they'd killed the ship's officers and passengers for such a reward. They were enraged because one of their number had been killed and others singed by blaster bolts. They would have exacted special vengeance for those things, if they could.

The details of the circuits gradually became clear. Braden and Diane and Hardy knew what wires carried the signal for overdrive and breakout; for compartment doors to close or open; for the image of bow and stem and side vision screens; for all the things the ship's equipment could be commanded to do.

But they lost track of time. Finally, they believed, they had the information needed for the action Braden intended, quite alone, to take. He said with satisfaction:

"Now we plan the business! We've got to work the thing out in detail and then rehearse it until we have it perfect..."

At that exact instant a voice boomed out of a speaker unit in the drive-room ceiling.

"Attention! Breakout coming! Prepare to come out of overdrive in five seconds. Five... four... three... two... one..."

The universe seemed to reel and their bodies and particularly their stomachs seemed to be trying to turn inside out. There was an instant of intolerable dizziness and the feeling of a precipitous fall...

"Turn on the test screens," snapped Braden. "Put everything on test to make sure! We should have been ready! Hurry!"

Diane threw one switch after another. The vision screens of the drive-room lighted, showing exactly what the screens in the control-room showed. A voice - a different voice - came out of the speaker. It was not from inside the ship.

"Checkpoint Carol," said the voice. It was metallic and loud. "Report. Report." There was a pause. "Checkpoint Carol. Report. Report."

The voice was strong. This was another Space Patrol checkpoint at another crossroads of space. The checkpoint robot here could not be more than a light-minute away - no more than ten or eleven million miles. It seemed - almost - that a human being was calling to the *Rim Star*, and that if the *Rim Star* appealed for help, it would be given. But the voice was that of a robot - a clumsy, unmanned complex of machinery within a hedgehog-like agglomeration of receiving antennas. It would record what the *Rim Star* broadcast to it, but it would not reply; it could not respond. It continued to repeat senselessly, "Checkpoint Carol, Report..."

There was a banded sun in the right-hand vision screen; it filled a respectable part of the firmament. There were millions upon millions of stars in view. There was a planet to port. There were hummings, and whirrings, and no less than two wabbling whines which were ship's logs being broadcast for the Patrol checkpoint robot to pick up and record. Ultimately they would be listened to by somebody in case there was anything notable about them. There never was.

The *Rim Star's* own high-speed broadcast of her log began. It came through on the test circuit in the drive-room as an unsteady, high-pitched droning noise.

Braden's lips compressed. The ship was out of overdrive in a checkpoint solar system. It would be possible to cut the drive from here, the drive-room. From here, too, he could broadcast an appeal for help - not to the checkpoint robot, of course, but to other ships also out of overdrive and in this same solar system. But it would be utterly futile.

It was conceivable that a ship might pick up such an appeal. It was even remotely - very remotely - possible that such a ship might take a bearing on the call and come to investigate. But it couldn't do a thing to help. In theory, perhaps a Patrol ship could match the speed of the *Rim Star* in space and conceivably clamp on to the bigger vessel. But it was by no means certain that even a Patrol ship could break into an air lock and fight its way inside, even if it was convinced that such a course was necessary. Nothing like it had ever happened in all the centuries of space travel.

Braden wouldn't have attempted anything of the sort. As long as the *Rim Star's* mutineers believed the passengers and himself helplessly and hopelessly waiting to die in a disabled space-boat some light-years away, he and the passengers could work on the scheme he'd

contrived for retaking the ship. But once the crewmen discovered that they were alive and holding the drive-room, they'd have no chance at all.

The whine of the *Rim Star's* log broadcast cut off with a savage clicking. Then a voice bellowed from the log speaker and from all the interior-communication speakers simultaneously.

"Call for help!" roared the skipper's voice. "Mutiny! *Rim Star* calls for help! Skipper, mate, and passengers need help immediately! Mutiny! Mutiny! Mutiny!"

Braden plunged toward the door of the drive-compartment. If the skipper was fighting, he had to have help. But before he'd reached the drive-room door the speakers rasped out the sound of a blaster in action. Instantly thereafter, the log-speaker unit made a raucous crashing sound that would only be made by a cable or a microphone unit that had been struck and fused.

At the same time the stars moved on the test screens that duplicated everything the screens in the control-room showed. Millions of specks of light moved together, some off one screen, others on to another. The Milky Way was in a new position. There was a click.

The *Rim Star's* observation units had recorded the bearing of the banded sun to starboard. They'd searched for and found the pattern made by other remote and brilliant stars. They had swung the ship's blunt bow to a new bearing, the bearing of the destination the ship was heading for from this spot. The stars steadied.

There came the impersonal booming voice again, but this time interrupted and crashing as if a blaster bolt had melted a cable whose ends still remained precariously in contact.

"Atten-" CRASH! "Prepare..." CRASH! CRASH! CRASH! "... drive in CRASH! CRASH! "four... three..." CRASH! "one..."

Again the universe reeled and seemed to turn inside out. Again there was the feeling of intolerable nausea and unbearable dizziness. The feel of a horrible fall in a contracting spiral.

The ship was silent once more. She was in overdrive again, heading at swiftly multiplying light-speeds for her destination still scores of light-years away.

Braden looked at the white faces turned to him. All had heard the skipper's voice. He'd broadcast, uselessly, that he and Braden and the passengers were alive and on the ship. There was no help to be had from the broadcast. Already the *Rim Star* was farther from her position of report than the span of any known planetary system. She was momentarily increasing her speed. She was invisible, untraceable, and in a perfectly accurate sense nonexistent in the space in which - if it had been picked up - the skipper's cry of "Mutiny!" might have caused some concern.

"Why did he do that?" Braden asked fiercely. "Why the *hell* did he do that?"

## Chapter 7

The universe went on about its businesses, which were many and extremely varied. Nobody thought about the *Rim Star* - or anyhow, only very few. Other and more important matters filled men's minds.

For example, there was a shortage of available capital on Halli IV, so shrewd businessmen on Timbuk bought drafts on Klit, which were paid by drafts on Chagan, which were met out of funds on Tralee, which could be transferred to Halli IV. Thus an economic crisis was solved by shifting written numerals from this column to that on ruled paper pages, a juggling that yielded admirable profits to the shrewd businessmen who arranged it.

There were other important matters. There were gigantic engineering projects involving moving parts of mountains on Lhasa III; economic systems were in process of change in the Nurmi Cluster worlds. There was the discovery of frozen, once-living organisms on Lithian VI, which was proof that in past ages the sun Lithian had been a brilliant star and life had begun even on its outermost planet, where now there were only frozen wastes of nitrogen snow. Expeditions were being organized with feverish haste to study the deep-frozen organisms *in situ*, to settle again the question of how life began, and why.

Orators made strident speeches, offering themselves for public offices. A sun with three occupied worlds, in Andromeda, began to show signs of instability, which meant that the planets would have to be evacuated. On a world in Cetus there was a collapse of public confidence, and the average price index of sixty standard stocks dropped from a prosperous 698 to a catastrophic 473; supposedly sane businessmen committed suicide in consequence.

And nobody thought of the *Rim Star*. Anyhow, almost nobody.

Of course the people on Handel's Planet hoped that she would arrive, for things would be easier for them if she did. They'd been brought to Handel's Planet in the mother ships of drone fleets, and they'd been landed by space-boat - at enormous costs in destruction - and the drones with supplies and equipment had followed them down. They'd hacked out a clearing in the planet's jungles, and they had wrestled with various local problems. They were poorly fed, and there was considerable danger. It was to be expected that several standard years must pass, and some hundreds of millions of credits be expended, before they could receive the material for a landing-grid aground and erect it, largely by hand. But then a reasonably comfortable life would begin, and colonists would come and settle down to a heavily mortgaged future.

If the *Rim Star* arrived and managed to land in one piece, though, the prospects would be brighter for everybody. Equipment that it would take years to land by rocket-driven drones could come down in the *Rim Star* on one journey. There was some doubt about it, to be sure. Rockets were not gentle propulsion systems. Many drone ships made crash landings, and much equipment was lost. And the *Rim Star* was to try to land on rockets. There was no other way.

Even a space-boat, coming to ground on Lawlor drive, created hurricanes of considerable proportions. A ship like the *Rim Star* would wreck hundreds of square leagues. So the big ship must balance herself down on jets of rocket-flame that would incinerate only forty or fifty acres. But it would be risky. Hence the few hundreds of people on Handel's Planet were not too optimistic.

If very few people not on the ship thought about the *Rim Star*, though, those on board did not think about anybody else. Before the Checkpoint Carol incident, the steward and his followers may have dreamed fondly of the riotous debauchery to follow the completed looting of the ship. But they must travel a long way yet to where it would be safe and easy to get to ground with their booty, while the *Rim Star* floated on, dead and forever a derelict. So they continued without haste to shift the cargo in No. 2 hold. They found some mild pleasure in smashing shipping cases in their search, wasting what was needed by others. Eventually they would find a certain unmarked box that would make them all millionaires. Before the broadcast cry of "Mutiny!" they'd felt perfectly secure. It had been amusing, too, to think about the officers and passengers on the ship being cooped up hopelessly in a lifeboat with no real hope of ever touching ground again.

But then came the control-room incident, revealing the continued existence of at least the skipper. Everything was changed. One enemy aboard any spacecraft can destroy it if he is willing to be destroyed with it. The skipper was an enemy. Definitely! He was aboard. Definitely! He'd concealed himself nearly all the way between Checkpoint Alyx and Checkpoint Carol; apparently he'd gone but actually he was preparing some monstrous disaster for the former crew of the *Melpomene*. What? He had to be found and killed. Instantly!

Squabbling began among the mutineers. Each man, frantic, proposed a different, desperate procedure. But there was only one kind of action that could do any good - the skipper's murder, at once.

Braden's situation had changed, too. He was authorized to look after the passengers and ship according to his best judgment while the skipper hunted the mutineers. His authority had been delegated to him, not transferred. And there was another point. If he, Braden, were killed during what was now nearly ready to be tried, the passengers could not hope to escape. They couldn't handle the ship. They couldn't even use the communication system they'd need in the remote event that the *Rim Star* broke out of overdrive where other human beings lived. Even then the ship could become a derelict with her passengers helplessly imprisoned in her. All this hampered Braden's planning. If the skipper was alive, Braden had to delay his own plan and try to find the skipper so the danger to the passengers - and Diane - would be reduced.

Something else happened as Checkpoint Carol dropped behind. Its banded sun was merely a moderately bright star among others when the sound of a blaster went through the fabric of the ship. Braden heard the noise as it was carried by metal. The mutineers heard it the same way. It meant that the skipper was taking action which could only be aimed at them.

The crewmen went desperately to see what he'd done. They hoped to kill him. But they were not easy in their minds. One of them - the chubby man with the insistent innocent face - had been near the control-room when the skipper broadcast. It was his blaster bolt that melted down the communicator wire. But the skipper had fired to better effect. The chubby man moaned from time to time now, but they left him to hunt for the skipper.

The skipper had nearly a hundred hours in which to make up for the frustration of his original scheme. He'd had time to prepare a second unpleasant fate for the crew. They were jittery. But they were desperate.

Their task, at best, was hair-raising. Every collision door in the ship was shut now, so the hull was divided into scores of separate airtight compartments. Two of these were known to be empty of air and sealed off by necessity, as the rest were sealed off for precaution. The armed, fearful, desperately ferocious group of four men - they had been six, and two of the present four were bandaged - had to search each sealed-off space or submit to whatever the skipper could contrive for them.

When they started off, they were not very impressive as a combat group. The steward said abruptly:

"He said Braden and the passengers are still aboard. See what that means?"

His followers stopped to listen. He motioned them on with a scowl.

"It means the women are still aboard," said the steward. "You can think about that."

It had some effect - not much, but some. They came to the first collision door. They went through it with weapons handy. That section of the ship was empty. They went through another door. Emptiness. Still another. Emptiness.

"He's ducked," said the man with the battered face, referring to the skipper. He was pleased. "He won't fight."

"And if he does," said the steward savagely, "it won't do him any good!"

He hoped it was true, but he wasn't sure.

They entered another compartment. Everything was as it should be. They were becoming confident now, although there was no reason for it. But it is characteristic of the professional criminal, as of the gambler, that he always believes that the laws of chance and probability, and even of cause and effect, do not really apply to him. He believes only in runs of good luck for himself. The former crewmen of the *Melpomene* went through half a dozen compartments without discovering the skipper or any sign of him.

Then a man opened the collision door next ahead. Instantly there came a roar and a scream, together, of air rushing into a vacuum. This was not one of the two compartments known to open on empty space. It was another.

There was a frantic, horrified struggle as the mutineers tried to get the escape door shut again. They succeeded. Then they realized that air could be let out of the compartment they were in. They didn't know how, but it could be done. They fled.

No space crewman feels anything but a pure horror of airlessness. It is the enemy of all life between the stars. And if a man has ever seen another man after two minutes where there is no air, he is never careless again. Not in space!

It took them a long time to get back to the part of the ship they'd been using. They fought to be the first to go through the doors. Finally they made their way back to the corridor, which began at the control-room and went in turn past the skipper's cabin, the mate's, the crew's quarters, and the galley. There it branched to reach the ship's door to the No. 2 hold. The skipper might have planned it that in pure terror of other air leaks they'd gone back to the place where they'd felt safe, before. On their arrival, they realized that there was no safety there, either. But there was nowhere else to go.

The chubby man moaned from his blaster burns when they returned.

"Skipper was here," he told them despairingly. "He laughed!"

The steward was speechless. The chubby man gasped out his story. They'd been gone for a long time in search of the skipper when he appeared. He'd looked in and seen the chubby man on the floor. His eyes went over the mutineer without a change of expression, as if that former member of the *Melpomene's* crew were an inanimate object. He went somewhere else. Presently he came back and went toward the control-room. The chubby man heard him chuckle.

The steward went to find out what the skipper had done. He came back, his eyes flaming.

"We got to find him," he said thickly. "Got to find him..."

He mouthed horrors, raging as a man can only when frustrated by the object of his rage. The steward had taken the weapons from two of the three lifeboats, and had wrecked their drives. He'd left them so they could be launched and would only afterward be discovered to be the coffins of those who had thought them means of escape. But now the skipper had disabled the lifeboat the steward had kept for the mutineers. It could not even be launched!

The former crew of the *Melpomene* were now imprisoned on the *Rim Star*. They might destroy all life aboard but themselves, and they might drive the big ship anywhere they pleased; but they could not land except by landing-grid, and the commonplace formalities of Patrol regulations must infallibly reveal them for what they were.

The steward realized the trap into which he'd led the others. The skipper's broadcast at Checkpoint Carol had not been an attempt to get help. It had been a trick to make the mutineers resolve to find him. He'd fired a blaster through a collision door - emptying another compartment of air - and they'd gone after him there. They'd left their own lifeboat, the last one, for him to wreck. He'd fixed it so it couldn't be launched, let alone driven. It would be a deathtrap for anyone who tried to use it.

The steward cursed harshly as he realized how neatly and precisely his own plans had been countered. His men looked at him numbly. They were in bad enough shape themselves. But he...

In the drive-compartment, Braden's preparations for the recapture of the ship were sufficiently complete. The order of procedure was settled. What he himself was to do, he carefully glossed over. But he began to give Diane painstaking, rule-of-thumb instructions on how to direct the *Rim Star* to a yellow sun, and how, if necessary, to establish communication with the human occupants of any planet that had land and seas and icecaps.

During his instructions, he grew concerned because he suspected Diane of saying, "Yes, yes, I understand," when actually she was thinking of something else. She denied it, and watched carefully as he drew diagrams in his notebook and wrote out the more difficult things she must remember; but she did seem to be thinking about something else. Eventually he called in Hardy to listen to these instructions too.

Braden was impatient. Up to now, it seemed to him, he had acted in an overprudent, overreflective, less-than-masculine way. What he planned to do would be violent and deadly and he counted upon surprise and experience in combat - if of a less lethal kind - to solve all the problems that still remained. Yet his chances of being killed were not small. But he was convinced that he would somehow manage to stay alive until his part of the job was done. Otherwise, these instructions might have to be depended on to finish the work if he himself couldn't do it.

"Why," asked Diane, "do you insist that somebody else at least know how to try to find a way of getting the ship to where we can get help without your doing it?"

"It's a simple, ordinary, rational precaution," he answered. "In the one chance in a thousand or a million..."

"You ought to find the captain," said Diane. Her eyes were at once frightened and soft, and she looked at Braden strangely. "Only... all he wants is to kill the men who murdered his family."

"I can understand that!" said Braden grimly. "If..."

Then he left them. But within an hour he was back, explaining again to Hardy. Presently Braden beckoned to Diane to listen too. She obeyed, watching him very gravely as he spoke. What she was to do at the appropriate time she had learned well. He was confident of that; he could act in full assurance that she'd do her part. But he was desperately uneasy about the rest.

Fortescue, on guard by the door, said abruptly,

"Something's happened! I hear shouting!"

Braden unconsciously felt for his blaster. Without a word, he went out the door. His exit was completely silent. Fortescue closed the door without the faintest sound. It was essential that the mutineers never think of the drive-compartment as a hiding place.

Braden stood for a moment on the walkway and listened.

A man shrieked. It was not a cry of pain, but of terror almost beyond imagining. It was high, and thin, and shrill, made by a man gripped by the unsurpassed fear and anguish one would expect of someone dangling over the deepest pit of hell, then being lowered into it. The sounds were no more articulate than the squealing of a pig which knows it is going to be butchered. And because it was a human throat that made such inhuman sounds, Braden was ashamed for it.

He swung over the railing and began to swing down through that incredible, vaguely lit blur of struts and joists and girders. The cry came from a definite direction, and Braden made for the source of the sound. There could be only certain causes for the cry - the most likely one being the skipper.

Braden came to a catwalk many levels below. He moved along it to the corridor-plate which should be at the end. The cries died away, and Braden heard lesser sounds like sobbing. He opened the door-plate to the corridor. There was utter and absolute blackness. There should not be such complete absence of light anywhere. The door-plate closed softly behind him, and Braden crouched in the abysmal dark. The man who'd been screaming only wept now, but it was a bubbling and a whimpering and a gasping babble. The man only gathered breath for further cries of terror.

Braden moved toward the sound with all possible caution, making sure that his blaster was handy. He fumbled in his pocket and found a coin which he tossed from him with his left hand. It struck the metal of the corridor wall. The sobbing man was paralysed into a horror-filled stillness. Braden heard the breathing of someone besides the man who'd been sobbing. It was a fat man's breathing. The man waited, as alert and listening as Braden was, but not conscious of the faint wheezing sound he had lived with so long that he'd ceased to hear it.

Braden said quietly:

"Skipper?"

There came a chuckle from the blackness.



"Ah, Mr. Braden! Fancy meeting you here!" The skipper's voice rolled and rumbled. It was sardonic. "And how have you made out with your responsibility, Mr. Braden?"

"Fairly well, sir," said Braden grimly. "I'm ready to take decisive action, sir. But I wanted to make contact with you before starting."

He could tell where the skipper was. Against the side wall, but not standing up. He was sitting, with his back against the wall-plating.

"How badly are you hurt?" Braden asked abruptly.

The skipper growled as if in vexation.

"Now, how the devil... It's nothing serious, Mr. Braden. Nothing to interfere with what I propose to do. Our companion, Mr. Braden - the voice you heard singing - is one Sharkey, who considers himself an accomplished pirate. I fancy, at that, that he's the bravest of the lot. I caught him bound for the passengers' quarters, quite alone, doubtless hoping to find something there that he could steal and hide from his fellows. I took him by the throat from behind. He fought like the rat he is, but when he recovered consciousness he found himself bound and in the dark... I think," rumbled the skipper, with relish, "I think he believes himself in hell."

"He can hear you," said Braden, "and learn better."

The skipper rumbled once more, zestfully.

"Ah, yes! But he screamed most edifyingly when he thought he was in hell. Why shouldn't he be in even better voice, now he knows I will presently take him in hand to... ah... exact some payment for events aboard the *Melpomene*?"

"How badly are you hurt?" demanded Braden again.

"Trivial," said the skipper. "I'm a heavy man, Mr. Braden. In the struggle with Sharkey, I tripped. His weight and mine came together on my ankle. It snapped - something did, at any rate. So I am immobilized, but I shall devote all my attention to Sharkey until his associates come and rescue him."

The other man in the corridor, Sharkey, began to whimper. It was a revolting sound. No man should ever utter such abject, hopeless, despairing sounds.

"I still hope," said the skipper benignly, "that his friends will come to his rescue. In the dark all cats are gray, and everything that moves can be a target. I believe that in darkness like this I can come to a settlement with most of the crew I have reason to... be stern with. But you've come first. If you will go away, Mr. Braden, I feel sure that Sharkey will try much more urgently to persuade his friends to come and kill me."

"They've only to turn the lights on," said Braden grimly. "Then..."

"Ah!" said the skipper. "But they can't turn on the lights! I've blown the main ship circuits and I've smashed the emergency light systems. If the gentlemen formerly of the *Melpomene* want to come at me, they must come on my terms.... In the dark." Then the skipper said cheerfully, "I'll have him call them again."

The other man, unseen in the darkness - Sharkey - screamed even when the skipper made only a rustling movement. It was pure terror, perhaps made specific by knowledge both of past events on the *Melpomene* and of intended happenings on the *Rim Star*. The mere idea that the skipper was moving toward him was utterly terrifying. He shrieked.

There came a new sound - a hissing, crackling noise. It was entirely familiar. It was the sound made by loudspeaker units in every part of the ship when a general communication announcement was to be made. There were voices behind the crackling sound. They said indefinite things. One voice said, "No good." Then the steward's voice boomed at full volume in all the halls and corridors of the *Rim Star*.

"Captain, sir," it said. There was a pause. "Captain!"

The skipper rumbled. Sharkey ceased his shrieks to listen. Braden automatically felt for his blaster.

"Captain," said the steward's voice, smooth and unctuous. "You are making things bad all around. I'm going to give you a chance to stay alive. I am talking under a flag of truce. Listen carefully!"

It was black where Braden and the skipper and the tied-up mutineer listened to the steward's voice. All over the ship the voice boomed. It reverberated in the holds. It was intolerably loud in the drive-compartment. It boomed hollowly in every section of the passageway from the abandoned passenger quarters to the ship's controlroom. All through the ship... everywhere... the steward's voice echoed and reechoed and reverberated resonantly between the curving metal walls.

"Listen, captain," said the voice persuasively, "you know you haven't any help. You can't hope for any help. You're alone and you'll stay alone. But I'll make a bargain with you. We're ready to leave the ship. Before we leave, we can let in space. We can make the ship an empty shell. And if we do that, you'll die here, all alone, and you'll stay alone for the next ten million years! But we'll make a deal!"

"Mr. Braden," said the skipper sardonically, "you're about to hear an attempt to bribe me!"

The steward's voice came again, cajoling and somehow plausible.

"Don't you think I should be offered something too, sir?" Braden asked.

The skipper growled. Braden felt along the corridor wall. He found a monitor-box that contained instruments which reported to the control-room the temperature and air-pressure and CO<sup>2</sup> content and innumerable other items about conditions in this part of the ship. The steward had used such a monitor-box intercom when Braden was alone in the control-room and the skipper was discovering that his bomb had been disarmed and his blast-rifles made away with.

"We can go away leaving the ship bled of air," said the steward, "or we can leave you here with the ship all tight, and you can get to ground in her and be a hero, and you can have Sharkey..."

The steward's voice went on, with a sort of deferential blandness to propose that the skipper return the part he'd taken from Lifeboat One and let the surviving mutineers go free, taking the money in No. 2 hold. They'd repaired the lifeboat, he said suavely, but they didn't have too much confidence in it. They'd rather have the original part. So to get that part he'd bargain... It was not a reasonable offer, even if the skipper had been alone to face all the mutineers upon the ship. It surely would not have been fulfilled. But the steward offered it in a fashion at once obsequious and flattering and cajoling.

Then Braden said ironically into the intercom:

"Steward, I have to be bribed too! What do you offer me?"

There was silence. Braden's presence on the ship was a distinct shock. But then the steward's voice grew bright and surprised and very admiring indeed. And it still sounded through the general communication speakers all over the ship.

"Mr. Braden!" he said warmly. "You have surprised me! You're a very brilliant man, Mr. Braden! Very brilliant! I see I'll have to make a better bargain! Very well! Mr. Braden, I'll give you a million credits out of No. 2 hold if you'll shoot the captain! A million credits! You can leave the ship with us, leaving no sign behind you, or you can take the *Rim Star* into port with a good story of how you recaptured her..."

For a moment, Braden forgot that he was surrounded by abysmal darkness, because the steward's voice was so plausible and deferential and respectfully admiring. He could see the steward in his mind, as if in reality. The straw-colored hair, and the singular, apparently flabby skin on his face which wasn't flabby at all when one looked at it closely.

"... Just one moment is all it will take you, Mr. Braden!" the steward was saying brightly. "Just a pull of the trigger and you have a million credits! Think what you can do with a million credits, Mr. Braden! The girls..."

"The devil!" Braden said disgustedly.

"He's mad!" the skipper rumbled. "Trying to get us to kill each other! The man's mad! He's possessed of a devil..."

"I think he is," said Braden coldly. "And I'm going to let that devil out of him with a blaster bolt!"

Silence for half a second. Then the steward spoke again. There was a quivering rage in his voice now, that was literally demoniac.

"Come and try it, Mr. Braden! I'm in the control-room. Come and kill me! Captain, you'll come! You'll come and I'll burn you down and you know it, but you'll come because..."

What followed was literally unbearable, because the steward taunted the skipper. He began to tell the story of taking the *Melpomene*. He began the story with the officers dead and the passengers captives of the piratical crew. He started to tell in detail what the passengers went through before they were murdered. He mentioned Sharkey. He mentioned the skipper's wife and daughter. The skipper began to move heavily in the darkness and the bound man began to shriek again in terror past description.

Braden moved through the darkness, blaster in hand, headed for the control-room. He had to stop the story of such enormities. It must be stopped! He did not think coldly. He did not think clearly. He thought only of getting to the control-room and killing the chattering, despicably boasting steward, even though three blast-rifles might be waiting to burn him down as he came down the corridor to the control-room door.

He heard indescribable sounds behind him. The skipper could not walk, but he was crawling to get at the man he had to kill, no matter if the skipper's pocket blaster was a toy in comparison to the weapons the other man had.

## Chapter 8

Braden went through one of the collision doors. The compartment ahead was utterly black. The loud-speaker behind him ceased to be heard and the loud-speaker ahead took up the intolerable narrative, syllable by syllable. The steward boasted to the skipper. The skipper crawled, to kill him or - much more likely - to be killed. Braden moved faster. To kill. No man could hold himself back while such a story was being told. Or even afterward.

The skipper crawled because he could not walk; and if he came to a section of the corridor that was commanded by blast-rifles in the control-room door, he would crawl down that section in the face of any imaginable fire. Because no man could endure such boasts unless he was in the act of trying to kill the man who made them.

Braden went through another collision door. There was darkness and the same unthinkable boasting. Still another door, and there was light. Just around the curve of the passageway was the control-room, and men waited in its doorway with heavy-duty weapons to turn the air incandescent when the skipper or Braden appeared.

But it was impossible not to go forward...

Braden swore brokenly. The voice boasted...

A new voice, a new noise, broke into the steward's bragging about horror accomplished. The new voice was metallic and loud.

"Nuw... oot... eerth... rouf... sdnoces..." They were unintelligible syllables. "Vyff... ni... ngimuc..."

There came more senseless sounds. Then the universe reeled. There was the sensation of falling, and of overpowering vertigo, and a person seemed to spin dizzily in a contracting spiral. Then stillness... For one second.

Howls came from the control-room. The ship drove on. Braden looked at his blaster and made himself ready for what he knew must come now. He began to feel a tremendous, and peaceful, and terrible satisfaction.

The ship's gravity reversed... Slowly... Deliberately... His weight decreased to nothing, and then increased. What had been up was down; the floor of the corridor was now its ceiling, and what had been its ceiling was now its floor. There were more noises from the control-room.

Braden walked very, very grimly on the ceiling of the corridor toward the control-room. When he came to the doorway, there was a four-foot sill instead of a wall section above it. What had been the threshold was now overhead. The instruments were upside down. The chair by the tape coder hung downward from the ceiling. The control-switches were bottom-side up.

The three surviving crewmen still at large lay in a scrambled heap on the ceiling-now-become-the-floor.

Two of the control-room's three occupants clung to each other. Blast-rifles banged about their feet. They grabbed at each other, at the steward, at any solid object they could reach. They howled. The steward shouted at them.

Braden saw what the vision screen showed. There was a sun - a yellow sun - a monstrous, writhing, globular glare as of burning sulfur. It filled a considerable part of the right-hand screen. It was near... Too near. The ship appeared to be drifting slantingly toward its farther edge.

No other cause of terror could keep a space crewman from recognizing this as an emergency that required attention above everything else. The steward scrambled for the controls. They were upside down and therefore reversed, but he swung the ship. The image of the sun ceased to be visible in the right-hand screen. It almost filled the screen dead ahead. The steward wrenched at the controls again, and the sun swung and was visible dead astern. The steward, panting, put on full drive.

The sun grew visibly larger. It seemed to leap in pursuit of the *Rim Star*. There could be no question about it - driving away from the sun meant approaching it. The steward panted even harder. Again the directional controls. He got the sun abeam. He tried to drive the ship laterally, to get it in orbit.

The sun swam ahead, to intercept the *Rim Star*.

The steward cried out at it. He flung his hands around wildly, shifting controls at random. The gravity went off and came on again, and the floor was the floor and the ceiling was the ceiling; but the sun still leaped ahead to head off the big ship.

Suddenly a planet came in view. It was small and rocky and very near the sun. The steward aimed the ship at it. It went away. He swung to flee from it. It grew in size. He tried to go past it, and it moved so it was directly ahead...

The steward uttered animal-like cries of fury. His men hid their eyes.

Gravity reversed again, without reason. The ceiling was again the floor. Blast-rifles clattered upon it, and the men in the room were grotesque objects, staring at the vision screens and sobbing bitterly - except the steward. He raged and shouted and flung himself at the ship's controls which now were upside down and now...

Braden could anticipate the consequences of some of those insane attacks upon the ship's guiding and directing controls. There was a hissing sound, and firefighting fog poured out somewhere, and there was the desolate, spinetingling moo of the maximum-emergency alarm. But the screens were mad. The sun was dead astern, and it pursued the *Rim Star*, growing larger and larger and larger, visibly, until it filled the whole screen, and faculae and solar markings appeared and grew larger until the ship seemed about to be swallowed up in flaming hell-fire.

The steward chattered, his eyes fixed and glassy; he struck this control, and that. There was a sudden violent jolting - something the gravity could not adjust to quite in time. The ship's giant rockets, intended to be used for the first time in history to land the heaviest burden against the gravity of Handel's Planet, now burned furiously to try to hurl the ship away from that hideous ball of flame. But their pencil-thin flames did not spurt out astern. Inconceivably, they

appeared at the bow, pushing the *Rim Star* back so that the swelling solar photosphere could reach out and lick at her.

Braden stepped over what should have been the top of the control-room doorframe. He walked across what should have been the ceiling. The man with the battered features moved blindly about, his eyes blank, his mouth open, making meaningless noises. Braden hit him, with precision. The man with the birthmark on his cheek that looked like a recent bruise pawed at Braden imploringly, babbling incoherencies. Braden hit him too.

There was the steward, his eyes insane, his face purple with fury. He shouted unspeakable things. He suddenly bent down and snatched up a blaster, to destroy with it everything that would not do what he wanted.

Braden hit him with all his strength. He could not hold himself back. He felt toward the steward as one would feel about a demon - such impassioned hatred and revulsion and horror that it was impossible to limit the violence he used against him. Braden felt something give, in his fist, but could not bother about it.

He said aloud, to the four walls and the instrument boards and the reversed floor and ceiling:

"All right, Diane. Put things back to normal. We don't have to stay in the Other Side of Nowhere any longer."

The gravity weakened and went to zero, and from there came on very gently; and for the second or fifth or tenth time since Braden went into the control-room up was up and down was down and left was left and ahead was ahead. But the screens still showed madness.

But then they shifted. The magnification changed; and what had appeared to be the nearby topographic detail of the sun's photosphere smoothed out as the magnification which had made the sun seem so close was cut back and back; the sun dwindled to a more nearly normal sort of object. The stars multiplied too, and the small and rocky planet shrank remarkably. The mere fact of extreme magnification on all the screens had made this solar system look strange, with all motions magnified as the local objects were. But still things did not look normal. The black nebula of the Horse's Head was turned about; it faced in the wrong direction. The striations of the stars in the Milky Way turned backward. The universe still did not look right.

The skipper came crawling along the curved corridor from below. His eyes blazed.

"No!" said Braden grimly, "and I mean no! They're out cold. You can tie them up if you like, but we're too close to port for what you have in mind... Even if I'd permit it!"

The skipper, crawling and grotesque, looked in the doorway. Braden suddenly realized the state he was in. He had become aware of it when he first realized the nature of Diane's danger at the mutineers' hands. It was rage so terrible and fury so vast that his feeling ceased to be either rage or fury. It was an unnatural cold calmness that was utterly implacable.

As the skipper looked in, his features went set and composed.

Braden held out the fist he'd hit the steward with.

"I smashed my hand against his jaw," he said.

The skipper reached out and grasped the doorframe, using it to pull himself erect.

"Ah, yes!" he said with terrifying composure. "But I do not think it would be wise for me to touch any of them. I do not trust myself, Mr. Braden."

He partly hopped and partly hitched himself to the upholstered control-board chair and let himself down into it. He looked at the three unconscious mutineers with distended nostrils and utter ferocity in his eyes.

"You had better call your passengers out of wherever they are, Mr. Braden," he said with the same peculiar composure. "Let them attend to these..." He stopped. "I'll take over the ship. You have done very well, Mr. Braden. I will ask you to make a report, for the log, in a moment or two. But call your passengers now. I... do not like to see these men. The boasting..."

He turned his eyes away. He looked at the screens.

"What is the matter with the stars, Mr. Braden?"

"The leads are changed in the communicator room, sir," said Braden. "They're giving mirror images. Change back in a few moments, sir." He pressed the general communicator button, and his voice came over the loudspeakers all over the ship. "Diane, it's all over. Let Hardy finish getting things back to normal. The rest of you come up to the control-room. Everything's all right. We're stopped within a day or so of normal drive of Handel's Planet. Come up."

He went professionally to make the normal check-over of the meteor scanners to make sure they were functioning. They had not been touched, in the process of contriving an Other Side of Nowhere for the *Rim Star* to break out into; nevertheless it was wise to check them.

He saw the skipper, sitting heavily in the control-board chair. His hands were shaking. His fingers closed and unclosed and writhed as if filled with a horrible longing to rend and tear. But he said composedly:

"Suppose you make your report for the log, Mr. Braden. Will you throw the switch, please?"

A pair of vision screens went out. Hardy, down in the drive-compartment, had turned them off. They would come back on in a moment, showing the outside galaxy as it really was.

"You know where I hid the passengers, sir," said Braden. He looked at his broken fist. It had begun to be painful. "It was in the drive-compartment. There was any amount of test equipment on the walls. The control-room, here, uses small currents to throw relays in the drive-compartment that actually handle the ship. We traced those currents, sir. We found we could make the ship's gravity reverse for no visible reason in the control room. We could scramble the vision-screen leads, sir, so the camera at the bow made its report to the screen that normally shows the stars astern, the port-side camera reported to the starboard screen, and so on. We could magnify everything, so that a sun or a planet at an enormous distance away would seem unbelievably close. And we scrambled everything so it would appear that the laws of nature had changed, and right was left and up was down and nothing was normal any more."

The skipper nodded. He was breathing heavily and his hands still quivered. He carefully looked away from the crewmen on the floor.

"Go on, Mr. Braden!"

"Then we adjusted the speaker tape so that instead of calling for attention to announce a coming breakout, it ran backwards and counted up - but backwards, so the words weren't like anything anybody ever heard before. The intonations were reversed too, sir, so it sounded like nothing human... But you heard it!"

"Yes, Mr. Braden, I heard it." His features were as if chiseled out of stone. "And to make a formal statement of the purpose of this mystification, Mr. Braden?"

"When the mutineers broke out of overdrive, sir," Braden said formally, "they'd hear that unearthly announcement first, and then they'd find themselves where everything functioned as if they were in the Other Side of Nowhere. You've heard that fable, sir. The steward talked about it to me once, at considerable length. At the time, he was making conversation until he had a chance to murder me, but I could tell that he more than halfway believed in it. He may have believed in it entirely."

"Ah," said the skipper impassively. "And the idea was to prepare all this, and at the moment of breakout, when they were confused and frightened and appalled, you'd attack them. Alone. You hoped they'd be agitated enough to let you - only one man and with only a hand-blaster for a weapon - recapture the ship against four or five men armed with blast-rifles."

"Yes, sir," said Braden. "I think I could have done it."

"This is a report for the ship's log, Mr. Braden!" said the skipper reprovingly. "You did, though the crewmen who were still active were reduced to three by that time. You did very well. In fact, in capturing these desperate characters unharmed - or let us say nearly unharmed - your action was praiseworthy in the extreme."

Braden looked sharply at the skipper. His face was impassive to an improbable degree, but his tone was definitely ironic.

There were sounds. Duckworth and Diane and Fortescue appeared, Duckworth still worried and cautious, Diane infinitely relieved. The skipper nodded to them.

"How do you do?" he asked, with elaborate politeness. "We have not met before. I will ask you, though" ... he fixed Fortescue with his eyes... "to get handcuffs and such things and shackle these three men on the floor here. You will find them..."

He gave instructions. Fortescue, more or less awed by the skipper's air, went away. Duckworth regarded the mutineers doubtfully.

"If they stir," rumbled the skipper, "you may take measures. I insist, though, that they not be killed. Mr. Braden would not approve."

The irony in his tone was acid. Braden stirred uneasily. The skipper went on with painstaking precision.

"When they are suitably shackled - there's another man among you passengers, I believe - when they are cuffed and he arrives, I should like them to be put in the No. 1 lifeboat blister. Mr. Braden will show you where it is. He has a broken hand, which forces us to request this favor of you, and I have an ankle which prevents me from helping."

Two vision screens had gone out and come back on some time before. Two others had now been out for minutes. First one and then the other came back on. The last two went out. Hardy was restoring the vision-screen connections to their places. The stars, and the sun of Handel's Planet, looked perfectly normal in the screens that were now working, but Hardy's task was not quite complete. He'd come up presently, with Derr Carmody.

"All this," said the skipper, "is being recorded for the ship's log. I shall add that we will now drive for Handel's Planet. We cannot land, because the steward used all our rocket-fuel in an attempt to escape a phantom danger. But we will orbit our actual destination and try to get you passengers aground. Then Mr. Braden and myself will take the ship to where we can replenish her rockets. After that we will return to deliver her cargo."



Again the impression of irony was overwhelming. The skipper threw the log-recorder switch. The log-tape ceased to run. Then he said in an entirely changed voice:

"My daughter - my surviving daughter - will be pleased when she hears that. She does not believe in vengeance. But we will see what we will see!"

Fortescue came back with handcuffs and leg-irons which would be both comfortable and escape-proof. The skipper tested a blast-rifle for its value as a crutch. With it he limped ponderously to his cabin.

Braden supervised the transfer of the prisoners, duly cuffed, to the lifeboat blister, where they were fastened to small welded braces. Duckworth and Fortescue were joined by Hardy, and they took both Sharkey and the chubby man, still moaning, to the other crewmen imprisoned in the blister.

Presently Braden was alone in the control-room.

Diane came in. He nodded to her and said dourly:

"I wish things had worked out better."

He was not pleased with himself. He'd contrived to give the effect of being on the Other Side of Nowhere because otherwise he'd have had no chance at all to recover the ship. But it had worked too well. Braden was deeply suspicious of schemes and contrived achievements. He felt that he hadn't acted in a properly forthright, self-respecting manner.

Diane smiled at him. Tolerantly. She acted as if she disagreed with him but wouldn't say so. He was embarrassed.

"There's Handel's Planet," he said, pointing to a bright dot on the screen. He turned up the magnification. "We'll land you there by a space-boat from the ground. Then we'll go get more rocket-fuel, taking the prisoners with us..."

"I suspect," said Diane, "you'll have trouble getting them there."

Braden frowned and nodded. He would have trouble. He knew that if he were in the skipper's shoes, no man who'd boasted as the steward had, or shared in the atrocities he'd boasted of... no such man would live long. Life would be intolerable until such men were dead. Even then...

The image of Handel's Planet magnified. The planet had seas and green continents, and the snowcaps that are guarantees of the absence of poisonous gases and extremes of temperature in an Earth-type world.

"I think that you should try to land somehow," Diane said. "You've always been able to think of something to do."

He shook his head.

"Rockets will burn out fifty or sixty acres, at worst, even letting down the *Rim Star*; but a space-drive in atmosphere is something else. Even a space-boat creates a small but deadly hurricane when it takes off or lands in atmosphere. Trees blow down and houses explode and generally the effect is calamitous. But a ship the size of the *Rim Star* would create a full-scale typhoon. Everything within a hundred miles of where she landed would be wrecked. So we'll have to go on to some spaceport where our rockets can be refueled, and then come back for our landing. But we may have to go to several spaceports to get enough rocket-fuel."

"We... haven't a long schedule of shooting to do on Handel's Planet," said Diane, unhappily. "We may be gone when you get back."

There was silence. Diane seemed to be looking absorbedly at the now much-enlarged image of the planet on the screen. There were seas and landmasses and polar icecaps. There were clouds, and a storm system over an ocean. Over all there was the glamour that all oxygen-atmosphere planets seem to possess.

"I wish..."

"It would be... pleasant if you thought of a way to land," said Diane, almost dolefully. "You always have thought of necessary things..."

"But landing on space-drive..."

"Here's an island!" Diane said.

She pointed, on the screen. And Braden literally started. He stared at her. He took a deep breath.

"Wait here!" he said.

He left the control-room. At this distance from the local sun there should be no danger from trash in space.

He went to the skipper's quarters, where he found the skipper trying to learn to walk with a blast-rifle as a crutch.

"Yes, Mr. Braden?" the skipper asked frostily.

"The ship," said Braden with painstaking precision, "was to land on rockets because landing on space-drive would create a cyclone that would devastate 10,000 square miles, whipping trees to matchwood, and destroying everything men had built, including spaceports and roads to them."

"Quite true," said the skipper as coldly as before. "But what of it?"

"There are islands," said Braden, "that nothing has been built on yet. They're located in oceans that don't grow trees. They're far enough from the continents so a storm thrashing over even 10,000 square miles won't bother anybody. And there'll be some surface ships already built for surface exploration and the like. We can let down the *Rim Star* by space-drive to an island off a coast, and the storm will not matter. Haul her cargo away and she can take off in the same fashion. It would save several months in getting our cargo aground."

The skipper considered, then frowned.

"A very sound idea, Mr. Braden!" He spoke very deliberately. "Very sound! It has advantages over rocket descent. For one thing, it should be much safer for the ship. So you may put us into orbit around Handel's Planet and we'll work out the idea in detail. We shall have to get in touch with the people ashore, of course. They may need time to make arrangements. But it seems an excellent idea! I have even a personal reason for preferring this landing system, Mr. Braden." His tone became enigmatic. "A long journey with the men who murdered my wife and daughter in my care, Mr. Braden... Did you hear the steward boast?"

Braden went back to Diane. He set about the strictly man-style astrogation which is necessary inside of solar systems. He assigned Fortescue to take care of feeding the prisoners. He advised him to have a blaster ready and to take every possible precaution.

Then he threw himself into the work the new proposal - he thought of it as Diane's - involved. The skipper made no pretense of helping. He stayed in his cabin. Fortescue and Hardy had made makeshift splints for his ankle, but apparently he found it uncomfortable to walk, even with the blast-rifle crutch.

Duckworth was frantically busy. He was changing the script of the epic, *The Other Side of Nowhere*, to make it an adventure-documentary of the actual attempt to pirate the huge ship *Rim Star*. Some of the scenes would admittedly be staged, but Derr Carmody had been involved; and if she repeated before the cameras what she had actually experienced, the film could legitimately be called a documentary and would receive incredible publicity and be assured of triumph even before its release. Duckworth and Fortescue and Derr Carmody worked feverishly in preparation. And since all the replayed scenes centered upon Derr Carmody - and all but one scene would be replayed - a second turn of fame and stardom for her was assured.

All this was arranged during the days when the *Rim Star* slogged sturdily toward Handel's Planet in space-drive - not overdrive, which was not practical for such short distances. There were other arrangements to be made, too. All the details of her landing had to be discussed at irritating length with the construction supervisors in the new colony. This method of landing was a novel idea, and accordingly there was resistance to it. But the *Rim Star* carried stores that would mean the difference between merely adequate nourishment and really good food for the people aground. She carried cranes and bulldozers and earthmovers and roofing, and reading matter and antibiotics and beverages and ground cars. She had on board all the necessities for civilized life, or at least the means of making them. But if she were to go away to reload her rockets, it would be six months or more before she could return. Whereas if she landed now, the grid would be up and working in three months or less, and Handel's Planet would be part of civilization.

Duckworth was entranced. He set up the cameras to show the ship's descent through her own vision screens. He arranged for shots to be taken of interior scenes which to Braden made no sense whatever, since they were not in chronological order and were to fit between other scenes not yet staged. Braden did observe, though, that Derr Carmody behaved in a highly emotional fashion while the cameras were running. He marveled at it, but it was not his business.

He thought a great deal about Diane, who was busy with the camera work a deplorably large part of the time. He thought much less about the skipper. The skipper stayed in his quarters. Although a blast-rifle could be a substitute crutch, the skipper didn't seem to become proficient in using it. Braden only really saw him once. His expression was strange, then, for a deep and somehow terrible satisfaction lay below an outward impassiveness. But he spoke to Braden in his usual rumbling manner, but Braden was busy.

Plans for the descent involved choosing an island, in agreement with the authorities below. There had to be elaborate discussions of the time and direction of landing, and the fitting of such factors into the weather pattern of the planet. Even then there was delay while the buildings thus far constructed in the colony were battened down. It was a full six days after breakout before Braden turned on the drive and began to match the ship's velocity with that of the planet which seemed to revolve below the ship.

The *Rim Star* went down slowly. The vast curved surface of a world's hemisphere seemed to rise toward the ship. To the west, where haze and dust particles acted as a filter, the horizon was visibly pinkish. To the east, where the light was reflected from the same kind of ions and dust, the edge of the planet was faintly blue. There was a vast mottled stretch of land surface,

with river systems and forests and mountain ranges changing the appearance of the island ever more markedly as the ship descended. There was the peculiar muddy color of the ocean bottom - here deeper, there more shallow - which also became visible in greater detail as it came nearer.

The winds began a hundred miles up. The big ship's drive-field was designed to have an effect on interstellar space itself, where matter existed only in the ratio of one atom per cubic centimeter. As she descended, the thousands and millions and trillions and quadrillions of atmospheric ions per cubic centimeter went mad in the stresses imposed by the field.

Braden, seated at the control-board, saw the storm develop. The water beneath the *Rim Star* turned white as the winds whipped the sea to waves and seized upon the waves and turned them to spray. Giant billows formed and instantly dissolved into monstrous clouds of mist driven by 500-mile winds. The island on which the ship was to land became invisible under a dome of whiteness as its surface deflected the winds.

The *Rim Star* rocked. Her gigantic size and unbelievable mass were not enough to hold her steady. Braden held her against random, monstrous thrusts. She went down and down. The air-pressure meters gave fantastic readings. The pressure alternated between the vacuum of space and the pressure of many atmospheres. The wind was freakish in its action. Braden saw a huge tree, torn bodily from the soil with roots and branches intact, being borne level with the ship five miles up. As the descent continued, the destruction became even greater. Eventually there came an end to the soaring trees and other such objects because there were no more left. At three miles the ship was enveloped in fog. Only radar could penetrate the turmoil, which seemed to be an inextricable mixture of sea and air and earth and thousand-mile winds.

The skipper came limping into the control-room. He said benignly:

"Mr. Braden, I heard a noise just now. I fear something was not properly checked when the *Rim Star* left the spaceport. A boat-blister was forced open by the violence of the winds."

Braden did not answer. He was extremely occupied. The ship remained under control, of course, but she required the most exact and careful handling if she was to be set down, not only on the island below but on a sort of plateau at one end which was the most desirable landing-spot.

"It appears," rumbled the skipper, "that the blister for the No. 1 lifeboat was torn open by the wind. That was where the *Melpomene's* crew was confined. I have closed it, Mr. Braden, but I think you should entertain the gravest fears for the safety of the prisoners."

Braden looked up. The skipper's face was filled with a terrible satisfaction. It was not the kind that would come of knowing that the murderers of one's wife and daughter had been killed instantly and quite painlessly by storm winds. The skipper's expression implied much more.

"I have closed it, Mr. Braden," repeated the skipper, rumbling. "I leave the ship in your hands. I am an old man, and I am battered, and I am very tired. Good luck!"

He went out of the control-room. The others were silent. Braden had nothing to say. Duckworth watched nervously as the cameras recorded what the screens showed. But eventually they showed nothing but whiteness.

Presently the ship touched ground. It was a gentle landing, considering her bulk, but it was perceptible. Braden steadily lessened the drive which, in preventing a headlong fall, had created the blank and screaming opacity outside. He eased the drive off very gently indeed. The ship did not tilt. He cut the drive. Nothing happened. The ship was solidly aground.

He reversed the drive to begin checking the winds it had caused previously.

It seemed hours before the tumult had died down enough to allow direct observation of the world outside. Then Braden went down the long, circling corridor of ramps and stairways. The collision doors were open, now. The two formerly empty compartments were now filled with air from Handel's Planet - it smelled of wetness and the sea. The ship was at rest.

The personnel lock-door at the very bottom could be opened under the shelter of the hull. There were gusts of wind. There was rain. The high clouds formed by the *Rim Star's* descent were not stable clouds. They couldn't be. They condensed. Rain came down in drops, in streams, in seemingly solid masses. It was rain such as might have been imagined to have fallen when the oceans were first filled. The ground was devastated. There was mud and stone and nothing else. For many miles around, the sea still flung itself up in waves and combers. But the *Rim Star* was aground.

Nothing in particular happened after that. In less than one full day the air was clear, and by the next day the colony's small ships were offshore, carrying men to unload the *Rim Star*. They brought out cranes and began to empty her holds. But there was a great deal of cargo to be taken off. Presently they were towing hastily-made empty barges to the island and towing them away again, loaded.

Braden went to the mainland presently. Duckworth and Hardy and Fortescue - and of course Derr Carmody and Diane - had gone briskly to work the minute they could get to the new continent. They were shooting sequences for that splendid adventure-documentary, *The Other Side of Nowhere*. Braden hung around restlessly. A few days before the picture-tape job was to be finished, Duckworth took Braden aside. Derr Carmody had thrown an outstanding temperamental tantrum that day, and shooting had been suspended.

"Mr. Braden," Duckworth said jerkily, "you've been hanging around all the time we've been shooting. I don't think it's my sex appeal that keeps you so absorbed, and I don't think it's Derr's... look here! I like Diane! If I had a daughter, Diane would be my choice. If I were your age... Dammit, what are you waiting for?"

Braden said awkwardly:

"I'm a merchant-space officer. I've a master's ticket, but the pay and the long voyages... It wouldn't be fair to Diane."

Duckworth made an impatient gesture.

"Have you talked to the skipper lately?"

"No," said Braden. "He sleeps most of the time, and I've spent most of my time ashore. Why?"

"My business," said Duckworth, "is making tape plays. I know how things ought to turn out. You saved the lot of us from being killed - or something considerably worse. So I figured out how this business ought to end. And I went to see the skipper."

Braden blinked at him.

"The skipper's finished," said Duckworth briskly. "He sleeps all the time because he's done the last two things he wanted to do. One was settling up with the men who murdered his wife and daughter, and the other was landing the biggest cargo in history to be landed without a grid. He doesn't want to be the skipper of the *Rim Star* any more. He's going back to where his other daughter lives - he'll go as a passenger on another ship - and he'll play with his grandchildren, and he'll sleep a lot, and the rest of the time he'll... remember."

"I wouldn't want..." began Braden.

"I wouldn't want to remember what he does, either," said Duckworth. "But he's through. He's made the *Rim Star* into a valuable property for his son-in-law. There's plenty of need for a ship that can carry a colony - men and tools and food and the materials for a grid - all at one time. The *Rim Star's* that ship. You'll have to take her back to port, and the skipper says his son-in-law will take his word that you're the best skipper he can possibly get for her. With new worlds to be colonized all the time you'll be busy..."

"If you're sure," Braden said urgently.

"I am sure. And Derr Carmody won't object. She'll raise the devil, of course, but that will be for the drama in such a scene. When Diane points out that there'll always be passengers on the *Rim Star*, and that on a colony-carrying voyage a skipper should have his wife along, she'll calm down. It's true, you know."

Braden said feverishly:

"Excuse me!"

He hurried away. Duckworth mopped his forehead as he looked after him.

Diane came out from where she'd been waiting, unseen, and joined Duckworth. She asked uneasily:

"What... what did he say?"

"If you'll let him find you - oh, quite by accident! - he'll tell you himself. But dammit, you've still got to work a camera for me until this job is finished!"

Diane smiled. Her eyes shone a little. Without a word she moved away, so she'd be where Braden could find her quite by accident.

The building of the colony went on.

*THE END*