

# THRILLING Wonder STORIES

VOL. XLIV, NO. 3 A THRILLING PUBLICATION WINTER ISSUE

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Cover Painting by EMSH—Illustrating "Name Your Pleasure"

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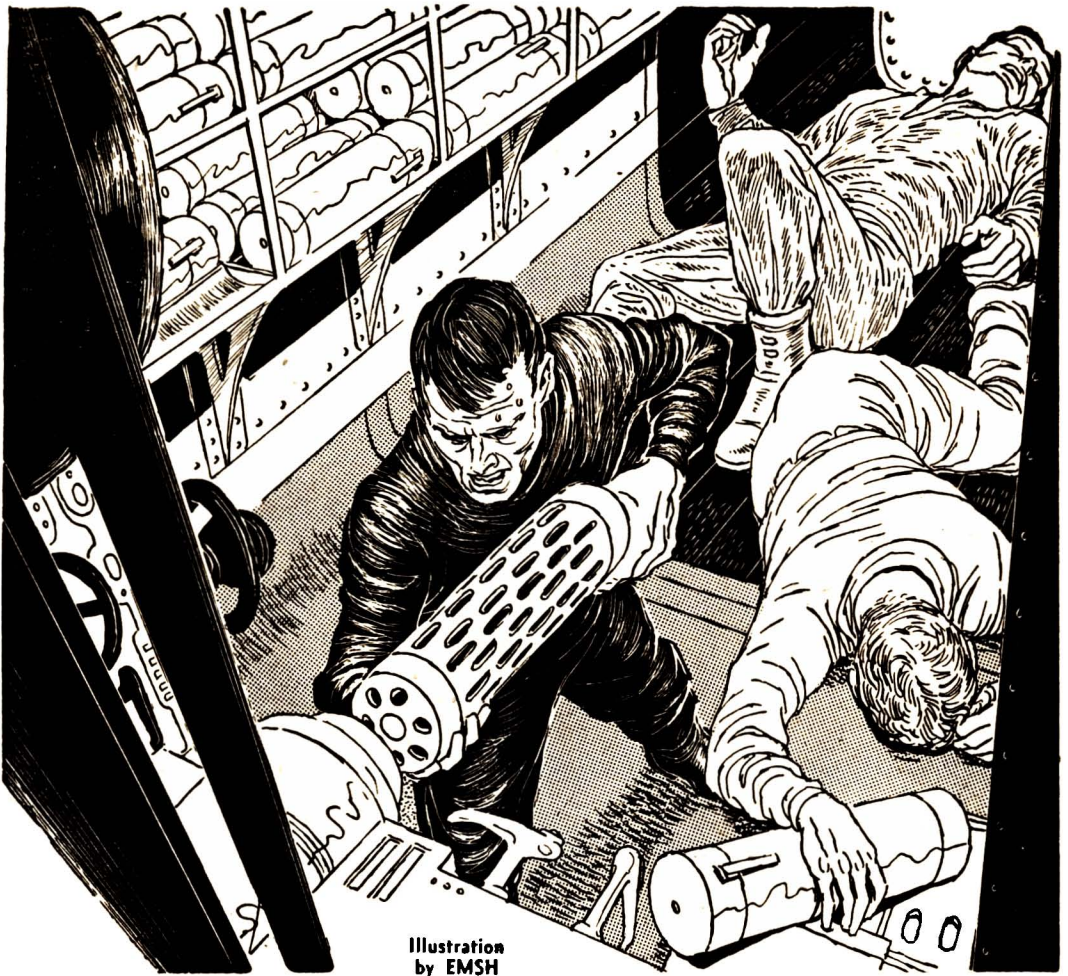


Illustration  
by E.M.S.H.

# *Backlash*

By GUY DeANGELIS

**A**FTER the red thunder of our escape velocity had blasted us free of Mars we should have been able to relax and wait until Earth came rolling across our trajectory to suck us in out of nowhere. But this wasn't like any other voyage I'd ever been on, and I prowled the ship at all hours.

Wherever I went, Monk went with

me. If I was the one who could find trouble, he was the one who could take care of it. Finally he said, "Lucky what's eating on you?"

"What do you think?"

He shrugged. "That's what I'm asking you. I've seen you in the clutch plenty of times but it's never hit you like this before. I've got a hunch you know

*They'd laugh him out of the service if he dared to tell the truth*

something the rest of us don't."

He didn't know how right he was. Everybody on board had an idea that we were carrying something important, but I knew just how vital it actually was. What was more, I knew the enemy had a man on board who wasn't going to let us get home with it, if he had to scuttle the ship to stop us. I knew who he was too. But there wasn't anything I could do about it.

Monk grabbed my arm. "Lucky—that thing in the strongroom! Is it the key? Is that what we've got on board? Is that what's bothering you?" We had stopped for some coffee in the supply room of my section, a place not much bigger than a closet. I jerked my head at the door and he closed it.

"Yes, it's the key," I said, after a moment. "The thing everybody has been looking for ever since the first Martian expedition."

"What do you know! What kind of a thing is it?"

"Remember the Rosetta stone in our own Terran history?"

He shook his head. "You know I haven't any brains except in my fingers."

"Well, roughly, it was a stone left by an ancient people and the effect of it was to explain their written language. And this one the Martians left is enough like it to give you the creeps. Three sided, with simple pictures on one side, the written symbols for the pictures on another side and the phonetic symbols for the same objects on the third side. You know—vocal chord diagrams and layouts for the position of the lips and tongue. The Martians must have been a lot like us."

Like us, yes—but the writings they had left behind looked like cobwebs and the spools of crystal thread they had recorded their speech on were nothing but gibberish when we played them. And since the Martians hadn't been a picture-minded people we had no reference points at all. But now we could decipher the cobweb writing, and trans-

late the alien Martian speech.

"Hey!" Monk was saying. "That means we get first crack at the Martian science, doesn't it? And the drive! They had it, didn't they?"

"That's what the experts say," I told him. "There wasn't any decline and fall of the Martian empire. They just put the whole darned planet in order when it got too old and took off into the wild black. They must have had some sort of star-travel drive, because there isn't any sign of their civilization anywhere else in the solar system."

And that was more than we had been able to develop. The time element had us trapped in our own little system. We couldn't even beat the speed of light with direct rocket drive, no matter what we powered the tubes with.

"A subspace drive," Monk breathed. "Man, what we couldn't do with that. We could outmaneuver anything the Sinatics could put in space. The stars would belong to us, Lucky! The whole darned galaxy and more. And we could put the lid on this damned cold war for good and breathe slow and easy for a change!"

"I hope so," I said. For seventy-five years there had been an uneasy truce between the Atlantic Federation and the Sinatic League—the Sino-Asiatic powers headed by what had been Red China before China had absorbed Russia. Or what was left of Russia after the First Atomic War. Earth itself was split into two armed camps and there were outposts on every habitable planet and satellite in the system. Including some which were habitable only by a wide stretch of technology.

"Wait a minute," Monk said. "How do you know this thing is the key, and how do you know what it's like? I thought the F.S.S. man we got aboard and maybe the captain were the only ones who had the complete dope on this mission."

"They're supposed to be," I admitted. "But I know too. I can't tell you how I found out."

**H**E WOULDN'T have believed me if I had told him. Nobody would believe me if I told them I could send my invisible consciousness into the strongroom—or any other secret place—to see everything with an inner sight and to know its touch with intangible fingers. That was the way I had managed to build a reputation as a safety engineer. I could sense my way through solids as easily as I could see through a pane of glass, so that I knew when things were going wrong long before others could detect any sign of it.

"Lucky" Hammond they called me. I was lucky like a black cat walking under a ladder on Friday the thirteenth, because I was born a mental freak and my whole life had been one long lie. People with extra-sensory perception weren't too rare. But I had more than that. I was what psychiatrists were beginning to call a "paradept." It was a new term because it was a newly discovered aberration. There were only two others like me in the whole Federation, that I had ever heard of. One of them had gone raving crazy two years before and the other was an invalid who lived the life of a laboratory guinea pig.

In addition to my ability to sense the very pattern of matter, I had limited telekinetic power over it. Particularly with electronic equipment. I could receive and send radar and trivid signals and images over short distances without any equipment at all. It was logical enough, since the encephalograph had proved centuries before that thought was electronic and could even be measured with almost primitive equipment. Worst of all, I could do just that: read thought. I could peer into people's minds when they didn't know I was looking, but I did darned little of it. I found out pretty young that that kind of thing could turn you into a madman or a saint. Or both, in a hurry.

And I didn't want to be either. I had wanted out into space since I was a kid. So I had followed a kid's normal instinct to conform to the herd. And I had coun-

terfeited normality well enough to make the Federation's academy and to get a commission in the space service—the last place in the universe where an off-type would be tolerated. But I had to hold onto that commission now.

Once a man has watched the whole earth dwindle away to a pinpoint in the void, you can't tie him down to it any more. It would be more merciful to stake him out on an anthill to be eaten to bits. Every time a grounded spaceman sees a ship take off into the black a part of him goes with it until, after a while, there's nothing left of him at all. . . .

"What do you think of Jerold Frontenac, Monk?" I asked.

He stared. "Who, me? I think he's captain of this hooker. That's all I have to know."

I knew a little more than that. I wondered whom we had planted in the Sinatic fleet. A couple of admirals, I hoped. Because Jerold Frontenac—the D'Artagnan of Space, the facsipapers called him—belonged to the enemy. And I hadn't found out until it was too late. Until we had reached Mars, picked up the Martian stone, and blasted off for Earth again.

I suppose that as soon as the exploration party at Little Atlantica had found the stone on Mars, they had alerted home base. And a warship had been sent out from Earth to ferry it home. She was a beautiful craft—a brand new Annihilator Class cruiser fresh from a moonside shakedown cruise. Being tapped for the voyage had seemed like an honor at the time. Now I was willing to let anybody have my share of the glory.

**F**RONTENAC had called an officers' meeting as soon as we were clear of Mars. He had paced the bridge in front of us, elegant as a dress sword and twice as keen, smoothing his silver-gilt hair down on the back of his head with one palm. "I can't tell you anything about this voyage except that it's of vital im-



portance to every man, woman and child in the Federation," he had said. He stopped and looked at Fisher, the Federal Secret Service man, before he went on. "Commander Fisher has the authority to kill me where I stand if I said any more. And I suspect he would, too."

Fisher said nothing. He simply looked up at the captain and nodded. Frontenac grinned and bowed to him before he turned to me. "Have you any suggestions, Mr. Hammond?"

"No, sir."

"With your record as a safety officer, I'm sure I don't have to remind you that you're responsible for this ship between worlds."

"No, sir," I repeated, after a moment. I hesitated because I knew, all at once, that there was something abnormal about him; something menacing. My reaction was as definite as if he had pulled a knife on me, but I couldn't analyze it. So I forced myself to look into his mind, and I saw what he was thinking, as plainly as if it had been printed on his forehead.

*This is the one I have to look out for, he was thinking. The one who's supposed to have eyes in the back of his head. It would be a lot easier if I could get rid of him.*

And—because connected thought is almost impossible to an individual educated through the use of words, except in terms of words—I knew he was thinking in the wrong language. He was thinking in the new common language of the Sinatic League—colloquial Sinese.

Since then, I hadn't had a moment's peace.

My conscience wouldn't let me rest. *Tell them*, it demanded. Then I asked myself what good that would do. If I told them I was a paradept they'd only think I'd gone mad. I've got to have proof, I told myself. I've got to catch him red-handed. It's the only way. But my conscience said:

You're lying—and it's the same old lie. You won't tell because you're afraid

someone will believe you—not because you're afraid they won't. You're afraid you'll lose your ticket and be grounded. . . .

Suddenly, as I sat in the supply room drinking coffee with Monk, I knew that trouble had come aboard. It was a shrill, wordless sensation like a little alarm bell ringing far back in my mind. I got up.

"What now?" Monk asked, looking at the spilled coffee.

"Trouble," I told him.

He groaned. "Don't even use that word!"

"Shut up," I whispered, groping. But it was no use. "Come on," I said. "We'll check ship again." I headed for the strong room first. As usual, Fisher was there, looking out of the Judas window in the door. His lean, sharp face was so much like the edge of an ax I almost expected to hear his lids clank when he blinked at me.

"What's on your mind, Hammond?"

"Routine check, Commander."

"All secure here."

There was no one on the bridge except a communications officer conning a radar screen. He looked up at me and yawned. "Hi, Lucky. Want anything?"

"Routine check, that's all."

"All secure here."

IN THE engine room the pile sat in sanctum behind its shields, nothing but the governor heads on the converter showing. The man on watch was trying hard not to nod sleepily. "All clear, Chief?" I asked.

"All secure here, Lieutenant."

We headed forward again. "How you doing?" Monk asked.

"I've got a hunch it's all over the ship at once. I can't localize it, Monk!"

"Relax. You will."

I grunted and jammed my forehead against a bulkhead to see if bone conduction would do any good. But I couldn't smooth my mind out into a receptive blank. It was too full of conflict, and panic. Monk seemed all blurry when

I looked up and he was swaying on his feet. Then I caught on.

People blinking, yawning, nodding. All over the ship! I grabbed Monk by the shoulders and shook him, yelling in his face. "Monk! It's in the air ducts!"

When we got to tempcontrol, the man on duty was laid out cold on the deck. Monk stumbled toward the housing for the main filter at the base of the master conduit. My hands seemed to have turned into fingerless mittens of dead flesh as I wrenched the alarm box open. My knuckles clicked on a big yellow button and transcribed voices all over the ship began to yell, "Gas! Gas! Gas!"

"Cartridge canister!" Monk said.

"Check!" I took a canister from a rack, shook out the filter cartridge, and set the empty at his feet.

"Hold your breath!" he said thickly, and the housing clanged open. Monk managed to scoop out the poison cartridge, jam it into the canister, and lever the air-tight clasp shut. Then he fell. I stepped over him and fed the clean cartridge into the housing. I closed the housing and pushed the control over to forced draft. The blowers began to roar. I got hold of Monk's arm and the other man's foot and dragged them out into the companionway before I went down.

The hurricane I had started in the ducts took effect almost at once and I stayed down for a moment, sobbing in fresh air. Monk sat up. "You all right?" I asked.

"Yeah. Lucky, that was neuroform, that stuff. It belongs in the sick bay, not in the air filters. You know what I mean?"

"I know," I said. "In another couple of minutes everybody aboard would have gotten a lethal dose of it." All but one man, waiting in the privacy of a captain's cabin. One man, grinning behind the safety of a gas mask, probably.

Frontenac called another officers' meeting, but it didn't do any good. Everybody knew it couldn't have been an accident, so that the enemy had lost

some ground. Everybody knew we had a saboteur aboard now. An old Biblical phrase kept thrusting into my mind as Frontenac talked. It was "Thou art the man!" But I couldn't use it. I had nothing to back it up but the recurring suspicion that there was something wrong about him: some physical evidence which would betray him, if I could only discover what it was. Then he threw me off stride completely by saying:

"Well done, Mr. Hammond. Your name will be entered on today's log."

I wished I could tell him what to do with his log. "Chief Safetyman John Maxim was with me, sir," I told him.

"Maxim's name will be entered, too."

Then he gave orders to double the guard on the strongroom and to put the whole ship on orbital alert. I don't suppose he liked it, but it might have seemed peculiar if he hadn't.

It was a bad business, being on orbital alert while we were still twenty million miles from anything at all. None of us got much sleep. I caught a couple of men napping on watch and had to turn them in. Everyone on board must have been sick of my face. I know I was sick of theirs. Sick of Fisher's, framed in the Judas window of the strongroom. Sick of Frontenac's. There were moments when I almost hated Monk Maxim's face, with its round brown eyes, a little like a dog's.

But most of all, I think, I hated myself.

I was deep in the ship's core when the waiting finally came to an end. Monk and I were checking over a hold, when I felt a sore spot like a tiny burn blistering my brain tissue. I knew what that meant. "Hold it!" I said. "There's something hot aboard."

"Fission?" he asked.

"Yes. Near critical point. Too damned near."

"Where?"

"I can't fix it from here. We'll have to prowl."

He grabbed at me. "There may be no time for that. Lucky, try the strong-

room where the key is. That's what they're after!"

"I'll never know, now, how much Monk knew about me and how much he only suspected. But something told me he was right. I tried the strongroom as I stood there in the hold—not trying to visualize it but merely exposing my consciousness to it. In an instant the stone developed in my mind, clearly, even though I could sense that it was shut away in a vault. The little blister of sensation which had warned me still remained, and it was centered directly over my image of the stone.

"You tagged it!" I said. "Let's go."

THE two men on guard tried to stop us when we got there. This was no time for respectfully requesting permission—which we wouldn't get anyway. Monk rammed one man in the belly with his head and I stooped and sent the other flying over my back with a quick body block. Fisher rasped at me:

"Hold it right there, Hammond!"

His hand came out of the window with a blaster in it. That was his mistake. I was close enough to grab his gun wrist and pull it over my shoulder as I spun. My shoulderblades slammed into the door with all my weight behind them and Monk hit it at the same time. The door crashed open. Fisher yelped as I levered his arm down. His blaster hit the deck.

"Monk—it's in the vault," I gasped. "On top of the stone. Get it!"

Both guards were up again and charging at us. I got one in the middle with a savage kick and then pulled the other off Monk's back. Monk lunged into the strongroom and tried to fight his way past Fisher. I backhanded the guard and he fell. Monk was trying to dial the vault open and hold Fisher off at the same time. The F.S.S. man's gun arm dangled broken. I hauled him out of the strongroom and stiffened him with a short hook. But he had already tripped off an alarm and canned voices

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were yelling, "Strongroom! Strongroom!" everywhere. I heard feet pounding on the deck, coming nearer and nearer, and I turned back to the strongroom to help Monk. I didn't get to him in time.

Later—much later—I learned that it was a hand bomb he had found. A fear-some grenade made secretly of half-inhibited junk from here and there on the ship. But it was inhibited only in a relative sense. Monk must have been holding it in both hands, shielding the Martian stone from it with his body, when it blew.

The concussion slammed the big steel door into me just as I reached it. There was a roaring and a blackness and then, after a while, a time like a dream suffered in a red mist. In that waking dream I was crawling into the strongroom on all fours. I crawled back out dragging Monk with me.

Some men were picking themselves up off the deck and others were standing there dazed. I put my hands on Monk here and there and one of the men watching me made a sick noise. I looked up at him. He didn't say anything but I read his thoughts.

*Stop it—stop it! You can't put him back together like a doll. He's dead.*

Frontenac was there, too, staring down at me and thinking: *Why couldn't you have been killed instead? Damn you and your lucky hunches! This makes twice!*

I got up and took hold of his throat. I put my thumbs on his windpipe, locking my fingers behind his neck, but I couldn't squeeze hard enough to kill him. I didn't have much strength left and there was something wrong with the back of his neck—something hard in his flesh or under it—which distracted me.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw a watch stick swing up. Then the whole back of my head seemed to explode.

**I** WAS alone in a compartment and I knew I was in the sick bay. My head

itched and when I put my hand up I felt bandages on it. There were bandages on my ribs too. I tried to sit up but I couldn't make it. There was a buzzer clipped to my pillow and I pushed it.

A big surgeon came in. I saw another man outside my door, with a watch stick. The surgeon looked at the meters recessed in the head of my bed where I couldn't see them: temperature, pulse, respiration and what have you, all at a glance. "How are you feeling?" he asked.

"I don't know yet," I told him. Then, after a moment, I said; "Monk's dead, isn't he?"

"Never mind that. You just take it easy."

Then Fisher came in. His right arm was in a cast. "How is he?" he asked. The surgeon shook his head.

"I can't turn him over to you yet, Commander. He's still a sick man."

"Fisher!" I said. "Monk's dead, isn't he?" The F.S.S. man nodded. "You've got me under arrest, haven't you? Because I tried to kill the captain. But I didn't manage it, did I?"

"No."

I got my head off the pillow. The big surgeon said, "Hey, where do you think you're going?"

"I'm getting up. And this time I am going to kill him!"

But the surgeon's hands were firm and I couldn't get my shoulders off the bed and I knew I couldn't kill a fly and I began to laugh and blackness came down again. . . .

**I** WAS stronger now. I knew it wouldn't be long before they turned me over to Fisher and then I'd be locked up tight until they decided to court martial me. The door was open just a little and I could see the guard outside. This time I didn't thumb the buzzer. I just hissed at him.

He came to the door and opened it a little wider, to look in at me.

"Where are we? I asked softly. "What's the ship's position?"



"I'm not supposed to talk to you, Lieutenant. If you want anything, buzz for the surgeon."

"Lend a shipmate a hand, will you? Just tell me where we are. That's all I want to know."

He hesitated. Then he said, "Twenty-four hours from land, give or take a couple of minutes either way. And that's all you get from me!"

I groaned. If Frontenac was going to do anything at all, he'd have to do it fast. So that something was likely to happen any minute. Lying there, I began to test the ship for danger.

How can I describe that dark audition behind closed eyelids? None of the five senses entered into it, and memory itself had to be blocked out to prevent it from distorting my impressions of the here and now. If it was like anything familiar, it was like a synthesis of sound and touch. She was a full sized cruiser, and the job I had to do was as difficult as checking the pitch of every single instrument in a full symphony orchestra as they tuned up all at once.

I sensed the great basso booming of the hull, augmented by the fugue of the labyrinth within it—passageways for humans, for air, water, waste and communications, each with a tonality of its own, as distinct and separate as the sounds of flutes and violins and woodwinds. I had to identify the harplike complexity of radar equipment, the tiny pipings of an infinity of gauges, instruments and gadgets, and the muted clarion call of the power pile in the stern.

That was where I found discord. The converter itself rang true, but its governor gave back countless, tingling little reactions instead of one clear chime. I had come across that reaction before, and I knew it could mean only one thing. The governor had been crystallized!

I started to get up. Then I made myself lie back again. I wasn't in any condition to fight my way to the engine room nor anywhere else. All right, so you don't have muscles, I told myself.

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Use your head!

The door was still open just a little and I could see the guard. I could see a loudspeaker on the bulkhead just beyond him, too, and it gave me an idea. More than once I had made people jump by tuning my mind in on a speaker and agitating its diaphragm into giving a high frequency shriek just as they passed it. What I was trying to do now was a lot more difficult.

Very faintly, the speaker said: "Now hear this. This is Commander Fisher speaking." It sounded like Fisher even to me, and I knew better. The guard turned and looked at it. "This is Commander Fisher speaking," it repeated, and this time I managed to get more power into it. "The guard on duty in the sick bay will conduct Lieutenant Hammond to the bridge. Conduct Lieutenant Hammond to the bridge at once!" The man shrugged and started toward my door.

There were guards everywhere along our route, armed with watch sticks. They don't issue firearms to people on Hammond. I wouldn't say anything spaceships except in trivideo dramas. People in space don't have anything to shoot at except each other, and if the voyage is long enough they're likely to start doing just that. Fisher had the only blaster aboard that wasn't locked away in the armory, but he was F.S.S. and the secret service makes rules to suit itself.

Jerold Frontenac was there on the bridge, at the projection table, with his staff around him. He stared when he saw us, and said, "I didn't send for the prisoner!"

"Commander Fisher's orders, sir," the man said uncomfortably.

"Ask Commander Fisher to report to me at once!" The guard was gone before I could open my mouth. Then I said:

"Fisher didn't give any order. I just tricked the man into thinking he did."

**V**ERY gently, Frontenac said, "You look like a pretty sick man to me,

more until a defense counsel has been appointed, if I were you."

"I didn't come up here to talk to you," I told him. "I'll take care of you later. Right now I want to talk to the rest of the staff." I turned to look at them, but none of them would look back at me.

"You'd better take the captain's advice, Hammond," our executive officer said.

"Listen to me!" I took hold of a chair, because the journey up to the bridge had taken a lot out of me. "If you don't listen, this ship will never reach the ground. In just about twelve hours you're going to have to start preliminary braking action with the jets. And if you do that without installing a new governor, this ship is going to blow up in a million pieces!"

The chief engineer's jaw dropped. "Man, it would be almost impossible to damp down behind the shielding and change governors in twelve hours."

Frontenac shrugged. "Fortunately, it's a theoretical problem."

"The governor in our converter right now has been crystallized!" I snapped. "It won't control the output properly. And if we get an accumulation at the tube intakes it will backlash right through the converter into the pile. The whole business will go critical in a fraction of a second, and that will be the end!"

No one said anything for a moment. Then Frontenac said, "Very dramatic. But how could our governor have become crystallized? This is a brand new ship."

"I don't know how! It doesn't matter. It could have been done with a shell-circuit breaker. It doesn't take a genius to rig one up that would be small enough to hide in one fist. Anybody could have played it on the governor heads a few seconds at a time until the damage was done."

He leaned back lazily in his chair. "What makes you so sure of this, Hammond? You haven't even been in the engine room, have you? Before you an-

swer, remember that I can get the duty officer on the screen and cheek up on you."

Now I saw where he was going. I'd used my head, all right. I'd used it to sign my own death warrant and everyone else's. "No, I haven't been in the engine room," I admitted.

"Then how do you know the governor is crystallized?"

"I know it because I have extra-sensory perception," I said desperately. "I'm a paradept."

Frontenac began to laugh. But I noticed that no one laughed with him. I had shipped out with most of the officers



on the staff before, and while he had convinced them I was mad, they didn't like to see me laughed at because of it. He noticed their silence. In an instant he was all charm again, smoothing his hair down on the back of his head in that way of his. For some reason that gesture reminded me of the moment when I had tried to choke him, with Monk's blood on my hands.

Now he was looking past me and saying, "Commander Fisher, will you escort Lieutenant Hammond back to the sick bay? Try to forgive me, gentlemen. I've been inexcusably rude to a man who isn't responsible for his actions. I'm afraid we've all been under a terrific strain."

**W**ITHOUT turning to look at Fisher I said, "Just a minute, Captain. There's one more thing. If I'm crazy enough to think the governor is crystal-

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lized, maybe I'm crazy enough to think I know who did it! Why don't you ask me who did it, Captain?"

"Very well, Lieutenant. Who did it?"

I leaned across the table and pointed at him. I knew what I had to do now. "You did it! You're the man who's been trying to wreck this ship!"

His mouth curved open and I think he was going to laugh again. But he never managed it. Instead, he cried out and leaped to his feet, almost tripping over his chair. Far above the UHF band my probing mind had found the frequency of the thing some plastic surgeon had buried in his flesh at the top of his spine. It was a miniature bone conduction signal receiver, and now I was exciting it to vibrations its wearer had never been meant to withstand. Frontenac tried to speak as he backed away from me, but I forced my gains higher, and he gave a gibbering sob instead.

SOMEONE said "Captain!" and went toward him. Others began to close in on me.

"Watch him!" I yelled. Frontenac scuttled away from us like a crab, bent almost double, his hands clawing at the back of his head until his nails drew blood. Whoever he was—whether he was actually Jerold Frontenac or whether the real Frontenac was long since dead—he had guts. He must have felt as if his brains were frying in hell, but he went reeling up the skeletal stairway to the flying bridge, still ripping at the back of his head and making sounds I hope never to hear again. I yelled once more. "He's after the big switch!"

If he managed to close the emergency circuit that tripped off the main tubes in our stern, the governor would fail just as I had said it would. And that would be all.

Somewhere in the din a blaster coughed and went off. Its beam sizzled past me and hit Frontenac's back, burning a big black pit there. He spun as he died, flopping over a railing, and came

crashing down to the deck at my feet. A wisp of reeking smoke curled slowly up from his body.

Fisher stepped out from behind me, awkwardly shoving his blaster into its holster. "That's pretty fair shooting, for left handed stuff," I said foolishly. I swayed, and for a moment everything blurred. Then I saw that he was examining the back of the dead man's neck.

"Concealed bone conduction receiver," he said. "A typical Sinatic espionage gadget. Secret communications. What did you do to him, Hammond?"

"Telekinesis," I explained. "Mental broadcasting, in a way. I kept throwing an overload into the thing at close range."

"How did you know about it?"

"I felt it under my fingers that day when I tried to choke him. But I was too stupid to realize what it was." Everything around me started to tilt into a slow spin and Fisher's grip was strong and comforting on me.

"Get a chair!" he ordered. Someone slid a chair into place behind me and someone else helped Fisher to lower me into it. Everyone wanted to help now.

"Thanks," I said. I heard myself trying to laugh and I wasn't making a very good job of it. "Might as well finish my last voyage in comfort. Come and see me in the zoo, boys. Or wherever they decide to put me. Come and see the freak who used to be a spaceman."

Fisher snapped his fingers for attention, and pointed to a panoramplate. Someone turned it on and I saw the whole galaxy spread out before me, except for the part hidden by Earth's great serene, welcoming curve, because we were almost home now.

"The stars!" Fisher said. "Sirius, Procyon and Regulus!" He called off the resounding, ancient names like a roll of honor. "Aldebaran! Rigel! Betelgeuse! There they are, Hammond—your personal gift to the human race. After today, do you think we'd dare to send our first ship out into the stars without you?"

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