

ROCKET STORIES

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BLOOD ON MY JETS



BY ALGIS BUDRYS

ILLUSTRATED BY EBEL

They were the hired gun-rabble of the System, engaged in the dirtiest, most thankless racket in all the worlds. But Ash Holcomb was doing all right, until the girl walked out of his past with high stakes in her pockets and murder in her eyes!



Rocket Row is the Joy Street of three planets. It's got neon lights, crummy dives, cheap hotels, and women to match. Every man who's ever rode a ship into space knows about Rocket Row. It runs along the far side of Flushing Spaceport, down toward the Sound.

The New Shanghai was full of dockworkers and crewmen on liberty. It was noisy. I sat on a bar stool and watched the fog trying to infiltrate the open door. It didn't have a chance against the tobacco smoke that rolled out to meet it. Outside, the streets and alleys would be choked with wet, creeping darkness, full of quiet footsteps, and the cops would find empty-pocketed corpses behind the ashcans in the morning.

But none of that was any of my business. I was sick and tired of fog—the real kind, the kind they grow on Venus—and I was sick of the thought of blood. I'd seen too much of it, soaking into the hot mud, and some of it spilled by my guns. I wanted to forget the night, and fog that gave cover to every kind of dirty deal a man could imagine. I wanted to pull the corners of my world together until all that was left was the drink, the bar stool, and me. But it wasn't going to work out that way, be-

cause I was in the New Shanghai on business.

And my kind of business was the dirtiest, lousiest, most thankless racket in the world.

The bartender moved up to where I was sitting. "Have another one, Ash?" he asked.

"Yeah, sure, Ming," I said. "You still make the best Stingers in the System. Maybe that's because you don't brew your own gin."

"Could be, Ash, could be," he laughed. He shook up the drink and poured it in my glass. "How'd it go on Venus?"

"It went," I said.

Ming was one of the few people who admitted knowing I was a D. O.—a Detached Operative. It was a crummy job, but it suited me.

We were the hired-gun rabble of the System, thrown together into the damnedest police force there had ever been. Spacial expansion hadn't really gotten underway until after the Terro-Martian War, and after it ended every would-be bigshot there was had realized that all he really needed to set himself up as a pocket-size dictator was some salvaged gear from the mess the war had left, a crew that wasn't too particular, and a good-looking piece of territory in the practically limitless areas of space. Most of them had picked

slices of Venus. There were a few in the Asteroids, hooked up with renegade Marties, and one or two that had actually grabbed sections of Mars.

Sending regular law enforcement officers or Marines after each one of these boys would have been physically impossible. Earth government had come up with a cuter idea.

It was a lot more economical to fight one big decisive battle than to endure a series of inconclusive skirmishes. There were a lot of us boys out in space, most of us just drifting from one port to the next, picking up a living by our wits, and by our skill with a gun, some of us. Earth government had quietly picked out the ones they considered trustworthy, sworn us in, and turned us loose with a few standing orders and a lot of dependence on our discretion.

Whenever something brewed between two of these minor warlords, we'd come flocking in and hire ourselves out to whichever side we felt had slightly more justice. Sometimes we wound up shooting at each other, but you couldn't even be sure of that, since most of us didn't know, beyond a guess or two, who the other D. O.'s were. Usually, though, we had enough brains to pick the right side, and we'd

make sure that was the one that came out on top.

It was a process of elimination, actually. The warlords were helped to knock each other off until, eventually, those who remained either proved themselves to be strong leaders, which was what frontier planets needed, or else megalomaniacs, in which case it paid to devote a full-scale military campaign to them.

It was a highly informal system, but it had worked. It was tough on us, but it wasn't any harder than freelance grifting had been. It left an awful lot to personal discretion, and we paid ourselves out of whatever came to hand, but there hadn't been any big totalitarian regimes lately, either.

"Yeah, I did pretty well," I repeated.

Ming puckered his mouth and winked. I used to try and figure out how he did it, standing behind his bar all day, never going out, never talking much except to a few people like me. But I knew for sure that he could have told me exactly how much I'd made on that Venus job—and the gimmick I'd pulled to get it past Customs, too.

But that was why I was in here. Something was up—something big, and I wanted to find out what it was before every grifter and chiseler in the Sys-

tem tried to cut a piece of it for himself.

"I got a note in my mailbox today," I said casually.

"Yeah?" he asked, just as quietly.

"Must have been put there as soon as I touched down this morning. Somebody wants me to go to work for them. They're paying high—too high, maybe. Hear anything about a big job coming off somewhere?"

Ming grinned. "If you mean that little letter from Transolar, yeah, I know about that." He got serious, and moved closer.

"But that's all I know, and nobody else knows even that much. Sure, something's cooking, but nobody knows what it is. I—" He broke off. "You've got company. Boy, *have* you got company!"

I looked in the backbar mirror. A girl had come in the doorway and was walking toward me. Her dress tightened in intriguing places. Her face was as much of a treat. High-cheeked, brown-eyed, with a small, uptilted nose and a full mouth, it was framed by short curly hair the color of new copper wire. I liked it.

So did the spacemen and the dockworkers sitting at the bar. One or two half-rose to invite her to join them, but they sat down again when they saw who she was headed for.

There was something about that hair. I'd seen it before, somewhere.

The guy next to me got up and slid out of the way. I let my eyes stay on the bottles on the backbar until she sat down beside me. I gave Ming a look. He nodded, and moved down the bar.

"Ash?"

The voice was low, but crisp. It had whispers and murmurs in it, too, and I knew I'd heard it before.

"I'm Pat McKay."

I turned my head and looked at her. Her dress, tight as paint from hem to bodice, was mysteriously loose in the sleeves. Ruffles at each shoulder hid bulges that Mother Nature never put there. They looked more like twin shoulder holsters. They were.

And the last time I'd seen her, she was seventeen—eighteen, maybe—in a ball gown, her hair long then, curling around her shoulders.

And the voice hadn't been as controlled, or as crisp, but she'd been saying, "You're a good dancer, Mr. Holcomb. Not much on the light conversation, but a good leader."

I'd swept her around another couple, and kept my cheek away from hers. "The Academy is geared to the production of good

leaders, Pat. Good conversation-alists, on the other hand, are born, not made."

She laughed—a giddy party laugh from a girl who dated Academy boys exclusively, who loved the glitter and pomp of graduation ceremonies, who hung around the Academy all she could, who had been to Graduation Balls before, and would certainly be to a number of them again, before she managed to separate all the black and silver uniforms she'd danced with and found herself a man from inside one of them. An Academy drag—a number in a score of little black books.

"Like Harry—oh, pardon me, it's Graduation Night—like Mr. Thorsten, you mean?" And she looked up at me, raking my face with her green eyes.

"If you will."

"You're jealous, Mr. Holcomb," she said, breaking out her best little tease manner.

"Maybe." I knew she was trying to get me angry. She was getting there fast, too.

"Well, now, if you displayed some of Mr. Thorsten's other gifts, I could forget about the conversation," she said lightly.

"Meaning you'd like me to dance you out on the terrace and make a pass at you?"

"Maybe."

She was daring me.

I danced her out on the terrace, and found a darker corner. She looked up at me, her eyes a little surprised, but her lips were parted.

I tightened my arms and kissed her. It started gently—just a kiss sneaked in between dances—but her arms were growing tighter too, and her fingers were hooking. We held it, while I listened to the blood running in my ears, until we broke apart, both of us dropping our arms, standing and looking at each other, dragging air down our throats.

"Ash! You—"

She started to say something, and broke it. It sounded a little too much like a movie heroine, all of a sudden. She was holding the pose a little too long, too. "Hell, she's a kid—she's doing it the way the grown-ups in the movies do it," I told myself, but I'd danced her out here for a purpose. Maybe she didn't deserve it, but I was sick to death of the little bits of fluff that hung around, drinking in borrowed glamor, getting the big play from boys like Harry Thorsten.

I reached out and grabbed.

"Now comes the part you've really been asking for," I said. I crouched, bent her over my knee, and brought my hand down. Hard. Three times in all, putting everything I had into it.

"Now," I said, letting her get up, "maybe you'll quit bothering guys who worked all their lives to get in a spot where they could go out and be of some help in the only job they ever wanted—the TSN. Do you think you really stack up worth a damn beside the only thing that counts?"

She just stood there, tears of rage in her eyes. I was never sure whether it was what I'd done or what I said that had her so mad, but the last thing I heard her say as I walked away was: "Damn you, Ash Holcomb! Damn you for being such a snob-bish stuck-up . . ."

Well, maybe I was wrong and maybe I wasn't. I didn't know as much in those days as I should have, either. But it was too late now—too late by a war and a hundred revolutions, too late by all the men who'd gone down before my guns, too late by years of loneliness and bitterness.

But if it was too late, why did I remember it all now, with Thorsten up in the Asteroids, a little king in his own right, with me in the New Shanghai, a white ray-burn splashed through my hair, with the Academy a dim thing behind both of us, and Pat—

Why was Pat here? What had she done through the years, while I fought my way from one end of the System to the other,

and Harry took the easy way out during the war?

"Hello, Pat," I said. "I haven't seen you in a long time." Well, what else was I going to say?

I don't know what she had expected me to say. She kept her face in profile, and didn't let me see what it was showing.

"I'm here on business. I hear you're a good man, these days, for the job I've got." She twisted the words like a knife.

All right, if she wanted it that way, she'd get it.

"So they tell me," I said.

"Fifteen thousand for a month's work."

She said it quietly, without any build-up. Maybe she figured fifteen thousand didn't need one.

I sat there for a minute, not saying anything, but thinking hard. What kind of a setup was she offering me? Was this the big job that was floating around? There's usually a sure way to find out. When someone offers you a blind deal, argue. Maybe they'll get mad, or scared you won't take it, and spill something.

"No, thanks," I said.

She frowned. "Don't try haggling with me, Ash. I can get somebody just as good for less."

"I don't doubt it. You could probably get three. That's why

I don't want any part of it. It's sucker bait."

She looked at me for the first time, mouth twisted.

"Since when does a hired gun like you turn down that kind of money? The job's worth it, believe me."

That hit me. But I couldn't afford to get touchy.

"Probably is. But with standard pay at three thousand a month, plus bounties and commissions, this little errand of yours, whatever it may be, must break so many laws it could land me in a death house," I said, watching her eyes.

It didn't add up. Nothing added up. Why had she picked me, in the first place? I had a reputation as one of the better gunnies, sure, but there were at least twenty guys I'd never draw against, if I could help it, and four or five of them were available. Because she'd known me? And this job—what kind of hanky-panky was going on at these prices?

I watched her eyes acquiring dangerous highlights. The temper that went with that hair was beginning to stir.

"Do you want to get in on the biggest deal that's ever been pulled off in space or don't you?" she said. "Or are you going to chicken out?" she added contemptuously.

I let it slide off my shoulders.

"I don't know," I said. I wanted to get a chance to really talk things out with her, and this wasn't the place for it. "Anyway, this is no place to talk business. Walk out of here as if I'd turned you down, and go up the street. I'll catch up to you."

"Okay." She got up and walked out.

"Sorry, Honey," I called after her, loud enough for everybody to hear. A snicker went up. I cut it off with a look at the characters lined up against the bar, and got back to my drink. I finished it casually, put it down, paid, and walked slowly to the door. I let everybody get a good look at me turning down the street in the opposite direction from the one Pat had taken.

I ducked into the first cross street and moved swiftly over to the alley that paralleled the street that Pat was on. I was thinking all the way.

Being a D.O. was one thing—getting into something solo was another. I could get killed, for all I knew, and maybe by a lawman's gun. That was a risk I ran on every job, but in this case, I didn't even know, yet, what was going on. The smart thing to do would have been to pass the word to my SBI contact, but that would take too much time. There was nothing I could do but

dive into this mess head-on, and hope I'd have time to yell for help later.

I was about to turn into another alley that ran back to the main street when I heard the coughing of a Saro airgun and the faint sizzle of a Colt in reply.

Instantly, I was running silently up the alley. One hand unzipped the chest of my cover-all, and the other one dove in and grabbed the butt of the heavy Sturmeys that's my favorite man-killer. I reached the mouth of the alley and stopped abruptly in the shadows.

A man lay in the middle of the street, unnaturally flat against the concrete slab. The street lamp up the block was dark, its base surrounded by shattered glass.

The Saro went into action again from the roof of a building across the street. I saw the slugs chip cement from the railing of a flight of steps four doors up. A pale blue flare winked from behind the railing, and the man with the Saro ducked, but was up again as another gun raked the stairs from a spot on my side of the street. I didn't like that setup one bit.

The Sturmeys in my hand went *whoomp!* and the man on the roof sailed out over the street and landed with a crunch. The

other gun cut off abruptly. Two Colt beams probed for it from the stairs, and that clinched it. It was Pat, all right, and somewhere, she'd become a fair hand at street fighting.

"Hey, Pat!" I yelled, and ducked away from the storm of bullets the other gunman flung at me. The result was what I'd hoped for. The man had exposed himself to Pat's fire by shooting at me. The Colts sizzled viciously, and the burst of Saro noise stopped in mid-clip.

A gun clattered on cement. I poked my head cautiously around the corner. Silence blanketed Rocket Row, and then was tempered by a scuffling noise. Up the street, a leather belt was being pressed against the side of a building by the weight of a body that was sliding slowly downwards. I spotted a glowing dot that was a tunic smoldering around a Colt burn.

"Ash!"

"Yeah?"

"You okay?"

I grinned. She sounded a little worried.

I sprinted across the street at a weaving run, and dove behind the stairway.

"What happened?" I asked.

"I don't know—but I've got an idea. I got about a hundred yards up the street when I spotted this guy tailing me. I yelled, and he

ducked. At the same time, this other fellow started running toward me across the street. I burned him down, and ducked in here just as the bird on the roof opened up. That's it, until you came along."

I swore. I didn't go for three men gunning one girl. I looked over the top of the railing. One or two people were starting to come out of doorways.

"Maybe we'd better get out of here," I said.

We ran up the street to another alley. She re-holstered her guns on the way, revealing a lot of what the dress advertised.

We stopped inside the alley and caught our breaths. "Well, anyway," I said, "I know what you're in this for."

She looked up sharply. "What?"

"You need money to buy some underwear with."

She slammed her hand into my face. I ducked back, and stood there, blinking.

"Look, Holcomb, as far as I'm concerned, the deal's on. Fine. Thanks for helping me out back there, too. But just thanks—no further payment. And no kidding around. This is a business deal. Have you got that straight, or do I burn you down where you stand and find another boy?"

She meant it. I looked down at her hand, and one of the Colts was in it.

"Okay." I hadn't meant that crack as a pass; but as long as the question had come up, it was all right by me to have it settled right here. "But put that thing away before I make you eat it."

She grinned, suddenly, and put the gun back. "I'm sorry, Ash. But it's the best way I've ever found to establish a clear-cut business relationship. Partners?"

She stuck out her hand, and I took it.

"Deal."

A siren rose and died on Rocket Row. Pat jumped back. "Damn it!" she said. She shot a glance up the alley. "We'd better split up," she said. "Look, Ash," she said hastily, "I'll get in touch with you. Meanwhile, do what I tell you to, and don't waste time asking me why. I'll tell you later. All you have to do now is take the job Transolar is going to offer you. That's all. Take that job, and start to carry it out. I'll be in touch with you somewhere along the line."

She looked down toward the alley's mouth. I followed her glance, and saw shadowy figures of men running by.

"They'll be in here in a minute. I've got a car a couple of blocks away. I'll see you, Ash."

"Yeah. Hurry up," I added, as the first of the cops came warily into the alley.

I pulled my gun and ducked behind a barrel as she started to run. The cop yelled and came after her. I snapped a shot over his head, and that drove him into cover. Over the shouts that rose, I could hear her footsteps fading out.

I followed her cautiously, sliding from behind one ashcan to another, keeping the cops down with an occasional shot. I made it out of the alley and into the street, then ducked into a doorway, kicked the lock loose, took the stairs two at a time to the roof, and got away over the housetops.

And all the time, I was wondering about Pat, the job that Transolar was going to offer me, and how she'd known about it.

II

Mort Weidmann was the same Captain Weidmann who'd left an arm in the cockpit of a K class scoutbomber that he'd flown through a formation of Marties while he almost bled to death. He looked very military in his blue and silver uniform. It wasn't a TSN uniform, of course, but even a Transolar Express rig makes an old soldier feel better.

He was another old friend of mine, like Thorsten. The three of us had been touched by the war, each in our separate ways. Mort was the one who didn't just feel a yearning for space, who didn't just ride on a TSN uniform because it was the one available way. Mort had loved the TSN itself, with a pride in the traditions that guys like Thorsten and me hadn't quite had. He'd been a better officer because of it—and the only one who couldn't have stayed.

And, as we'd gone our separate ways, so our ways of thinking had changed. Thorsten—well, he'd taken his choice, and some day I might have to go into the Belt and do something about it, but Mort's attitude hurt. He didn't have any respect for me—he couldn't have, for a man who'd resigned his commission and become a planet-hopper.

He stood at the window in his office, his phony arm tucked into a pocket, his moustache moving up and down as he talked to me.

"I don't know why they picked you, Ash," he said.

I leaned back in my chair. "I don't either—unless maybe it's because they couldn't find anybody else with my qualifications. Or maybe it's because they can trust me, and they know it." I was getting pretty mad. Weid-

mann was a right guy, but I was getting sick of being offered jobs without being told what they were. Two in two days was a little too much.

Weidmann turned around. "Don't get edgy, Ash! I've got my orders—they came down from the top brass, and I'll carry them, whether I approve or not. But don't get me sore. I'm authorized to offer you ten thousand dollars, plus expenses, for one trip to Titan and back. You'll be carrying extremely valuable cargo, and you'll be expected to deliver it intact. Do you want the job, or not?"

I didn't answer him right away. What was wrong with him? There was more than just dislike riding his voice.

"I don't get," I stalled. "Like you've said, why me? And why Titan? There's nothing out there. Besides, the Asteroid Belt is full of Marties, to say nothing of Thorsten and his crew. Nobody in his right mind would try to make that trip without a convoy."

Weidmann flushed. "For your information," he said, "there's a small scientific staff in a bubble on Titan. They need a new charge for their power pile, and we've got the shipping contract. Our problem is to get it to them without Thorsten or the Martians learning about it and grab-

bing it up. That's why we dug you up. We need somebody who can fly it out to them and fight off raiders at the same time. You're still the best available."

So that was the big job! No wonder there were so many phony things going on!

"For God, for Country, and for Transolar, huh?" I said, watching the blood leave his face. "Now why should I help you pull your fat contracts out of the fire? What's it to me if a bunch of technicians don't get their damn fuel? The stuff'd be worth plenty to either Thorsten or the Marties. Living in the Asteroids isn't fun—I've done it, and it takes power to maintain a bubble. Believe me, they'll throw everything they've got to keep a ship carrying a pile charge from making it past them."

I must have sounded pretty nasty about it, because Weidmann actually yanked that murderous motorized artificial arm out of his pocket. He pulled up his shoulders and looked at me like I was something floating down a sewer, but he kept his voice even.

"All right, Ash. Ten thousand, plus expenses. You'll be given a new kind of ship. It's a model we picked up from a manufacturer who had his contract cancelled by the TSN. She was originally designed for armed

reconnaissance, and we've installed the weapons called for in the original specifications. She'll outfly anything with jets on it, and stand off a cruiser, given room to maneuver. Does that soothe you, or do you want a convoy, too?" he added scornfully.

I lit a cigarette and pretended to think it over. Actually, of course, I was going to take the job. I would have, anyway, but there were two additional reasons why I wouldn't turn it down. There was Pat, of course, and her orders. Most important though, had been the fact that the message to report to Weidmann that I'd found in my mailbox at the Spacemen's Hiring Hall had borne a slightly different Post Office cancellation on the stamp than the usual. The "T" in United wasn't quite formed the way it was on the regular stamp. It wasn't apparent unless you looked for it—but it was as good as a big red sign that spelled out "Official United Terrestrial Government Business—Act as Directed Within," because that was what it meant.

"Sounds better than I expected," I admitted. "All right. When do I go?"

Weidmann didn't show any expression to indicate disappointment or satisfaction. He simply

said, "Tonight, after we check over the details. The ship's equipped with standard TSN controls, and you'll have lots of time to test her flight characteristics once you get out in space."

"What happens if she explodes. Don't I get to test her first?"

"No—there isn't time, and it would be a dead giveaway." For the first time, I saw something like satisfaction on Weidmann's face. "And if she explodes . . . well, frankly, Holcomb, that's your problem."

I spent the afternoon being briefed. One thing was off my mind—if I had official orders to take this job, then the SBI would be keeping a tab on me. It made a difference, knowing that no matter what kind of a mess I got into, somebody would at least know what had happened to me, and, most important, why.

I was given a Company flight suit, and a hip rig for my Sturmei. I put those on, and was taken to within a block of the port in a shuttered car.

Not going all the way to the spaceport was my idea. The reason I gave Weidmann was good enough—there was no sense putting up neon markers to indicate that I was up to something special—but I had a better one than that. I had to

give Pat a chance to get in touch with me.

It didn't work out that way.

I began walking down toward the Transolar revetment, using a shortcut street, looking around for Pat. It was a cinch she'd had some kind of a tail on me, and I was expecting to see her step out of almost any of the doorways I passed.

Instead, I heard something.

Back up the street, the way I had come, boot soles whispered on concrete. I turned around and looked, buried in shadow.

I couldn't see anything. I turned back around, and kept on walking, and I heard a holster being unsnapped. I stopped to listen, and there was only silence. I moved, and somebody slipped a safety catch.

I leaped suddenly to my right. My shoulders touched the wall of a house. My hands blurred forward, one locking on my holster and holding it down, the other scooping the Sturmev out and clear of the leather, then blurring again as I shot my hand as far away from me as I could, fired down the street, and spun myself away from the building. I fired again, and the street lamp above my head smashed into bits. Then I was in a deep doorway, crouched, waiting, while ribbons of light cut creases in the wall where I'd been.

That was how it began. There were endless minutes of silence, and then someone would drag a heel or kick a step. There'd be the kick of my gun against my palm, and once, the count on their side dropped from five to four.

A dot of light flickered from behind a high gutter, and rock chipped off a wall near my head. I ducked, kissed the sidewalk with my belly, slithered down a flight of steps to a basement alcove, rolled over, and slid behind the stone. On the way down, I fired back, and I heard a rasp of metal on stone. Not the momentary rake of a belt buckle or button, but a gun, dragging its muzzle against curbing while the man who'd fired it kicked his life away in the gutter. I heard it drop the last inch to the street.

I knew they'd be flanking me pretty soon. I heard cloth whisper as two of them slipped off to each side. The fellow they'd left behind began firing from all angles, weaving back and forth to cover them. He put too much pattern in his weave, though, and that was his mistake. The pattern broke, and became random as the guns spun out of his hands before he could even realize there was a shot coming.

Two! I rolled away from behind the steps, crouched, and

padded away on the balls of my feet. My boots had special sponge soles on them, but even so, a lance of blue slashed from down the street against my calf. I plowed into the sidewalk, furling my face and tearing meat off the knuckles wrapped around my gun. I tried not to catch my breath too loudly as I dragged myself behind the ornamental outcrop of the bannister on the next flight of steps.

My leg felt like there was a railroad spike driven into it, and my knuckles were numb and stiff. I worked my fingers to keep them from freezing up on me, even though jolts of pain came up and hammered at the backs of my eyes. My face felt wet and itchy. I lay there, waiting.

I got one more of them. He decided I was dead, and poked his pale face out against a black wall. The face vanished in a burst of red, and he sprawled back. I chuckled.

There wasn't much I could do but chuckle. The one guy left had me cold. I had no idea where he was, but he'd seen the flash of my gun. I couldn't shift position fast enough or quietly enough to get away. All I could do was lie there.

He took a chance and jumped me. I never heard him coming.

A gun bounced off my head, and I went under— But not be-

fore I looked up and saw that it was Pat herself.

III

I remember lying on my back for quite awhile before I wanted to open my eyes. I knew I wasn't on the street. The air was warm, and heated, and I was on a bed, or something like it. My leg was giving me hell where it had been burned, but I could feel the pressure of a bandage. I couldn't tell about my hand and face—they felt as if something had been done about them, too, but I couldn't find out for sure without looking or touching them, and I didn't want to do that yet.

Why the hell had Pat jumped me? I couldn't figure it.

I opened my eyes, and she was standing over me, a gun dangling from one hand. I threw a look at my watch, and saw I'd been out a half hour, at most.

"What the hell—" I began.

She cut me off with a gesture of the gun. "Shut up," she said wearily. "You'll have plenty of time to start lying later." She grimaced with tired disgust.

I shook my head, but I knew better than to go on talking. There was anger working its way into the hurt look in her eyes.

I got up, ignoring the feeling in my calf, and noticed several

other things. I'd been lying on a low couch. My flying boots were unzipped, so that I couldn't move faster than a shuffle. The coveralls were loose around my waist where my harness had been.

I pressed my left upper arm against my ribs. As far as I could tell, they hadn't found my insurance policy—a little single-shot burner hidden between two of my ribs under a strip of what looked like skin. There was collo-dion on my face, and tape on my knuckles.

"Happy?" she asked.

"Uh-huh. I'm Prince Charming, you're Snow White, and, as far as I can add up, somebody's fresh out of dwarves. What's going on around here, anyway?"

"You double-crossed me, that's what happened. We made a deal, and you sold out on it!" She was working herself to boiling mad, clear through—and that explained why she'd looked at me the way she had.

I shook my head again, trying to clear it. I was getting mad myself.

"Look, Pat, I can take just so much mysterious crap, and no more," I said, feeling the blood starting to work itself into my face. "I got in from Venus, after winding up one of the prettiest insurrections you ever saw. I got my belly full of the sound of guns and the smell of death, and

all I wanted to do was relax and spend the dough I made. No sooner do I take my first drink of decent liquor in six months than you walk up to me and start the goddamdest mess I've ever been in!

"All right—we made a deal. As far as I know, I've carried out the orders you gave me. I got the job for Transolar, and I started it. Nobody but you and I know there's something funny going on, though I suppose the cops are starting to suspect—seeing as I've killed five men in two days, and helped you knock off two more. Now let's get a few things straight around here! I've been shot at, slugged, and generally treated like a supporting star in a cloak and dagger movie. Either I get some fast answers, or I start slugging!"

I'd been moving forward as I talked, getting madder and madder, and closer to being ready to dive for that gun and rip it out of her hand.

She was starting to lose some of her determination. The gun muzzle was dipping. I reached out my hand.

The gun was centered on me again in an instant, but the fire was gone out of her eyes.

"Hold it, Ash!" she said. "You sound too mad to be lying, but you haven't convinced me yet. Just stay put a minute. You

want to know what's going on? You should have a pretty fair idea by now," she went on, still keeping the gun on me. "I'm after that power pile you're supposed to fly out to Titan. Harry needs it."

I should have known, I suppose. Well, maybe she was still space-struck. Thorsten played rough, and he had some strange friends, but so far he hadn't earned a full-scale visit from the TSN. It didn't mean as much in this case, though. He would have been a tough nut to crack, sitting out there in the Asteroids with a good-sized fleet behind him. Still—

But that was for another time. I let her see by my face that the subject wasn't closed, and then I went on.

"Yeah—keep talking. Who jumped you on Rocket Row last night? Why were you trying to pot me a while ago?"

"Because—goddam it, I don't know *what* to think!" she said. "Those were SBI men last night. I knew they were trailing me, but I thought I'd gotten rid of them before I contacted you. Maybe I did—maybe they picked me up again when I went back out on the street. Anyway, we killed them, but the SBI knows damn well who did it. We did enough yelling back and forth to

let all of New York City know who it was."

That had been a dumb play, all right. I didn't have time to curse my stupidity, though. I didn't care one bit for the idea of me having shot an SBI man. It was his own fault, but it wouldn't help my record any.

"All right," I said, "so they were SBI men. That's tough—for them."

"Why haven't we been picked up? I've been hiding out all day—but how did you get away with walking in Transolar in broad daylight and coming out again, if you didn't make some kind of deal?" She was gnawing on her lip. "Damn it, give me a reasonable explanation, and I'll forget the whole thing."

That sent me off. I knew why I hadn't been picked up, all right—they were waiting for me to blow this deal open for them. Maybe, if I did that, they'd forget I'd killed one of them. I'd have to do a really good job, though.

But I wasn't doing too much reasoning, right then. I'd been mad all night, but that was nothing to what I felt right then.

I could feel a big red ball of pure rage building up inside me. My fingers started to tremble, and my vision got hazy.

I swung out my hand and slapped the muzzle of the gun as

hard as I could, and to hell with what it did to my bum hand. The gun went spinning away, taking skin off her fingers as it went, and crashed into a wall. I swung my hand back and slapped her across the face. She fell back and hit the floor. She lay huddled in a corner, looking up at me, her eyes wide and her mouth open with surprise.

"You'll forget the whole thing, huh? All I have to do is explain away some half-baked idea that came into your head, and you'll forgive me, is that it?" I reached down, grabbed her shoulder, pulled her to her feet, and held her there. Her mouth was still open, and she couldn't get any words out of her throat.

"You're going to *forgive* me for getting me into a deal that involves killing SBI men. You're going to forgive me for having a guy that used to be a buddy of mine hate my guts, I suppose. You're going to forgive me for slapping my face, and I'm going to get your gracious pardon for having to fight it out for my life tonight against five guns. That's just fine! Is that supposed to cover getting shot and knocked around and slugged?"

I hauled back and slapped her again. "And that's for pointing a gun at me! Twice. I live by a gun, and I expect to die by one, someday. But not at the hands

of a woman who can't fight a man on his own terms, and has to keep him off with a gun after she gets herself into a mess. All right—you know how to use one. But, so help me, you wave one of those things at me again, and I'll ram it down your throat catty-cornered!"

I pushed her away, and she slammed back against the wall. "One more thing," I said. "Have you ever heard of the SBI fooling around making deals with a guy that's killed one of their men? Not on your life! They're a tough crew, and a smart one. If they thought I had anything to do with that fracas last night, I'd be on my way to a Federal gas chamber right now, if I was lucky enough to live through the working-over they'd give me! Use your brains!"

She stood against the wall, staring at me, making sounds in her throat. One of her cheeks was starting to puff.

I started for her again. Her eyes got even wider.

"Ash!"

Her voice was high and frightened. Somehow, it cut through the deadly anger in my chest, and made me stop.

"Ash! Please—Ash—I . . ." She put her hands up to her face and stood there, sobbing into them.

My nails were digging into my

palms. I opened my hands, and saw blood running over my knuckles where the tape had torn away. There was some of my blood on her dress, where I'd grabbed her shoulder.

"Ash! Please—I'm sorry— It —it's just that I didn't know what to think."

I don't know how I got over to her, but then I had my arms around her, and she was digging her teeth into the cloth of my shoulder, and sobbing.

"Pat, why do you have to be this way? Why can't you—" I was saying, and stroking that red-brown hair. She wasn't a tough, self-assured woman who could gun a man down without blinking. She was a soft, hurt, crying girl, mumbling through tears, her body shaking.

I wasn't a guy who'd fought his way through a war and countless battles since, either.

She pulled her face away from me, and looked up. Her eyes were wet, but she wasn't scared any more.

I looked down at her. I started to say something, but she stopped me.

"I had it coming, Ash," she said softly. "I didn't trust you. I should have known better."

She half-smiled. "I haven't met too many people who could get worked up over not being trusted."

I couldn't look at her. I was going to have to turn her over to the SBI some day, and I couldn't look at her.

"Ash, remember the night you spanked me? Remember what you did first?"

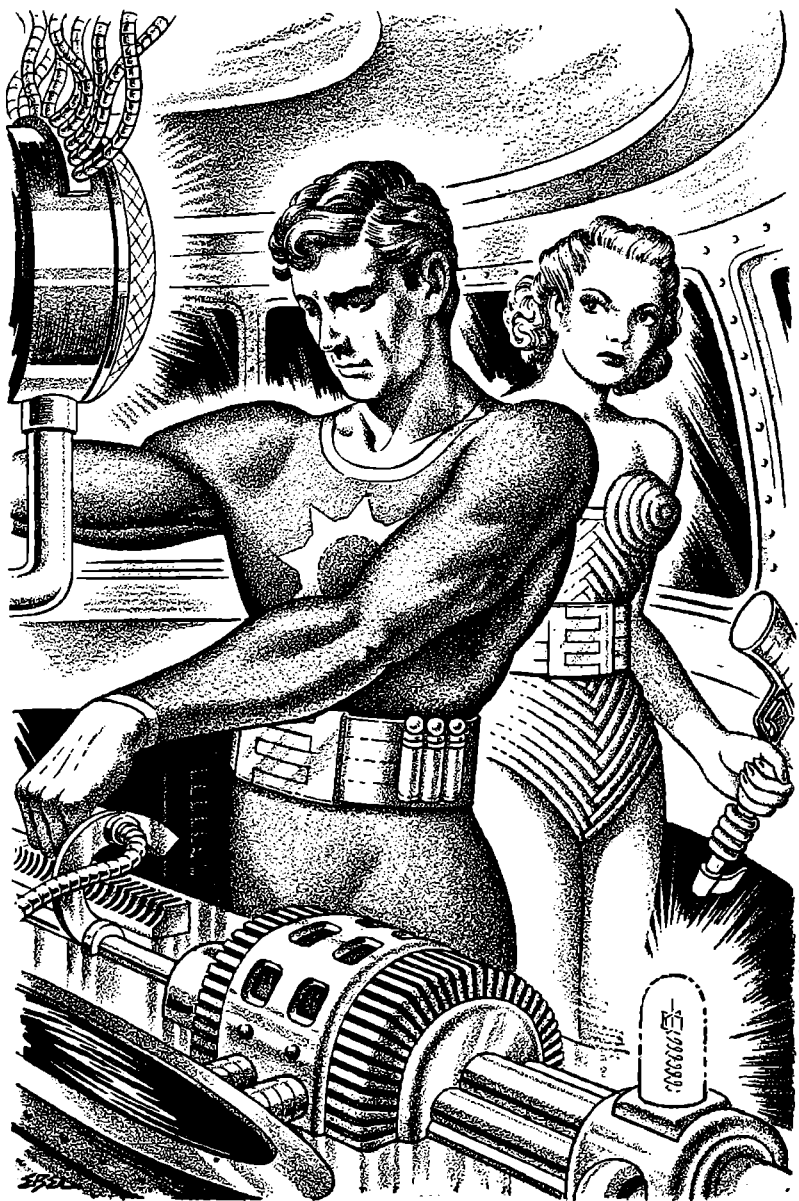
I felt her hand on my face, turning it. Then she was kissing me, her lips soft and fresh, her wet face under my glance, her long lashes down over closed eyes. Her arms moved on my back, and her body was as light as a dream in my arms.

My own eyes closed.

IV

Flight coveralls are designed to be airtight when fully zipped. Hoods with transparent faceplates and oxygen leads can be hermetically sealed to the collars, and every ship has emergency plug-ins for the oxygen tubes. In combat, all spacemen keep their hoods thrown back, like mackinaw hoods, so that if a hole is blown in the hull, they can slip the hoods on and plug into the emergency oxygen supply. Struggling into a full-dress spacesuit is too complicated a job to entrust to the few frantic minutes that spell the difference between life and death, and meanwhile, the coveralls are far more comfortable in flight.

Besides, anyone who'd seen



what a spacesuit does to a figure like Pat's will agree that it's a dirty shame.

While Pat was climbing into her outfit, I was outlining the plan we'd have to follow. As long as I was going to go along with this offer of hers, temporarily, at least, I might as well do it right.

"I got into a cab accident, or something," I said. "That accounts for the shape I'm in. You're an old friend of mine, and since I'm in no condition to fly and fight at the same time, I'm taking you along as co-pilot.

"Weidmann'll stick me for your pay, of course. I'll make sure he does—that way there won't be much kick about you coming along, especially if I make it a 'both or neither' proposition.

"When we get out in space, you show me how to get to Thorsten's bubble in the Asteroids, and that's it. We deliver the pile charge, shoot back out into space, fake the signs of a big battle, and yell for help over the radio. There'll be a squawk about you being a woman then, of course, but hell, us spacebums are supposed to be devil-may-care, aren't we?"

It was a great little plan, all right. It would give SBI the location of Thorsten's base, and it wouldn't hold up delivery of the

pile charge any longer than it would take to salvage it. Meanwhile, space would be rid of Harry.

"Sounds like it'll work, all right," she said. "I wish I was surer the SBI didn't have anything big on me. It'll be a bad enough stink as it is." She grinned. "But we'll make out."

Weidmann was out at the field, fuming over the fact that I was an hour and a half late.

He surprised me, though. He didn't boggle over taking Pat along, once I gave him a story about being lightly hit by a car and having to take my friend along.

Pat had had a tight cloth strapped across her breasts, her hood over her face, and I'd gotten her into the ship fast.

"Okay, okay, who gives a damn what happens to you, as long as the job's done," Weidmann said, but I couldn't believe him, somehow, when he added, "I don't even care who does it, personally."

He slipped an envelope into my pocket. "Something for you," he said. "Don't open it until you're past Mars, and don't let your friend see it—for awhile, anyway." He chuckled, and surprised me by doing it. He looked secretly happy over something, as if he knew about something

awful that was going to happen to me. "You'll have some sweet explaining to do to your friend, Holcomb. I'd love to see it." But there was still that note of something more than laughter, more than most feelings, in his voice.

He wouldn't say more than that. He just shoved me into the ship and slammed the hatch.

I kept watching him in the starboard screens as we checked off the instrument board. He was a little figure at the edge of the field, staring wistfully up at the ship, his mechanical arm in his pocket.

I couldn't wait until we were past Mars to open the letter, of course. We'd be too close to the Belt by then. I read it while Pat was at the controls.

Holcomb:

I don't know exactly why—except that you're the best there is, I guess—but you've been picked for this job.

As you may have guessed, Transolar Express is a blind for some pretty big Government bureaus. This isn't a ship the TSN cancelled, of course. It's a top-secret job built according to the specifications laid down by the Titan labs.

When you hit Titan, turn the ship over to the technicians there, and they'll install the additional equipment that's part of

your cargo of "pile fuels." The rest of your load really is fuel, but it's not meant for the Titan pile—it's for the engines in the ship.

When it's ready, you'll fly the ship to God knows where. You won't refuse, I know, because I wouldn't either, if I'd been given the chance to fly the first ship into hyperspace.

Luck,

Weidmann.

When I'd finished it, I went back to the engine room and took a look at the drive. Then I went to the cargo compartment and stood looking at the hatches. They were sealed—welded shut.

I went back up forward, and waited until Pat had to leave the controls for a few minutes.

The minute she dropped through the hatch I was over at an emergency tool kit, and a few seconds later I was ripping off bulkhead panels with a screwdriver. I got a fast look at banks of dials and instruments, and slapped the panels back up before Pat got back. Then I went down to my cabin and just sat on a bunk, staring at the wall.

That cocky little bastard! That frozen-faced terrier of a man, cursing me with all his heart because I was getting the chance he'd have had, if he hadn't given his right arm too soon!

And he had wished me luck.*

I was proud, then, of being an Earthman, of being a fighting man, of having earned the right to get my name in the history books.

I stood there, a big dumb jack-ass.

All of a sudden, it had hit me. I'd been asking a lot of questions lately, and getting only partial answers. Now I had all the answers, and I hated every one of them.

The misdirection and lying on Weidmann's part was clear as a bell. It had been designed to get me off Earth and headed for Titan without anybody knowing the real reasons—even me. They knew that if the real secret ever leaked out, every renegade and pirate in the system would swarm down, battling to the death to get their hands on this ship.

So they pulled the purloined letter gag. They hid the ship and its mission in plain sight. They sent me off in her to deliver the engine parts to where the hyperspatial drive could be assembled, and from there I'd be able to fly her to whatever star they chose, ghosting along in a universe where the speed of light as we knew it was not the fastest speed a ship could hit.

They'd given me a good excuse, too. "Pile fuels!" A big

enough cargo to justify using me and a special ship, but not so big that I couldn't handle the opposition I'd get from the Belt gangs, who'd fight for it, sure, but who'd try a lot less hard, and discourage a lot easier, than they would if they knew what was really up.

The only trouble with that was that they did know.

Sure—what else could it be? Earth was thick with two-bit sneaks and spies who sold information to anybody with the price. Even Earth government thought enough of them to cook up this big production. One of them must have dug deeper than anyone thought.

Thorsten knew, that was a cinch. He knew so well, that he hadn't even wanted to chance a fight out in space, where the drive might get shot up. He'd sent Pat out to decoy me into him.

I stood there, cursing, my big fists closed into sledges. Pat—Pat, that beautiful, wonderful actress. Pat, who was death with a gun and arson for me with her lips.

All my life, I'd been getting mad at people and things. During the war, I was crazy mad at Marties. Afterward, I was mad at anybody who wanted to push other people around. I got mad—

at Pat, because I thought she was playing me for a sucker.

And Pat had taught me what hatred could do. She'd given me love to replace it.

And played me for a sucker.

I stood there—Ash Holcomb, the toughest man in space, maybe. Not the smartest—no, not the smartest. The dumbest, the stupidest chump who'd ever fallen for the oldest gag in history.

And nobody knew about it. Back on Earth, they were sure they'd gotten away with it. Even Weidmann—Weidmann with the grin, Mort Weidmann who had gone helling around in a hundred dives with me, who didn't need obvious signs like long hair or breasts to spot a woman's figure—he thought everything was all right, too. He was probably shaking his head with envy, back on Earth, thinking of all the fun I'd be having in hyperspace.

Nobody knew the mess the System was in, except me. And nobody could do anything about it, now, except me.

That thought knocked me out of the raging mood I had been working myself into. I couldn't afford to lose my head.

I'd been wondering how Thorsten was going to work a rendezvous right in the middle of the Belt, with renegade Marties that had held out from the war

swarming all over the place, just waiting for a prize like this.

The answer was simple—he'd worked out an alliance with them. Probably the Marties thought they could use it to reconquer the System. If I knew Harry, he had other plans, but they were probably just as bad.

What in hell was I going to do?

One more thought hit me, that was the worst one of all, because it held out an impossible hope.

It was all right to picture Weidmann getting a boot out of me taking a woman along. Under ordinary circumstances, that might have been true. But this was too big, too important. There were two alternatives.

Weidmann must have known I was a D.O. I could assume that. But, knowing how important the job was, Weidmann wouldn't have let Pat come along, no matter what, *if he hadn't thought she and I were working together.*

And that one stopped me cold.

Was she, or wasn't she?

V

What was Pat doing, tied up with Thorsten? She was a high grade operator now, as far from the immature tease I'd known at the Academy as I could imagine. Where had she learned to handle a gun like that? Where had she

gotten the experience that let her handle a job this size by herself?

I couldn't answer that—not any of it, and it was driving me nuts. I stared over the control banks at the forward screen, watching the stars, and beating my brains out.

We'd been out in space for two days, and I hadn't dared to try and find out. You don't, when you're alone with the woman you love.

She was standing next to me, and I looked up at her. The coveralls gave a pretty good indication of what lay beneath, and it was top grade. Not that her figure was that spectacular—she had something more than figures on a tape measure. There was a precision, a slim freshness and freedom to the way one curve flowed into another. It sounds silly, but the way she held herself reminded me of a thing I'd seen once; a rocket transitting the sun, fire sparkling from the shimmering hull, and the Milky Way behind it.

I finally caught what I was trying to phrase; she looked as if she was poised for flight.

She grinned down at me. "Like it?" she asked, chuckling. Her green eyes crackled with light, and there were little demons in her laugh.

I tried to think of a clever

comeback, but I couldn't. I just said, "Yes."

I did like it. And I hated it, at the same time.

The ship was fast, but space is big. I had a week to plan my next moves while we worked our way through the area between Earth and Mars' orbit where the TSN kept the raiders down.

But the week went by, and I didn't think of anything. I'd be working over the control board, and then I'd look up, and she'd be smiling at me. I'd raise an eyebrow, and she'd stick her tongue out. We shared cigarettes. I'd take a drag, hand her the butt, and she'd cuff me when I blew smoke in her face.

"Hey, Goon," she'd say from behind the plotting board, "d'ja hear the one about the lady sociologist who wandered into Bessie's place on Venus?"

I taught her original verses to *The Song of the Wandering Spacemen*. Then she taught me the verses she knew.

We crossed Mars' orbit. I couldn't think of any way to find out what I'd been killing myself over except to ask.

"Ever hear of the D. O.'s?" I asked quietly.

"Will chewing chlorophyl tablets cure 'em?" she asked.

I laughed so hard that I cried.

"I don't think so," I answered

automatically, and got busy checking the breech assembly on one of the ship's rocket launchers.

"Lay off that, apeface," Pat said. "We won't need it."

"How come?"

"If anybody comes around looking unfriendly, just give 'em this on the radio," she said, and whistled off a recognition signal in Martian.

I turned slowly away from the launcher.

Thorsten did have a deal with the Marties. What was more, Pat was in on it. She had to be.

She looked at my face.

"What's the matter, Lump? Something you ate?"

"Sit down, Pat," I said, pointing to the navigation table. "Go on, sit down!" I yelled.

She turned white.

"You know what kind of a ship this is, don't you?" I said, feeling like I was a hundred years old.

"Sure." She nodded. She was beginning to get it. "You weren't supposed to know about that."

"I didn't. Not until we were spaceborne."

Didn't she realize? Couldn't she see what she was doing to me?

"Pat, do you know what'll happen if the Marties get this drive? They'll be able to hit Earth and Venus with everything they've

got, coming out of nowhere and going back into hyperspace when they're through. The TSN won't stand a chance against them."

She shrugged. "They probably would, if they ever got it, but they won't. Harry's going to assemble the drive, install it in his ships, and then we'll take off. The Marties'll be stuck."

"Wait a minute—you just mentioned taking off. Where to?"

She looked up at me. "Harry says there's another planet out in hyperspace, somewhere, circling another star. He says people can live on it." Her eyes were shining, and I remembered a girl on a terrace, back at the Academy, with a dream in her voice that I'd been too dumb to recognize.

"He does, does he? Can he prove it? How do you know what he's really going to do?"

"Because he's told me!" she flared. "He's going to by-pass the fumbling bureaucrats who run things on Earth and take mankind out to the stars—*man*-kind, Ash, the toughest, the strongest men in space, and their women. Space belongs to us, Ash, not to those Earthbound lilies!"

"And whose speech are you repeating?" I said, getting more and more mad every minute. "Thorsten's?"

"Yes!"

"All right, if you think so

God damned much of him, suppose you tell me what he is to you now?" I asked.

"He's my husband." She didn't even hesitate.

I started for her, before I could think of words for the doublecrossing . . .

She came off the navigation table like a coiled spring. She had a gun in her hand.

"Ash—get back! I don't want to hurt you. Ash—can't you see why? Do you think I'm the kind who—?"

I kept coming. "No," I said, "I can't see why. I'm not built so I could see why. And yes, I do think you're the kind."

"I don't know why I had to pick you!" she screamed then. "Maybe I remembered something—maybe I found something out, after it was too late—"

She was crying, but she was bringing the gun up at the same time.

I didn't care. I didn't care if she pulled the trigger or not.

"I told you," I said between my teeth.

She had the gun aimed right at me. Her face was gray, and her hand was shaking.

"I told you the last time what I'd do if you ever pointed a gun at me again." My voice was coming out low, but it had absolutely nothing in it. It was

just words, coming out one by one.

The gun muzzle was shaking badly. She put up her hand to steady it.

"I—" she said. There were tears running down her cheeks in a steady wet stream.

She should have pulled the trigger. I think she should have. But she didn't.

I smashed my fist against the gun, and it was out of her hands, crashing into metal somewhere.

"Ash!" she screamed, and raked her nails across my face.

She kicked up her knee, and fire exploded in my groin. I fell forward, slamming her down on the deck, and threw my entire dead weight across her shoulders.

I didn't have to. Her head had hit the deck, and she lay unconscious, blood seeping out through her hair.

She wouldn't talk to me. She lay on her bunk, her chest rising and falling under the straps I'd buckled around her.

I tried to explain, to make her understand, somehow.

"Pat, I've got a responsibility to the people I work for. I've spent the last ten years keeping characters like Harry Thorsten from taking over this System. It's a rough job, and it's a dirty one. I can't help that. I don't

like it. Pat, it's got to be this way."

She wouldn't talk to me. She wouldn't listen. I walked out of her cabin, locking the door behind me.

Locking a door and forgetting what's on the other side are two different things.

I went up the control room and set a course for Titan. Maybe once we got out there, I'd be able to convince her.

It was a lousy hope. I didn't even understand her—she was like something I'd never seen before. How could she be like she was? How, goddam it, *how*?

VI

Titan lay ahead of me, pursuing its track around Saturn.

My ship drove toward it, flaming out fuel in reckless amounts as I poured on the acceleration. I had to get there fast. We'd already missed our rendezvous time with Thorsten by two days. He was going to figure out what happened—must have done so already—and would be hot behind us. I had to land, get the engines installed, load supplies, and take off into hyperspace before he hit.

It was a race against time. I built up velocity to a point no sane skipper would ever dream of, leaving just enough

fuel to brake with, knowing I wouldn't need it to get back.

Part of me sat in the control room, plotting curves, charting fuel consumption figures on a graph, watching the black line rise hour by hour to the red crayon slash that meant I had done all I could.

And part of me was down in the cabin with Pat, but if I'd let the two parts mix . . .

No ship in the System had ever hit the speed I begged out of my ship's heaving engines. No human being had ever traveled as fast before, tracing his track across the white stars in the blue fire of his jets.

If I made it to Titan in time to get into hyperspace, I would have Pat with me. There'd be stars to look at, and the worlds that circled them. Star on star, marching past the ship, world after spinning world, fair against the stars, and a million things to see, a thousand lifetimes to live.

Out there, where other beings lived, was adventure enough for both of us, and enough of dreaming. Maybe she'd forget Thorsten, maybe some of the things she'd said had been lies, maybe the whisperings in darkness were true.

If I could get to Titan in time. I might as well have walked.

I knew there was no hope before I finished landing.

Titan was an empty moon. Where the project bubble had been was a circle of fused, concrete around a mess of melted alloys. A corpse in a TSN space-suit lay on its back and stared at Saturn.

I looked down at it, cursing, my shoulders slumping under the weight of my helmet.

And I heard the voice on the command frequency.

"Hey—you—you down by the bubble." The voice was weak, and getting weaker.

"Yeah!" I shouted into my mike.

"Holcomb?"

"Yeah, for Christ's sake! Where are you?"

"Your right—about a hundred yards. Start walking over here. I'll talk you in."

I started off at a lope, kicking my way over the rough ground. That voice was pitifully weak.

I found him, curled around a rock, his head and arm supported on a rifle that was leaned against the stone.

"Holcomb—"

"Yeah." He couldn't even turn his head to look at me.

"I'm Foster—Lou Foster. Commanding, Marine guard detail."

I remembered him. The one who filled a practice football with water.

"Yeah, Lou. How's it?"

"No damn good at all, Ash. I've been waiting for you."

"Thorsten?"

"Yeah—our old classmate, Harry the horse. About thirty-fourty hours back."

"You been in that thing all this time!"

"Sure—snap, if you breathe shallow and don't drink anything. Helps to have a couple of spare tanks." He could still try to chuckle.

"Well, hell, guy, let's get you over to my ship."

"No can do, Ash. No sense to it."

I was straining to hear the words now, even with his set right next to mine. I knelt down and touched helmets with him.

"Listen, Ash—he's got the stuff. The diagrams, the charts, the figures—everything. He's even got the tech detail to put it together for him."

"All right, Lou. It figured. But can the yak. Come on, boy, over my shoulder you go, and down to the can with you."

"Lemme lay! Goddam it, quit tryin' to move me! I didn't walk over here—I got flung when the dome let go!" He was screaming.

"Sorry, Lou!"

"S'all right." He bubbled a chuckle. "I see by my infallible little TSN instruments that I'm

gonna run outta breathin' material 'na couple minutes. 'S'all right by me. Luck to ya, Ash."

"Yeah."

But he didn't strangle. He didn't choke in his helmet; there was still air in his tanks when he died.

I went back to my ship and sat behind the control board, smoking a cigarette. I rubbed a hand across my tired eyes, and wondered what I was going to do next.

Thorsten had thought of everything. He couldn't have found technicians to assemble the drive anywhere else, so he'd come out here and kidnapped them. That was an elementary move, obviously planned far in advance.

I'd been running a useless race. I would have realized it long ago, if I hadn't been half-crazy about Pat.

She laughed at me when I told her about it, but she laughed in a peculiar way.

"I could have told you," she said, laughing. "Ash Holcomb, the big undercover agent, heading like mad for Titan! And what does he find?"

"I found Lou Foster, Pat," I said, feeling the steel in my voice slicing upward in my throat.

"That wasn't anybody's fault!"

she said quickly. "He happened to get in Harry's way."

"Go tell Andrea Foster," I said.

"Stop it, Ash! You can keep bringing up horrible examples, but it still doesn't mean anything, compared to travel to the stars."

"What was wrong with the way it was going to be done?" I asked.

But she was pulling her protective shell of mockery around her again. "Oh, stop it, Ash! You're licked, and now you're trying to justify it by claiming foul, the way losers always have."

But the last thing she said, as I slammed out of the cabin, was: "This time, you got the spanking, Ash. Now stop crying about it." But somehow, she didn't sound as happy as she'd probably expected.

I took the ship back out into space, finally, heading Sunward. All I could do was hope I'd get within radio range of a TSN ship before Thorsten found me.

But that didn't happen. I wasn't anywhere near the Belt when I had to sit and watch Thorsten's fleet come flaming at me out of space and surround my ship, sliding into tight courses that held me on a deadly and invisible leash.

And I could feel things crum-

bling inside me. All the principles the Academy had built in, and love, and fear—remorse, friendship, bravery—none of it meant anything. They were things that human hearts and minds were capable of, but when yesterday's love is today's revulsion, when friends are deadly enemies, when all the world thinks of you as just another space bum—what then? I had the destiny of the System riding in the holds behind me, and nobody really knew or cared that I'd break my heart to keep it safe.

They were my eyes, but they weren't altogether normal, as I stared out of the control room screens at the waiting fleet.

They kept their distances. They all had their launchers pointed at me, and on a few of the old T Class rack-mounts I could see the homing torps lying in wait on the flat upper decks.

I went back to Pat's cabin. She was sitting up on her bunk, staring at me. Fire lay buried deep in her eyes, but she kept her face smooth.

"Okay, Pat," I said. "Thorsten's got his crew in a globe around me. He wants this ship. Should I give it to him?"

What I was saying didn't match my voice. I was tired, and mad, and I couldn't look at her.

I could feel my lower teeth sliding back and forth against my upper ones.

"No—I know you too well, Ash," she said. "Not the way you'd give it to him." She pushed herself up and stood in front of me. Her eyes kept getting wider and wider. "Ash! You're crazy. If you think you can fight your way out of this—" her voice broke. "You know you don't have a chance. I've seen Harry's fleet in action. This is one ship, Ash—one ship!"

Her entire body was radiating urgency. She was standing stiff-legged, every muscle quivering, trying to get her words through the desperate red haze that was building up in front of my eyes. I couldn't see her very clearly.

But I could see her well enough to laugh at her.

"Fight?" I said. "*Fight?* I've had fighting—all the fighting I'm ever going to do. I've been fighting too much, too often. I had a name and a friend, once—and I had a girl, once, too. Now all I've got is a job, and some orders, and a conscience, maybe. No—I'm not going to fight." I threw back my head and laughed again. I reached out and grabbed her arm. "Come on—you're going to have a grandstand seat."

I pulled her up the companionway and into the control room,

and threw her into the co-pilot's seat. I pulled out my gun.

"Reach for those controls," I said, "and I'll blow your hand off." She sat in the chair, her face gray, staring out at Thorsten's fleet.

I reached over and switched the radio to Thorsten's frequency.

"Thorsten!"

"Yes, Holcomb?"

His, too, wasn't quite the same voice it had been. It was even, clipped, used to commanding a crew that didn't enjoy being commanded.

"I've got Pat," I said, keeping my gun on her.

"Let's stick to relevancies, Holcomb. How much for the ship?"

He'd given himself away! I could have laughed.

"No, Thorsten, let's keep it where I want it—how much for Pat?"

There was a pause on the other transmitter. I was playing my cards right. Thorsten had me, and the ship. But I had his wife, and that was swinging the scales my way. Why should he offer to pay me, now? A bluff? No—he had a better one in the ships, with their launchers ready. Why should he be willing to dicker for the ship? Because she was in it, that was why. If I refused to give up, he could always blow

me out of space, or take the ticklish chance of trying to disable the ship without wrecking the engines. But he wasn't going to do that. Pat was worth too much to him.

"Thorsten! You heard me—how much for your wife?"

He cursed me. His voice was a lot lower than it had been.

"I've got a gun on her, Thorsten."

Suddenly, he sighed. "All right, Holcomb. You win—but not as much as you'd think. I'll make a deal."

I laughed at him, still keeping my gun pointed at Pat with a rock-steady hand. "What am I supposed to think you've *been* doing, Thorsten?"

It was getting to be too much for me. I could feel all the pressure that had built up in the last ten days starting to come to a head, ready to explode and to hell with who the pieces hit.

"Oh, no, Thorsten—no deals. No bargains, no sell-outs, no compromises. I'm up to here on doublecrossing and crisscrossing. I hired out to you and Transolar, and before that I hired out to anybody who had money or a chance for me to get some. And all the time, I was hired out to Earth government. I've had too many jobs, Thorsten—my gun's been on the line too long. There are too many oaths and too many

loyalties. Too much of my honor's been spread from one end of the System to the other. Now I'm quitting. The towel's going in, and from now on, it's me that I fight for."

I had the mike up against my mouth, and I was yelling into it. "I know what you're going to offer me, Thorsten, I know what I'd offer. You want the girl and the ship. You want one as bad as the other, but you won't settle for half. So you're offering me my life, and a free ride to Earth. Well, you can take that deal and stuff it. Earth! Who the hell would want to live on the Earth you'd leave, after you and your Martie friends got through with it. No, Thorsten, it's no bargain. It's a Heads you win, Tails I lose proposition, no matter how you slice it."

I laughed again, enjoying it, because it was going to be my last laugh.

"Holcomb!" He must have guessed what I was working myself up to do, because there was sheer desperation in his voice, but I cut him off.

"Shut up, Harry! I told you I was quitting. You know the racket I'm in. You don't just quit it. You go out with your hand on the wheel and your jets full on. *And here I come!*"

I fed flame into my portside jets, throwing the mike away

from me as I grabbed the controls. The ship arced over, singing her death-song in snapping stanchions and straining plates, in the angry howl of the converters, in the drumfire of jets that coughed and choked as fuel poured into them, but which opened their throats and belled just the same.

"Ash!" That was Pat.

"Holcomb!" That was Thorsten.

But I was pure metal-jacketed, fireborne death, howling silently toward the sleek cruiser that was Thorsten's flagship, the best known and most feared silhouette in space.

The gates of Hell opened in space. Every ship in the hemisphere ahead of me vomitted fire as the ones behind me and beside me lanced out of the way of the arrowing missiles.

There was no way for Thorsten to avoid me. Fire blossomed at the throats of his jets, and the flagship shot forward.

I snarled, twisted the wheel, and kept my nose pointed for his bridge.

Proximity torps began exploding all around me. They weren't doing Thorsten a bit of good. Either they hit me, or, without air to carry the shock, they were as good as not there at all.

"Here's your hyperspatial

drive, Harry!" I howled. "Here it comes—compliments of Ash Holcomb, hired gun!"

Suddenly a missile exploded under my bow. It was a clean hit. The ship screamed escaping air, and shuddered, bucking upward. It wasn't just stanchions ripping loose now, or buckling plates. It was snapping girders, and metal spewing out into space like teeth from a broken mouth. The trouble board winked solid fire at me.

I didn't care about that. The ship was unhurt in the only place that counted—her engine room—and the stern jets kept firing. But I was bent over the wheel, sobbing in pure, white-hot, frustrated rage, because I was going to miss. I'd been slammed up off my trajectory high enough to miss, and Thorsten's ship was firing every tube he had to drive herself down and away, behind a protective screen of other ships.

I could hear the hysterical relief in Thorsten's laugh over the radio.

I could hear something else, too. It hadn't mattered what Pat did, once I'd swung the ship into line. I couldn't have pulled it out of the collision course myself. It had taken an atomic rocket to blast me out of the way.

But it was different, now.

I was folded over the wheel, blood running down my chin

from my bitten lip, my knuckles aching as I tightened my fists.

Pat said: "Ash—I'm sorry." There was a sob in her voice. "But you won't give up," she stumbled on. "You'll never give up, until you and Harry are both dead. And I couldn't stand losing both of you."

I never knew what she hit me with, but the back of my skull seemed to explode inward, and I slid out of the seat to the deck. I started crawling toward her. She sobbed, but she hit me again.

VII

The fleet had scattered back to the hundreds of hidden berths among the farflung Asteroids. I came awake in a pressurized burrow dug out in the particular rock Thorsten had chosen for himself and his crew. I'd been dropped in a corner and searched down to my shorts. There wasn't anything on me that I could use for a weapon.

Except—no, I caught myself before there was even a quiver in my left arm. Now wasn't the time to press against my ribs, to try to feel the almost imperceptible bulge of the singleshoot capsule between my ribs.

I groaned and let my eyes flicker open.

"How's it, Ash?"

I looked up. Thorsten was

standing a few feet away from me, looking down from under his spreading black eyebrows.

I put my hand up to my head. "Crummy. She hits hard."

Harry chuckled.

He wasn't a specially big man, but he was large enough. He had deep black eyes under his brows, an aristocratic nose that had been broken, a slightly off-center mouth whose lower lip was tighter on one side than the other, and a firm jaw. His hair was black—almost as black as mine, and as short. He hadn't changed much.

His voice started in the pit of his stomach, and worked its way up. When he chuckled, the sound was almost operatic, deeper than I remembered it.

"Why shouldn't I kill you, Holcomb?" he said.

I climbed to my feet, and looked into those probing eyes. "Go ahead. Give me half a chance, and I'll kill you."

He laughed. "The old school tie," he said. His voice dropped an octave. "Relax, Holcomb. You're alive, for the time being. Come on, let's get some food."

He reached out and slapped me on the back.

Thorsten's mess hall was another pocket in the Asteriod. It was connected to the burrow I'd been in by a tunnel in the rock, and as we walked down it, I'd

had a chance to get quick looks into branching corridors and other burrows that were machine shops, arsenals, ration dumps, and living quarters. Just before we turned into the mess hall, I caught a glimpse of an airlock hatch at the end of the tunnel. That was where Thorsten's ship had to be—and my own, too, unless I missed my guess.

As long as I had a functioning mind, I was going to use it. Automatically, a map of as much of the layout as I'd seen was filed away in my brain.

The mess hall must have been the largest single unit in the entire chain of burrows that honeycombed the Asteriod. It was lit by clamp-on units, like the rest of the place, but the lamps were spread a little farther apart, so it was darker. Even so, I could see that most of the space was filled with men sitting at the long mess tables.

"Quite a setup, isn't it, Holcomb?" Thorsten asked, leading me toward a table that was slightly set apart from the others.

"Looks like an improved standard TSN base," I said.

Thorsten chuckled again. He must have liked the sound of it.

"In many ways, that's more or less what it is," he said, sounding pleased.

We got to the table, and stopped.

All the other mess tables ran end to end from the far side of the burrow to this. Thorsten's table was set at right angles to the others, and a separate chair that was obviously his was placed so that he could look over all the other men. The table had a snow-fresh cloth on it, and was set in high-polish silver. Heavy napkins lay beside each of the places. I glanced down at the other tables. They were bare-boarded, but that wasn't going to make much difference to the men sitting at them.

But all of that took about half a minute's looking. What stopped my eye cold was Pat, dressed in an elaborate gown, seated at one end of Thorsten's table.

"Stop staring, Ash," Thorsten said, the laughter running under his words like the whisper of a river. "Let's not keep our hostess waiting."

"Hello, Pat," I said as I walked over to the chair that Thorsten indicated was mine. I was sitting next to her.

She half-smiled, but her eyes were uncertain. "Hello, Ash." She glanced quickly over toward Thorsten, who had reached his own chair.

Thorsten stopped next to the chair and laid his hand on its back. It was a signal.

"Attention!"

A paradeground voice near the door wiped out every other sound in the hall.

There were close to six hundred men in the mess hall. All of them were suddenly on their feet, snapping to, the sound of boots on rock thundering through the burrow. The men faced each other across the long tables, staring straight ahead.

The successive crashes of sound died out. I stood casually next to my place. Pat was the only seated person in the hall.

Thorsten stood where he was, his hand still on the chair, looking out over his men. The silence held.

"All right, men. Let's eat," Thorsten said casually. There was another roll of sound through the hall as six hundred men sat down and long platters of hot food were rushed out to them by table orderlies.

Thorsten and I sat down, and the three of us at the table faced each other.

"Enjoy the show?" I asked Thorsten. He came back with a peeved look.

It was my turn to chuckle, but I had enough sense to keep it inside. I was right back to not being sure of what to think, as far as Pat was concerned. How much of our affair had been

pure bait, and how much of it did Harry know about?

He motioned to a waiting orderly, who stepped forward and poured wine into the crystal goblets beside our plates. Thorsten reached forward and picked his up. "A toast, Holcomb!" The black eyes bored into mine. I picked up my glass.

Thorsten turned toward Pat and raised his glass. I looked at her. Her face was pale, and her eyes were oddly urgent. She couldn't seem to take them off Thorsten's face.

"To my wife!" Thorsten said, and drained his glass.

I drank out of my own. It was good Burgundy—cold and dry in my mouth, and warm as it came down my throat. I set the glass gently down. If Thorsten was expecting me to react, he was disappointed.

But he was laughing, the sound echoing through the burrow, none of the men paying any attention to it. I looked at Pat.

"Another toast!" Thorsten's glass had been refilled.

"To Ash Holcomb—hired gun and angel of death!" He was laughing at me, and at Pat. He knew, or guessed, and death was lightly hidden by his laughter.

"Don't do it, Holcomb!"

Thorsten's voice was ice. I

looked at my hands. They were hooked into talons, and I realized that there wasn't a muscle in my body that wasn't tensed and ready to cannon me across the table. I could even hear the snarl rumbling at the base of my throat.

I looked to the side. A man with an open holster flap was standing there, his eyes locked on me.

"Do what, Harry," I asked casually, "propose another toast?"

He looked uncertain for a moment. Then the smile and the laugh came on, and Thorsten was Thorsten again. He didn't know about the chained lightning that was running in my arteries instead of blood. He was a dead man as he sat there, and he didn't know it. In a way, that was funny enough to me to keep waiting.

"A toast? It certainly is a night for toasts, isn't it?" Thorsten murmured.

Pat hadn't moved, and stopped looking at him. I didn't know if she'd looked at me when I was ready to go for Thorsten's throat—but I didn't think so. Now she smiled. I wonder how much it cost her because her lower lip was gray where she'd had it between her teeth.

I had my glass refilled. I nodded toward Pat—and gave Thorsten the Academy toast. "Here's

to space, and the Academy. To stars, to the men that walk them, and to the flaming ships that fly."

I looked at Thorsten for the first time since I'd raised my glass, and it was my turn to laugh.

He was gray, and somehow smaller in his thronelike chair. He stared across the table at me, and then let his eyes fall. Hesitantly, he spread the fingers of his hand, and looked at the pale circle where the ring had been.

And, incredibly, he laughed.

"Score one for the opposition," he chuckled. "Nice going, Ash."

I laughed with him, keeping it on a casual plane. I'd done what I wanted to—hit him where he lived. Now, if I could give the conversation a nudge in just the right direction, I might be able to start him talking about his plans. I was that much closer to an outside chance to do something about them.

"What happened, Harry?" I asked. "How'd you get from the TSN into being the top man in the Belt?"

He bit. While Pat and I sat there, Pat nervously shifting her glance from him to me, and me not daring to look at her because of the things I'd say to myself, he told his story. The orderlies brought our dinner, putting

dishes down and taking them away as he talked between mouthfuls.

"They don't talk much about me, I guess," he began. "It's a pretty ordinary story, anyway. I was in the war, with my own squadron. We ran into some bad luck, combined with a set of orders that got mixed up. I lost my men. I lost a leg, too."

He leaned down and slapped his right thigh. It rang with metal. "I didn't enjoy that. While I was in the hospital, they brought charges against me. I wasn't given time to prepare an adequate defense, and they threw several paragraphs of the book at me. I was dropped a rank in grade, and slated for duty at a procurement office. I got my break, then. The Marties, under Kull, hit the Moon at practically that time."

I remembered that. They'd gotten a toehold and established a forward base, and Earth had started getting hit with atomic missiles.

"All of a sudden, anybody who could walk or be carried into a ship was tossed into a raggle-taggle fleet the TSN dredged up. That included me."

He grinned. "Only they made two mistakes. The first one was in thinking I still owed Earth any kind of a debt. The second was the bigger one—they gave

me a crew raked out of every brig and detention barracks in the fleet. I guess they didn't think I was fit to command anything else."

He grinned. "Pat was in a Wasp unit attached to the base. I took her along."

He waved his hand at the men in the mess hall. "Some of my original crew are still with me. I simply headed for the Belt, and sat out the war. The boys didn't mind one bit. We had plenty of stores, and they knew nobody would bother us while there were more important things going on. Afterwards—well, we've done all right."

He had. Some of the freight lines bribed him. Some didn't.

Uncounted millions in rare minerals were scattered among the tumbling rocks of the Belt, but nobody dared to mine them. He'd given refuge to the stragglers from Mars' broken navies, and built a kingdom on blood and loot.

"I know what I'm called on Earth," he said. "I'm a butcher, a brigand—all the names there are. Even another fighting man, like you, Holcomb, thinks I'm a renegade and a traitor to humanity for throwing in with the Marties. Well, they're blind, Holcomb!"

His open palm came cracking

down on the table. "They can't see that Earth is rotten to the very marrow in its mis-shapen bones, that any system that would do to a man what it did to me is based on stupid bungling! The war—Holcomb, you were in that, you know it was the most useless piece of imperialism the System has ever seen."

He was staring intently into my face. I did him the favor of keeping my expression blank, but if he expected me to nod, he was going to wait a long time. I couldn't help thinking of Mort Weidmann. Mort left an arm on Mars; he wasn't bitter about that, and he didn't think it had been a useless war. It had been the Marties for System bosses or us, and they wouldn't have been gentle overlords.

But Thorsten was going on, and now he'd gotten to the part I wanted to know.

"There's got to be a change, Holcomb. Humanity isn't fit to go out to the stars the way it is. It's not ready for the hyper-spatial drive.

"It's not going to get it."

I was beginning to understand. Most important, I could finally understand what was wrong with Thorsten. I could see the Messiah complex building up in front of my eyes. The laugh—the easy, chuckling, self-assured laugh—the laugh of a man

who was never wrong, and knew it.

"I've got the drive, Holcomb, and I'm going to use it. *I'll* be the standard-bearer of the human race among the stars. There won't be any fumbling and bumbling—no bureaucrats, Holcomb, no splinter groups, no special interests, no lobbies."

The dream was like a banner in his eyes.

"Nobody but you, right?" I said.

"Right!" the palm went down on the table again. The wine was beginning to loosen him up. His voice was losing the first fine edge of control.

And I finally understood about Pat. She was looking at Thorsten, and the same dream was plain on her face. That was all she saw—that, and the man. She couldn't see the gray rockets belching above the burning cities.

"Have you got the drive?"

"Damn right! Those technicians I lifted from Titan are working on your ship now. Then a test flight, and after that, a whole fleet—my fleet, equipped with the drive and ready for the jump.

"There's a planet out there, Holcomb. The Titan Project found it. A planet, Holcomb! Earth-type! Do you think I'd let those idiots on *Earth* have it!"

That locked it up. He was completely paranoid.

Pat was still looking at him, lost in the dream. She couldn't be bought, and she couldn't be taken. But she could be in love. Maybe, as a man, I stacked higher up with her than Thorsten did—but I couldn't rival the Dream.

"Seems to me a thing like that will take more supplies than generations of intercepting freight would give you. Where'll you get your equipment?" I asked.

I'd timed it right. A lot of Burgundy had gone down, followed by Sauterne and Chablis.

"That's where my Martian—friends come in," he said. Pat leaned forward. This was a part she'd never heard before, an answer to a question nobody but an old hand at expeditionary forces would ask.

"The Marties think they're going to get the System back, some day." He laughed. "They've been trying to persuade me to help them for a long time, now. Well, I'm going to. After my fleet has the drive. We'll invade Earth, then. The TSN won't be able to stand up to us—not when torps start coming out of nowhere. Picture it—all of Earth, busy fighting us off, all its attention on the invasion, and on nothing else. Then, when the

fighting's going nicely, my men and I will raid a few choice supply dumps I've had spotted for a long time. We'll load up on equipment and supplies, and take off, leaving some badly disconcerted Marties to finish their little revolt any way they want to—with no Earth for them to conquer!"

"What?" It ripped out of me. Pat was sitting there, her mouth open too, the same stunned question written on her face.

Thorsten laughed his omnipotent laugh again.

"Certainly! Didn't you know, Holcomb? Ordinarily, of course, a hyperspatial ship will take off from a planet on standard atomic drive, and cut to her hyperspatial engines when it's out in deep space. But it's possible to take off directly into hyperspace—the only trouble being that the warp changes a hundred cubic miles of adjacent mass to C-T matter."

"Seetee! You mean contraterrene?" That was Pat, tense-faced.

I couldn't say anything. I sat there, staring at Thorsten—calm, laughing, deliberate bringer of death to a world and its billions.

Because C-T atoms, in contact with normal matter, reacted violently. A hundred cubic miles, detonating instantaneously, would leave a ring of dust

where Earth and Moon now swung.

"There will be no cancer of humanity in space!" Thorsten declared.

I jumped for him.

One slug caught my shoulder. The other plowed through the muscles of my back. I lay bleeding among the broken glass and dishes on the table. Thorsten swung a rabbit punch at my head, and laughed.

VIII

The cell was small, dark, and damp. There were stitches across my back, under tape, and a traction splint and bandages on my shoulder. Let's forget pain. Pain . . . *Let's forget it! Forget it!*

I lay on my belly. I'd been on my belly for most of a week. And for most of a week, I'd thought of how it would be to dig my fingernails into my side, rip loose the phony skin over my ribs, and fire that one shot into Thorsten's guts.

All I needed was a chance. Here in the cell, in a corridor somewhere, alone with him, surrounded by his men, chance of life or no—that wasn't what counted. I wasn't sane myself, anymore. There were two people in the Universe—Thorsten and me—and room for one!

A chance. Lord God, a chance!

But all I had was dampness and darkness.

I was fed twice a day—or something like it. It was almost time for my next meal, but that wasn't the important time. It was the helpless week behind me, the week in which Thorsten's kidnaped technicians had had time to assemble the ship's engines. The test flight was due, and after that the production of engines for the other ships in Thorsten's fleet. If I was going to do anything, I had to do it now.

I dragged myself up the side of the cell, leaving meat from my fingers on the rough stone. I staggered over to the wall beside the door and waited.

Time went by—hours or minutes—and a sound of feet came down the tunnel leading to my cell.

I couldn't use my back muscles, but I tensed them now, feeling stitches give way.

Tumblers clicked, and the door was opened.

I kicked it shut and sprang, wrapping my hands around a dimly seen throat, a thin and soft neck.

"Ash!" Pat's voice was choked under my grip.

"Pat!" I opened my hands, and she stumbled free. But not

for long, because an instant later she was pressed against me again, her mouth over mine.

We stood together in the darkness and in hunger. Finally, she moved her lips away.

"Ash, Ash, you can stand!" She was sobbing with relief.

"Yeah—I'm on my feet."

"Can you fight?"

"Nothing bigger than you," I said. "What's going on?"

"He's crazy, Ash. That plan of his—I'd never heard it before. All he told me was that he was going to take humanity out to the stars—he said he didn't trust Earth government to do it."

"Yeah. I know. For that dream, I would have done what you did, too."

"I didn't love him, Ash. He—I don't know, he *was* his dream, somehow, and in spite of it all, he was a better, stronger man than anyone I ever knew. Except you, Ash."

That was good enough. That was good enough to give her everything I had or could get. And that made my spot even worse. It wasn't just she that was going to get hurt—but she was the most important one of them all.

I couldn't even stay with her, here in the cell.

But she knew that too, and

there was more to her coming here than that.

"Ash—they've finished assembling the drive in your ship. They've finished repairs on her bow, too. They're going to run the tests in a few hours. Everybody's sleeping, except for the maintenance crew, and they're scattered through the base. Ash—I think we can get out of here. If we don't run into any guards, we can make it to the airlock. There'll be a few suits in a locker there. We can make a run for the ship." Her voice was urgent, and full of hope, and bitterness for the desertion of a dream—a sick, tainted dream, but her dream for so many years at Thorsten's side.

And I knew, for the first time in weeks, that Earth had a chance. I knew, too, that Pat and I . . .

I could have kissed her then. But I had to be a damned fool. I didn't.

The tunnels and corridors were empty. The machine shops and storage rooms were dark, and the doors to the bunkrooms were closed. We reached the airlock.

All I had to do now was to get into a spacesuit and open the lock. The ship lay beyond it.

Then I heard Harry's laugh!

He stood behind us, holding a slim handgun.

"Running out, people?" he

asked. "Bribing that orderly wasn't bright, Pat. He not only gets to keep his money, but he gets a promotion from me. That's the way I operate—that's my justice."

Pat and I had turned half-way around, watching him carefully.

"Justice!" Pat flared. "Worry some more about Earth. Worry about the Universe. Teach them your justice!"

Again the laughter. "I will, Pat."

But the laughter broke.

"Pat—you're my wife. You know my dream—you shared it. Why did you do it?"

"Yes, she knows your sick dream, Harry," I said.

"Shut up, Ash," he said quietly. "Don't die with your mouth open."

He fired, but I was on the floor of the tunnel.

"Ash!" That was Pat's voice, but I was rolling, and tearing at my side.

"Get back, Pat!" Thorsten shouted. I was up on my knees, the singleshot gun in my hand. I charged forward.

He brought up his gun. The noise had awakened everybody in hearing distance. Doors were opening, men were running.

I pointed the slim tube at his belly and jammed my thumb down on the firing stud.

He screamed, cupping his hand

over the smoking hole I had punched in his stomach. His knees bent, and he sank backwards, toppling, finally, as he lost his balance. He opened his mouth, choking, and blood welled over his chin.

One last shred of laughter bubbled up through his throat.

And someone, down at the other end of the tunnel, fired at us. He missed me as I crouched over Thorsten's body.

"Ash—"

I had Thorsten's gun in my hand, but I didn't fire back. I spun around, and looked at Pat, crushed back against the tunnel wall.

"Pat!"

She slid down the wall, and huddled on the floor.

"Pat!" I bent down beside her. It was bad.

Her voice was thick. "How long have I got?"

"Five minutes—maybe ten." I knew I was lying. It was less.

"Ash . . . you heard what he said. I was in a Wasp unit. Space was my dream, too. Always."

I wanted to tell her I knew, now—knew a lot of things. But there was no use in holding a dying woman, kissing her, and caressing her tumbled hair for one last time. No use at all, when a world depended on not taking time for those things.

I put Thorsten's gun in her

hand. "Can you still shoot, Pat?"

Her fingers tightened on the butt, and her eyes met mine just once more before she turned her head.

She was a beauty to watch. Sprawled on the tunnel floor, not looking at anything but targets over the notch of her sights, calm and skilled while she covered my retreat as her heartbeats slowed. She cauterized the tunnel, weaving a fan of death that marched down the corridor, encompassing and moving beyond huddled and broken men.

I clamped on my suit helmet and spun the airlock controls. I snapped one quick look back at her. Then the airlock hatch thudded shut behind me. In a moment, I was on the surface of the Asteroid and running for the ship.

IX

Earth lies ahead of me, green and safe. The muted atomics behind me have brought me back from beyond Venus, where the split-second jump into hyperspace threw me.

Let Mort Weidmann have his farther stars—or anyone else who cares to try. I've had all I want from the new drive.

I gave Pat a funeral pyre. And now the lonely Asteroids have a star of their own.