

THRILLING WONDER STORIES

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A Complete Short Novel



THE CITADEL OF LOST AGES

By LEIGH BRACKETT

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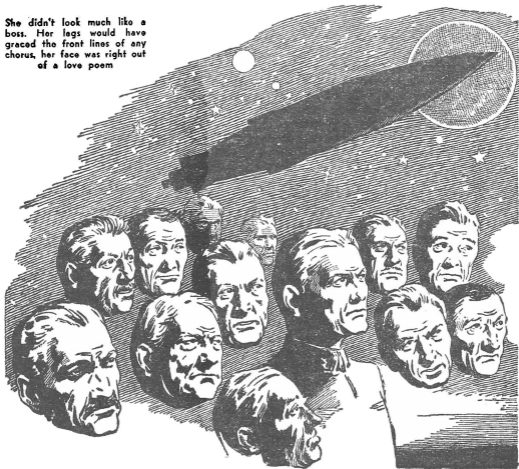
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She didn't look much like a boss. Her legs would have graced the front lines of any chorus, her face was right out of a love poem



CAPTAIN

A Complete Novelet

CHAPTER I

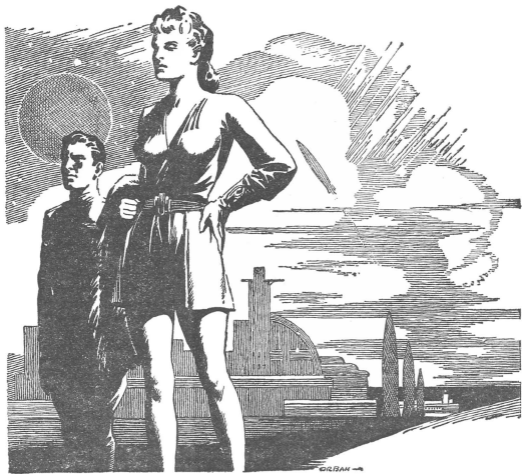
Orders for the Talisman

THE DEMONSTRATION at Spaceport One was orderly, thanks to police cordons, but almost deafening. People had come by the hundreds of thousands to register angry disapprov-

al of the navy's decision to scrap the space ship *Talisman*, better known as famous *Old Standby*.

In the approximate center of the milling throng, the battered hull of the

TO COUNCILWOMAN LOWELL THE JUNKING OF THE TALISMAN



FAMINE

by CLEVE CARTMILL

Talisman reared two thousand feet skyward. Far down the field, unhonored, unnoticed, was a sleek, new escort vessel that was to accompany *Old Standby* on this final flight, and to bring back her

crew and the single VIP aboard.

No less than fifty telescanners were busy on the field, getting crowd color and noise, transmitting random interviews with the common man. But in the

WAS ROUTINE—TO THE CREW, IT WAS A FORM OF DEATH!

administration building flight room, a scattered group waited silent and grim for take-off time. This group was composed mainly of the *Talisman's* crew, each man as famous as the ship herself.

Skipper J. F. Lincoln—"Captain Famine"—looked out with hard, expressionless blue eyes at the demonstration on the field. His long jaw was set, his big, space-tanned hands clenched in the pockets of his uniform jacket.

Chief Pilot R. T. Selden, as white-haired as the captain, sat at a chart desk and ran an aimless finger back and forth, back and forth, along the edge of the desk, completely unaware that he was doing so.

The machine-shop crew of three were huddled loosely in a corner, paying no attention to each other nor to anyone else in the room.

"Corky" McKorkle, news commentator, moved about under a mantle of restless gloom, thinking of his futile efforts in print, and on the screens of the world, to stop the junking of the gallant old ship. And now he was to go along to record this last flight for a combine of news agencies.

"I'll jerk tears," he thought savagely. "I'll make 'em cry!"

OPENING of the corridor door went unnoticed, but the booming voice that invaded the room brought heads snapping around, focused eyes on the frail and weather-beaten little man who entered in a wheel chair. This was Sam James, chief engineer.

"Thought they could keep me off ship, did they?" he cried in his amazingly deep, powerful voice. "Howdy, boys!"

He shook hands all around. This was a silent ceremony, Corky had the impression these men had no need to speak. The expression in their eyes, the firm handclasp, said it all. They didn't like the situation, but they would obey orders and carry out this last assignment.

The officers and crew of *Old Standby* were now present, except for the cook and steward, who were aboard checking the storage of last-minute food items.

Corky dreaded the arrival of the two remaining members of the voyage—Lieutenant Harvey Clay, liaison man between *Old Standby* and the escort vessel, and Councilwoman Janice Lowell. Corky's dread was not exactly definable. Part of it may have had to do with the known hazards of a trip through the Coal Sack. Mainly it was the uneasiness he always experienced in the presence of High Brass, and embarrassment for Captain Lincoln, whose authority was technically superseded by Miss Lowell's. But over all was the general feeling of impending disaster.

Lieutenant Clay came into the flight room then, a brisk, scrubbed young man with friendly dark eyes, a full-faced smile, and a becomingly correct manner. He saluted the captain, and introduced himself.

"Reporting for duty, sir."

Corky watched the captain intently. The old man was grave and courteous as he presented each man of the crew to Clay, but Corky thought he saw resentment in the cold blue eyes, defiance in added erectness, determination in the set of the jaw.

Determination to do what?—Corky asked himself. Surely the skipper wouldn't dare to go contrary to orders, not while an armed escort vessel was along, a vessel that could fly orbits around the battered *Old Standby*?

But there was something behind the smooth exterior, something ragged and raw, reflected in the overly polite attitude of every man in the room.

Miss Lowell's arrival put a thin crust of ice on the coldness. She was the boss, and these men had been on their own for more than thirty years. She didn't look much like a boss, Corky reflected. She was slim and trim in blue. A coat of golden fur, matching her hair, was draped over one arm. Her legs would have graced the front line of any chorus. Her face was right out of a love poem. But her eyes and her walk had no nonsense about them.

"Is everybody present?" she crisply asked the captain. He explained about the cook and steward.

"Get them here," she said, "for general inspection."

Captain Lincoln frowned. "Inspection, Miss Lowell? I know my crew, ma'am."

"Those are my orders, Captain. And," she added levelly, "yours."

"Very well, ma'am," the captain replied coldly, and went to the wall 'visor to summon the galley contingent.

Councilwoman Lowell idly scanned the crowd outside until the remaining two members arrived. Without looking at the captain, she asked, over her shoulder, that he have his men form a line. They did so, without a trace of expression on their stony faces.

AFTER they were in formation, she turned around, faced them. "I am the representative of the Executive Council," she told them. "My name is Janice Lowell. My orders are to see that the policies of the Council are carried out to the letter, with as much dispatch as is safe. I naturally have an interest in the men who will actually put these orders into effect. You, sir," she said to Chief Pilot Selden, "what is your name and function?"

She went down the line, until she came to Sam James in his wheel chair. "You are not a member of the crew, I take it?" she asked.

"I'm chief engineer," he boomed.

"But retired, I believe?"

"Not for this voyage, ma'am. I've got orders from the admiral himself. Though I almost had to break a couple of heads to get him," he added.

Miss Lowell turned to the skipper. "Captain, this man is unable to carry out his duties. He is physically unfit. I'm sorry, but he must be replaced."

"Unfit?" Sam James roared. "Unfit to push buttons? I'm going along!"

Miss Lowell paid him no attention. She looked steadily at the skipper, who returned her unwavering stare but said nothing. The silence got thicker than a meteor shower. Corky broke it.

"Wait'll the public hears this," he said. "Putting Sam James off his own ship!"

She turned, looked Corky up and down. "Who are you?" When he told her, she didn't seem impressed. "I suppose," she said, "you are partly responsible for that sentimental hysteria outside?"

"I sincerely hope so," Corky said.

The councilwoman gave a ladylike snort and turned back to the captain.

"All this crew, including myself, ma'am," Captain Lincoln said gently, "are on the retired list. We have been given special permission to take the *Talisman* to her grave. If one of us goes off ship, we all go. You have the authority to prevent Chief James from shipping with us, but neither you nor anyone else can make us fly her."

Miss Lowell did nothing so banal as to let her mouth drop open in astonishment. In fact, she did nothing at all for a thoughtful moment.

"You mean," she asked presently, "that you are defying orders from your superior officer?"

"Exactly what I mean, ma'am, maybe had better be threshed out in a court-martial, if it comes to that. Chief James has served the *Talisman* for many years. You heard, no doubt," he said dryly, "how he lost the use of his legs?"

"Exposing himself to radiations of a damaged tube? Yes, I heard. A heroic act. You understand, Captain, and you, Chief, that my main concern is for the safety of the personnel aboard. My considered opinion is that Chief James is physically unfit to act in an emergency. I have the authority to forbid his making the trip."

"I haven't questioned your authority, ma'am," Lincoln said.

"Could I put in my two cents?" Corky asked.

Janice Lowell made an impatient gesture. "I think I'm beginning to dislike you, Mr. McKorkle."

"Likewise, I'm sure," Corky retorted. "But you're a young gal impressed with the importance of authority, and apt to overlook some of the things people live by. My advice is free, and whether you take it or not, here it is: 'Pipe down!'"

She flushed. "You're impertinent!"

"Not at all. I speak for your own good. Look what you're up against. *Old Standby* has made more rescues in space than the sum total attempted by all other ships put together. And every rescue attempted by *Old Standby* and her crew was completely successful. Nobody died. They were brought in safe, if hungry." He grinned. "That's how the skipper got his name. Lots of people don't know his name is Lincoln, but you mention Captain Famine or *Old Standby* or Shorty James any place where language is a means of communication, and you'll see faces light up."

"I know the history," Miss Lowell said. "Get to the point."

"The point is, these guys have come out of retirement to take *Old Standby* on her last flight. Sentimental? Maybe. But they want to do it themselves, since somebody's got to. And if you or anybody else try to stop them, you can kiss good-by any career you might have had in mind. Believe me, those people out there are sore. They're resigned and won't try to stop the flight, because they're law-abiding. But it wouldn't take much to set them off. Do you want the responsibility?"

CHAPTER II

Unrest in Space

COUNCILWOMAN LOWELL glared at Corky for a moment before turning to the line of men. "Rest!" she snapped, and began to pace back and forth, frowning at the floor.

The men relaxed. The captain turned once more to the window to stare unseeingly at the seething crowd. Corky sat in a corner and kept a casual eye on the entire group.

Miss Lowell stopped her pacing and raised her head.

"Please listen to me," she called. "I realize what the name *Old Standby* means to billions of people. It's a symbol of heroism, of fighting against terrible

odds. I also realize what might result if this crew should fail to make this trip. The feeling built up by clever people like Mr. McKorkle might burst into action with lamentable consequences. I want you to believe that I am not an ogre, but neither am I an irresponsible girl impressed by the sense of my own importance, as some would have you believe."

She did not glance at Corky as she said this, but the glance was implied in her voice and the sardonic nod of the head could almost be seen. "I therefore withdraw my order concerning Chief James, but not my objection."

"The ceremony," Captain Lincoln said into the ensuing silence, "is due to begin. Shall we march to the reviewing stand?"

The admiral himself made the keynoting speech, composed mainly of what one would expect. Gallant ship, gallant men, known and revered everywhere, and so on. Obsolete type, due for honorable retirement; what better place than the planet of Silvor, where metal and machinery were at a premium, navy policy—and so the admiral rumbled on.

Corky paid little attention to the proceedings. He watched the men of the *Old Standby*. Each had gone back to that far-looking, that repressed inner turmoil. Each was granite-faced again. Each seemed to hear nothing that went on about him.

Corky shivered.

Then somebody broke a bottle of champagne, the band tooted, and the personnel of the last flight of *Old Standby* filed aboard. Cheers were raised, tears were shed. But by the crowd only. The crew of the ship went aboard with unseeing eyes, inattentive ears and rigid faces.

* * * * *

Old Standby hung motionless in space. The escort ship ahead was an unmoving dot on the pilot's screen. At least, Corky thought, that was the way it seemed. He knew intellectually that they were traveling at incredible speed, but space is so empty and points of reference so far away that his senses told him they

were hanging still in the blackness.

His intellect also told him that everything was orderly. Everyone was polite and businesslike. It had all the appearance of any routine flight.

But his senses put this peaceful scene out of focus, distorted it until it jarred on his nerves. He told himself again and again that he had no reason to feel that violence lurked beneath the surface courtesy of all personnel aboard. But reasoning didn't stop his feeling it.

He spent the first few days watching, analyzing. He found neither act nor word to support his inner conviction that conditions were not as they seemed. Everyone, except the galley crew and officer of the watch, met three times daily in the dining saloon. And everyone was meticulously polite. If there was no laughter, no gentle raillery, there was also no overt unpleasantness.

But still Corky's impression persisted. He cornered Janice Lowell in the combination library-lounge-exercise room.

"I know we don't seem to have much in common, Miss Lowell," he said, "but we're the only civilians aboard, and I'd like to talk to you about something."

She turned away from the viewport looking out on brilliant, scattered suns. Her eyes, a deep violet in the wall-reflected light, showed no expression. She said nothing.

Corky gave her a halting, confused description of his conviction and freely admitted it was emotional.

"But I've found," he said, "that these indefinable—uh—intuitions, I guess, have been frequently more dependable than a cold-blooded analysis of factors. Haven't you?"

"Never," she said. "Uncontrolled emotion has no place in intelligent life forms."

"I see," Corky said dryly. Movement in the main passage beyond the lounge door caught his eye. Chief Pilot Selden passed on his way forward. Corky turned back to the councilwoman. "Then you don't share my feeling that something—unpleasant—is going to happen?"

Sam James passed the door, wheeling his way forward.

"No," Janice Lowell said.

"I know from experience," Corky said stubbornly, "that when I feel like this, something unpleasant—or worse—is going to happen. Maybe I've made a subconsciously objective analysis of the factors involved here, and maybe the conscious effect of that analysis on me is purely emotional, but I *know* something's out of focus."

The cook and his steward went by, headed for the control room.

"Indeed?" Miss Lowell murmured. "If you'll pardon me, Mr. McKorkle, I think I'll retire."

HARVEY CLAY, the liaison officer, came into the lounge shortly after Miss Lowell walked out. Corky wondered if Clay would ever lose that freshly scrubbed look.

"Ahoy, Lieutenant," he murmured politely, as the machine-shop crew passed by on the way forward.

"How are you, Mr. McKorkle?"

"Pretty good. Everything all right?"

"Steady as she goes. Thought I'd have a smoke and then hit the sack. Like a game of chess?"

"Some other time, thanks," Corky said. He reflected that the entire crew of the ship was now in the control room. Why?

He said goodnight and wandered aimlessly forward himself. He felt a mild exultation. This concentration of personnel, certainly out of the ordinary, supported his hunch. There was no reason for the congregation, except in case of emergency. And no emergency existed. Otherwise, Clay wouldn't have been so carefree.

Corky moved silently as he approached the control room in the nose of the ship. He could see nobody in his line of vision. The pilot's panel was directly at the end of the passageway, and the forward screen above it on the far bulkhead showed the motionless dot of the escort vessel ahead.

He stepped cautiously when he came within earshot of a murmur of voices.

One voice—he couldn't identify it—rose out of the quiet babble:

"Put it to a vote!"

The murmur rose briefly, unintelligibly, engulfed the individual voice, and sank back. Corky moved to the entrance. The murmur stopped. Faces turned toward him, intent, grave faces.

The captain's face changed first. It conjured up a smile. Like a mask, Corky thought.

"Come in, Mr. McKorkle!" The voice was hearty. "We thought you had retired or we'd have called you. We were just yarning over old times."

The other faces took the cue, except for the cook. After that first intent look, the cook paid no attention to Corky.

"Yes, lad," boomed Sam James. "Join us."

Corky wondered how corny can you get? It was perfectly obvious they were not talking over old times. It was clear, in the forced welcome in eye and voice, that they wished he'd get lost. Well, he'd been invited. Maybe he could learn something.

"Thanks," he said with a false heartiness that matched the skipper's. "Maybe I can get a couple of stories. What particular time were you talking about?"

"The rescue off Venus."

"That freighter headed for Ganymede."

The Captain and Sam James spoke respectively, simultaneously. Each eyed the other. Each motioned the other to carry the conversational ball. Corky waited, watching.

The steward wore a silly grin. Grizzled Chief Pilot Selden was smiling, but it was a faint, almost secret smile, reflecting an inner amusement. But his face was flushed as the captain's and Sam James'.

"It was a little of both, I guess," Sam said. "We were trying to decide which was the most interesting. On the Venus rescue—"

He went on to relate the story Corky knew almost by heart—that is to say, Sam told it in almost the same words Corky had used to describe the event for the interplanet release.

"About that freighter, though—" Captain Lincoln interrupted.

And Corky listened to *that* story in the captain's precise phraseology. This was another exploit that he knew and had described professionally. It varied in minor details from the other, but with the same happy ending—everybody got back alive but hungry.

"What do you think, Mr. McKorkle?" Chief Engineer James asked. "Which is the most interesting?"

Corky had had enough of forced camaraderie.

"It's hard to say. They both have their points. Now, if you gentlemen will excuse me, I'll go hunt up a nice, peaceful pillowful of dreams."

A little later he lay wide-eyed in the silent dark and wondered. Why had they gathered together? "Put it to a vote!"

Put what? Before he could even hazard a guess, he needed more data. Tomorrow, he thought, he'd start gathering.

THE MEAL after sleeping was pretty much of a pattern, full of polite tension, but Corky noticed that the eyes of the crew held new life, a new sparkle. The men, from Captain Lincoln down to the steward, seemed no longer occupied with their own individual problems. A new feeling of unity was in the air. Corky couldn't define with exactitude the reasons why he felt this, but he did and accepted it as observational data.

He went hunting. He didn't know what he was hunting for. He was just hunting.

He moped along the main corridor aft of the lounge, moving aimlessly toward the engine room. His eye caught movement at the end of a transverse passageway. He right-angled along this until he saw the foreman of the engine room slip into a lifeboat with a full testing kit.

Corky stood unobserved and puzzled over this. His puzzlement was increased shortly when the steward brought cases of food and began to load them into the

lifeboat. Corky abandoned any effort at concealment then and went over to the pile of cases.

The steward nodded to him politely and finished loading. He nodded again and went aft. The foreman presently emerged from the open port, closed and locked it, saw Corky and smiled.

"Hello, there!"

"What goes on?" Corky asked. "Why all the work on this?"

"Why, uh—" The wrinkled foreman floundered for a moment. "Just routine."

"But the ship seems to be running perfectly," Corky protested. "Nobody's expecting an emergency, are they?"

"You'll have to ask the captain," the foreman said, and went away.

Corky's next stop was the engine control room.

"Come in, lad!" Sam James seemed unable to speak below the level of a shout. He waved at the panel of studs, dials and switches. "Physically unfit!" he said in derision. "All a man needs to run a good ship like *Old Standby* is a good pair of eyes and a stiff finger." He put a loving hand on a blueprint of the ship's assembly. "Treat a good ship right, lad, and she'll never let you down. Which is more than you can say of people. Now," he boomed, "what's on your mind?"

"Nothing special," Corky said. "Just wandering around. Well, it won't be long now, eh?"

"Two weeks, ship time, is all."

To Corky's shock and astonishment, Sam said this softly, so softly it was barely audible.

"So they're gonna dismantle the old space bucket," Sam went on quietly, bitterly. "This panel might wind up on a farm, and the good solid hull will be converted into a warehouse for storing grain. Grain!" he suddenly roared. "This ship that's been—"

He broke off, and his eyes took on a twinkle in which malice, mischief and triumph seemed to be mixed. "Ah, well," he said cheerfully, "there I go shooting off my face again. Don't pay any attention to it. Are you gettin' plenty of stuff to write up?"

Corky shrugged. "The usual," he said.

As he went forward to the main control room, he tried to fit into a pattern the meeting with its phony overtones, the stocking of the lifeboat, and the chief engineer's abrupt change of manner. He felt in his heart—and he could imagine Janice Lowell's sneer at the phrase—that there ought to be a pattern.

Captain Lincoln, Selden, and Lieutenant Clay were in the control room, Selden in the pilot's chair. Corky noted a certain physical tenseness in their motionlessness, as if they were waiting for something. All three flicked their eyes toward him as he entered, but nobody said anything.

The forward screen provided an explanation by filling with the image of the escort vessel's captain, a youngish man with a crisp, no-nonsense air about him.

"Approaching the Coal Sack," his voice crisped. "Stand by on *Talisman* to activate compensators."

"Aye, aye, sir," Lieutenant Clay answered, and looked expectantly at Selden as the screen blanked out.

Selden spoke into the intercom. "Stand by to fire nose rockets."

"Aye, aye, sir!" came the boom of Sam James' voice.

Lieutenant Clay frowned. "But look here," he began.

"Quiet!" Selden commanded. "This has to be done in split-seconds."

"But I protest. You're going contrary to orders."

"Mr. Clay!" Captain Lincoln snapped. "You will go to your quarters, if you can't be quiet here!"

Clay looked at the captain's steady eyes, flushed at his tone. "I submit," he said, "but under protest."

"You'll be allowed to make your protest later. Meanwhile, carry on as if we were obeying your commander's orders. Do you understand clearly, Mr. Clay?"

This sentence was so laden with menace that Corky shivered.

"Yes, sir," Clay muttered.

The screen came to life. "Ready with compensators!"

"Ready, sir," Selden said.

The escort commander said, "Minus five seconds . . . four . . . three . . . two . . . one . . . Zero!"

Selden touched a button. Rockets sputtered briefly and Corky could feel the shift in course.

"We're through," Selden said. He waved at the forward viewing screen. "There she is!"

CHAPTER III

Eluding the Astrolite

IN THE cross-hairs of the screen was a twinkling blue dot far ahead—the sun of Silvor.

"Right on the nose," Captain Lincoln said in a complimentary tone. "But I don't see the escort vessel."

"Compensators!" Selden snorted.

"Now," said Lieutenant Clay, flushed and grim, "may I have an explanation of this extraordinary behavior?"

"Certainly," Captain Lincoln said. "For reasons which I don't care to discuss at the moment, we wanted to get ahead of the escort cruiser *Astrolite*. The compensators, designed to offset aberrations in instruments caused by the peculiar radiations in the Coal Sack, also have a slowing effect. We simply took a short-cut and are ahead of the escort."

"But that's impossible!"

Captain Lincoln waved at the screen. "I think you'll agree she isn't ahead of us. Not only that," he went on, "but she is probably veering off course in an attempt to adjust her relationship to us in space. We're supposed to be behind her. When we suddenly appear in a new position, it's going to be confusing."

"Oh, well," said Seldon, "what's one escort, more or less? We're on our own, now."

This last was full of thinly veiled glee, and pilot and captain exchanged a secret, knowing glance.

Footsteps sounded in the corridor and Corky moved out of the entranceway, for the cook. "Cookie"—Corky never heard his given name—was gray and wrinkled like the rest of the ship's official company. He came to a halt just inside and sketched a salute.

"I regret to report, Captain," he said, scratching an ear, "that we're short on food."

Captain Lincoln's eyes sparkled. "Why? You were in charge of loading."

"Yeah, but—" Cookie looked both unhappy and defiant. "I hadn't counted on an inspection, like the councilwoman ordered. While we were gettin' inspected, either they didn't load the rest of the supplies or else somebody stole 'em."

"How short are we?"

"Well, I figure I can feed us at the present rate about ten more meals."

Captain Lincoln was thoughtfully silent, apparently making computations in his head. He went to the intercom, spoke into it.

"Engine room?"

"Yes, sir," came Sam James' answering voice.

"Can you give us more speed?"

"More, Captain? We've got to turn ship soon and start deceleration."

"Yes, Chief," the captain said impatiently, "but that's ninety-six hours away at our present speed. Can you cut that down to seventy-two?"

"I can try, sir. Let's hope the port tubes don't burn out."

"Very well, increase to maximum." Captain Lincoln turned back to Cookie. "Two meals in each twenty-four-hour period from now on. If we're hungry the last several days," he went on, with the trace of a smile, "it won't be anything new."

"Yes, sir," the cook said, and turned away.

"Wait a minute," Corky said, and the cook halted. "What about that emergency supply of food that's in the lifeboat? Why can't we use that?"

The cook looked at him coldly. "That's no emergency supply," he said, and departed.

"That will be all, Mr. McKorkle," Cap-

tain Lincoln said. "You have permission to return to the lounge."

CORKY went, more mixed up than ever. Captain Lincoln had admitted he wanted to lose the escort vessel. Why would they want to lose it? Its main purpose was to provide transportation back to Earth after *Old Standby* was disposed of. So, if they wanted to lose it, they didn't intend to return to Earth.

Was Captain Lincoln trying to escape the escort? He had effectively done so, but was still headed straight for the official destination. That must mean that he intended to land there, and his instructions to the cook bore that out.

But then, why stock the lifeboat? Its only purpose was to provide a means of escape from a dangerous condition. That condition was still in the future.

Corky snapped his fingers as he saw a possible explanation. Suppose they set *Old Standby* in an orbit around Silvor, make her a satellite of the planet, damaged beyond repair, and quietly stole away. What a joke! For an untold number of years the ship would ride far out in the heavens, a monument to her own glorious history.

A monument, too, to the will of the people. The public protest at the proposed junking of the most famous space vessel of all would have new significance. The chuckles that would go up would be heard all over the System.

Corky let out a chuckle of his own at how foolish the Executive Council would look, trying to figure a way to land a ship without power in heavy gravity.

That was only one theory, of course, but it seemed to fit the facts as he knew them, including the swift exchange of looks between captain and pilot when they decided the escort was off course.

Councilwoman Lowell entered the lounge then, and Corky got politely to his feet. He decided to let her in on his cogitating. She, after all, was in technical charge, and it might be amusing to see what would happen when she ordered Captain Lincoln to institute a search. If he defied her, Corky would

bet twenty to one his theory was correct.

"It was a good escort while it lasted," he said.

"I beg your pardon?" she said with cold politeness, which seemed to Corky to be her phrase in trade. Too bad, he thought, that she didn't have a personality to go with that exterior.

He told her about the escort vessel. "Seems that the gadgets didn't work and she's in a fast curve to nowhere."

"But that's impossible!"

"It seems to me that when a thing has happened, it isn't impossible."

"A search, of course, has been instituted." This was a statement, not a question.

"Remember my telling you about my—uh—intuitions?" Corky inquired lazily. "Well, I got another one. I don't think a search is."

"Nonsense!" she said, and went out. Corky tagged along.

IT WAS a flushed and sullen young face that Lieutenant Clay presented to the small group in the control room. He looked, Corky thought, as if he'd just been spanked and didn't approve. He raised his eyes from the deck as Janice Lowell entered, flushed even deeper, and looked away.

"Have you found our escort yet?" Miss Lowell demanded.

"Escort *Astrolite* calling *Talisman!*" the overhead speaker squawked. "Come in, Lieutenant Clay! Come in, please."

Captain Lincoln answered Janice Lowell's question. "Haven't looked, ma'am."

"Why don't you answer that call, and why isn't your screen activated?"

"Miss Lowell," the captain said, "this is going to come as a shock to you. I don't choose to answer."

"This is insubordination, Captain, and shall be so reported."

"Yes, ma'am."

"I demand an explanation, sir!"

Captain Lincoln sighed. "More people demanding explanations. Lieutenant Clay has had his, and is under technical arrest." He sighed again. "I sup-

pose I'll have to do the same to you."

"But you are subject to my orders, Captain!" she said firmly.

"But how are you going to enforce them, ma'am? If I choose to go contrary to your wishes or orders, I have a crew to back me up. Also, I am the only person aboard who is allowed to carry arms. So you see, quite aside from the tradition which says a captain is the law on his own ship, I can do just about as I please."

"And just what do you please?" she asked coldly, haughtily.

"Why, I'm going to give *Old Standby* a decent burial ma'am, as befits a good ship that has meant so much to us who have flown her for thirty years."

He cut off her reply with a raised hand. "Wait. Miss Lowell, you're too young to have felt this, but we of this ship have affection and respect for her every atom. We're a pretty ordinary bunch of men, with ordinary training, and this ship has made us famous.

"Oh, yes, it was the ship," he went on. "Make no mistake about that. She would have done the same for any crew who loved and admired her as we have. Always, when we wanted just one more surge of power, she had it. Always, when we needed shelter and protection for our very lives, she had it and gave it."

Captain Lincoln waved at the control board. "Take that assembly there. Mr. Selden has had that apart many times, Miss Lowell, keeping it in the very best of condition, so that no circuit should be faulty when it's needed. And ma'am, when you watched his big hands moving so gently among the parts of that panel, you'd think it was his own baby he was handling.

"The same with Sam Jones. All that power he works with isn't just blind force. It's something alive to him, something that answers when he calls. And you should see him working on one of the converters—you expect it to grow a tail and wag it every time he touches it.

"So, Miss Lowell, do you think we want some bookkeeper to get a part of that control assembly? Do you think we

like the idea of some government farm using Sam's converters? They can have our heads first!"

"Very interesting," Janice Lowell said coolly. "And poetic. But what do propose to do?"

"When we turn ship and start our decelerating fall to Silvor, we'll aim for the Banding Sea. I'll show you on a chart, if you don't know where it is. Then we'll all take off in the lifeboat and let *Old Standby* find her grave in the deepest part of the ocean. I'm taking the responsibility; I'll take the consequences."

"I see. And meanwhile?"

"Meanwhile, carry on."

"Very well, Captain Lincoln. But I assure you that you'll hear more about this."

"You may as well relax, Miss Lowell. You can't change the situation."

"If I could get my hands on that transmitter—" she said.

"But you can't, ma'am. And it wouldn't do any good. The escort may be so far off course that she can never reach Silvor by the time we do. But it doesn't matter. I'd still save *Old Standby*."

"Save?" she said.

The intercom spoke with the voice of Sam James. "Control room, attention. Port tubes have gone."

"What can we do about it, Chief?" the captain asked.

"Why do anything Captain? We can slow her down with what we've got. All we're going to do is sink her. Are the Boy Scouts still with us?"

"No." Captain Lincoln smiled.

"Good!" boomed the voice from the intercom.

CHAPTER IV

Standing by for Rescue

THEY turned ship and began the slowing drop toward the planet, which began gradually to assume a blue,

oval shape. The meetings at mealtimes were painful and silent affairs. Janice Lowell and Lieutenant Clay sometimes spoke to each other in monosyllables, but did not address anyone else.

Calls from the escort ship grew farther apart until they were heard over the ship's monitoring system only once in each twenty-four-hour period.

Everybody was mildly hungry all the time.

Janice Lowell, much to Corky's surprise, sought his advice when they were some one hundred twenty hours away from destination.

I was wrong. Official orders don't mean anything out here. Character and emotions carry much more weight. But go ahead, finish your gloating, and we'll talk."

"I'm not going to gloat. You want *Old Standby* delivered for junking, as ordered by your Council. Right?"

"It's such a waste, otherwise," she said. "I didn't make the policy. I'm along only to see that it's adhered to. The colony on Silvor needs metal and machinery. Wouldn't the ship serve a much better purpose if its parts were used rather than allowed to rust away?"

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"I'd like to talk to you," she said, without any of the hauteur he had come to believe was her natural manner.

Corky beamed.

"Delighted!"

She led the way into the lounge from the corridor where he had been walking for exercise.

"I must do something about this situation," she began abruptly, "and I want you to help me."

Corky raised his eyebrows. "What can you do?"

"I don't know," she said despondently. "I thought you might have an idea. One of your—er—intuitions."

"This is something of a change in attitude, Miss Lowell."

"All right," she said in a resigned voice. "Rub it in. You were right and

"I grant you it would be more useful, if not as sentimental or spectacular," Corky agreed. "But I don't think you can talk Captain Lincoln into it. Tell you what, though. We might sound out Sam James. If you apologized for your cracks about his physical fitness, he may soften up and tell you how much chance you have of getting your way."

"I'll do anything," she said. "Let's go see him."

Sam thawed as Miss Lowell ate humble pie, and listened gravely to her argument on waste in contradistinction to usefulness. Then he shook his gray-haired head.

"It's impossible, Miss Lowell. Even if the crew would agree, which they won't, we couldn't pull out of our present course with the port tubes burned out."

"Couldn't they be replaced?" she pleaded.

Sam considered this. "No," he said finally. "It's not easy to make repairs like that in space, and we're crowded for time in any case."

The monitor, set in a bulkhead, suddenly came to life.

"Attention, all ships! This is the cruiser *Astrolite*. We have burned out our drive assembly attempting to reach the planet Silvor. We are out of control. We shall continue to operate our carrier wave as long as possible, so that any vessel within hearing may establish our position. Our situation is desperate!"

The voice cut out, leaving a hum. Sam's intercom brought a query from Captain Lincoln.

"Engine room, attention. Can we do anything?"

"We can try," Chief James replied. "Send the machine-shop crew to the after-port lock with spare tubes, welding equipment, belt magnets and suits. We'll have to work outside. Send Pilot Selden down here to stand watch. We'll have to work fast, Captain."

He switched off, turned to Corky. "Get a suit out of that locker and help me into it." When Sam had struggled into the suit, before putting on his helmet, he said, "Now push me to the lock, quick."

Corky ran along the main corridor, shoving the wheel chair before him. The machine-shop crew was there, donning suits.

"Strap a magnet on me," Sam said. "Two of you carry me through the lock, and I'm on my own."

He fastened his helmet in place, and the four men disappeared into the air lock.

Corky looked at Janice Lowell. "We may as well go to the control room. We're helpless here."

CAPTAIN LINCOLN was at the direction finder, marking a blank graph. Lieutenant Clay was in the pilot's seat. Neither noticed the entrance of Corky and Miss Lowell.

The intercom came on with Selden's

voice. "I'm going to put the starboard drive on full. Watch swing indicator until it reaches thirty. Hold it steady with port nose jets until swing is zero. Then hold it."

"Aye, aye, sir," Lieutenant Clay answered.

Corky watched the dial which registered the attempt to pull away from Silvor on a tangent. He watched it as if he were responsible for the operation, and he stiffened a hand as if to fire the nose jets as the needle moved over. He noticed his tension and forced himself to relax. The intercom now began to bring a verbal picture of the group working outside in the black cold of space.

"Here, Chief, let me do that."

"Tend to your own job," the voice of Sam James growled. "I've got two good arms, haven't I? More hydrogen in the torch."

"It's starting, Chief."

"Give a hand here. Out she comes!"

Corky touched Janice Lowell on the arm. She jumped, turned to him, and then relaxed. With a jerk of his head, he motioned her toward the corridor.

"Whatever happens will come to us in here," he said when they reached the lounge.

Miss Lowell waved at the viewport. "Helpless," she said, "in that blackness and cold. It must be awful!"

"Air, I suppose, would be the biggest problem," Corky observed. "Or maybe cold, I don't know. Maybe you'd freeze to death before suffocating. I don't think you could use the air conditioner with the power assembly out, but you couldn't use heat, either. In any case, you would wind up frozen stiff."

Janice Lowell shuddered. "Please! Do you think there's a chance?"

Corky shrugged. "You heard what Sam said. It seems to be a matter of time. Poor guys. . . ."

"Who?" she demanded.

"The captain, Sam, the crew. They had the big gesture all set. They were thumbing their noses at the Executive Council. Now those dopes in the escort have messed everything up. Sheer sentiment, that's what!"

"All you do is confuse me," she said uncertainly. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Well, you saw the response to a distress call. Almost an automatic reflex. Sentiment, pride in their ship caused the crew to go against orders. And pride in their ship makes them junk their scheme the minute somebody's in trouble, even the guys who were to enforce the policy orders. Sentiment. Uncontrolled emotion, which," he quoted maliciously, "has no place in intelligent life forms."

She flushed. "I deserve that, I guess. Look, I can't stand this waiting. I'm going to my cabin. If anything happens, will you bang on my door?"

Corky sat alone in the lounge and listened to the fragmentary comments which told of progress outside. He dozed off once and slept for more than an hour. A second distress call from the *Astrolite* brought him awake for a few moments.

He was hungry, but knew that no attempt would be made to serve meals until the issue was settled one way or another.

"Engine room, attention," Sam James' voice said. "Stand by to test port tubes."

The order was acknowledged.

"All right, boys," James went on. "It's a makeshift, but maybe it'll work. Engine room, let's have it!"

Corky felt the sudden backward pull of acceleration.

"Everything reads okay here, Chief," Selden's voice said.

"All right. We're coming aboard."

Corky called Janice Lowell and they went into the control room, where Captain Lincoln was giving Lieutenant Clay

the interception course.

"I guess you win after all, Miss Lowell," Lincoln said. "But first, we'll have to return the crew of the *Astrolite* to Earth."

Janice Lowell leaned against the edge of the chart desk and crossed one foot over the other. Her eyes twinkled a little.

"It may be weakness on my part, Captain," she drawled, "but I've developed quite a healthy respect for sentiment in the last few hours. It has a great power, I think. And I believe that when *Old Standby* returns to Earth, having performed another rescue on what was supposed to be her voyage to the scrap heap, public sentiment won't let her be sent back again for junking."

She paused for a moment, as if marshaling unfamiliar ideas into line.

"Especially," she went on, with a small grin at Corky, "when that public feeling is aroused by Mr. McKorkle's reportorial genius. Finally, I'd like to point out that I have a voice on the Council. Taking it all in all, Captain, I don't think you need worry about the final disposition of your ship."

Captain Lincoln made a bow and spoke into the intercom. "Galley, attention. You may serve our meal now, Cookie. But only one meal each twenty-four hours until further orders. I hope," he added, turning back to Janice, "the *Astrolite* has plenty of food."

He activated his transmitter. "Calling the cruiser *Astrolite*. Come in, please."

The screen filled with the escort commander's face. "Thank God!" he said. "Where are you? Who are you?"

"S.S. *Talisman* standing by for rescue operation!"