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# DESTINATION UNKNOWN

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By **FRANK BELKNAP LONG**

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Most were less than men, a few were more than gods, on that ship wallowing spaceward toward its doom. But the burning day was to come when they would learn to work together—or die!

**R**AYNOR knew that the men in the rocket room hoped the fumes would kill him. They were primitive and surly brutes, and they stood with their faces pressed to the transparent bulkhead which had been his sole protection against

them for sixteen long, unending years.

Bitterly he told himself that they hated him because he was an officer and a gentleman. They hated him because he had a woman to talk to, and was not as lonely as they were. They hated him because compassion filled his eyes when his gaze locked with theirs. They did not want to be pitied by a man who was luckier than they were. Above all, they hated him because month after month, year after year, they had watched him moving about the control room, grimly intent on his job.

He took things easy while they sweated out their guts and lived cheek by jowl in cramped quarters, their lungs choked by seepage fumes. He was separated from them by a partition. He wasn't their friend, couldn't be. They hated him.

Raynor suspected that the scheme had been germinating in their thick skulls for years. It was as ingenious as it was simple and had been executed with cold-blooded malice. They had simply drilled a hole in the bulkhead, and allowed fumes from the rocket room to contaminate the air he was breathing.

It had taken them a long time to drill that hole. It had cost them blood and sweat; it had—yes, *debased* them. Primitive as they were, they had been sustained by a sense of solidarity in misfortune, a grim devotion to duty which had kept them from becoming jungle killers.

But now the bars were down, and they were staring at him through the bulkhead with red-rimmed savage eyes, their lips snagged by their teeth. Raynor knew that the lantern-jawed Neanderthals had built up a resistance to the noxious gases in the rocket room by inhaling them continuously for sixteen years.

He also knew that, having built up no resistance, he'd be down on the desk in another quarter hour, dragging himself toward the translucent bulkhead with insane babblings. He'd be seeing the hairy apes as in a glass, darkly, and cursing them.

Even now his mind kept carrying him back across the years. The board would glow sharply for an instant and he'd be alone in the control room. Then his vision would come unhinged and his father's leonine head, and broad, straight shoulders would loom above the panel and he'd find himself shrinking.

His long legs would shorten, his chief officer's uniform turn into a soiled, kid's jerkin, and he'd find himself sitting by the old man's side, drinking in the old man's words.

It was happening now—*had* happened. He had been a gawky kid with a sallow complexion, and eyes too big for his face. A kid who couldn't remember his mother, and only dimly the face of the woman who had cared for him in a distant part of the ship, and brought him to the pilot room at the age of six.

He had bunked with the other kids until his tenth year, with kids who were officers now, or rocket-room apes. Dimly he remembered the fathers of the surly brutes beyond the bulkhead—could conjure up a picture of them moving sullenly about opposite the old man, their faces streaked with damp.

Those earlier hairy apes had not only taught the kids he had bunked with how to handle the big blast tubes and keep the mercury drums from running too much of a temperature, but had instilled in them a grim devotion to duty which had kept them sweating for a generation.

He was running his eyes over the old man's face now, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down. "Why, Dad?" he could hear himself asking. "Why were they taught to take over, just as I was taught to take over when—"

He started to say, "When you die," but just in time caught himself up, his heart skipping a beat.

"You'll know some day, Jim, lad," was the old man's reply, his deepset eyes filming.

Even as Raynor stiffened in bewilderment the control board grew sharp and luminous again, and a misty glimmering blotted out the old man's head and shoulders.

Blotted out as well the small boy with his anxious face. It was as though a window of memory in the depths of Raynor's mind had fluttered shut, locking him up in a harsh prison of reality.

He was alone in the control room and had been for sixteen years. He was thirty-two now, and the old man hadn't been around since his sixteenth birthday. "Hadn't been around" implied no irreverence. "Death" was one of three words the old man had forbidden him to use.

"Jimmy, when I stop breathing, wrap me in a tarpaulin, and open the star door wide. If you feel I deserve it, just say: 'Good-by, Dad, and thanks for everything'."

The other two words he had been forbidden to use were "Earth", and "loneliness".

"You must never look back now, Jimmy. And don't ever get to feeling sorry for yourself. You can ride out rage, fear and boredom, but self-pity will tip the scales against you sooner or later, no matter how strong you feel yourself to be."

**R**AYNOR hadn't left the control room for twenty-one years. Whether he could have done so or not he did not know. There was a door in the bulkhead directly opposite the control panel which opened on a passageway down which he had walked twice daily from his sixth to his tenth year, passing from the control room to the bunks where the kids were, and back again for mind-torturing afternoon sessions with the *Astrogator's Manual*.

But the door was rusted over now, and a heavy bar had been placed across it. The old man had lowered the bar into place on Raynor's sixteenth birthday, with

an admonition which Raynor had steadfastly refused to disobey.

"Your job is your life, Jimmy," the old man said, perhaps realizing that the sands of his own life were running low. "If you stay in the control room the old Adam in you will remain bottled up. It will remain bottled up in your fellow officers, and the crew. When a man isn't standing within range of your fists you can carry on a conversation with him on a civilized plane. Believe me, Jimmy, I know."

What never ceased to bewilder Raynor was how the gorillas in the rocket room could remain cheek by jowl for sixteen years without crippling or killing one another.

If the old man had been right about human nature—well, perhaps he had the answer now. They had saved up all their savage resentment for him. They couldn't get out of the rocket room because the compartment had been sealed from the outside by their own fathers sixteen years ago.

The earlier rocket-room apes had stepped out of the picture at that time, leaving their kids locked up in there. No wonder that cruelly imprisoned bunch of sixteen-year-old Neanderthals had become middle-aged killers now, glary-eyed, their idealism shot to hell. Sixteen years of it, living on wormy concentrates, hating the spruce, young commanding officer in the compartment next to them.

If only he could have gotten his side of it across to them—the years of loneliness, the fact that mental toil could wear a man down too. All right, he had a woman to talk to, her face to look at when his nerves started shrieking that he couldn't absorb any more punishment.

A woman's face, a woman's voice to soothe and quiet him. But God, it wasn't a sufficient solace. It wasn't, when sheer boredom had time and again almost crumpled him to his knees.

The fumes were becoming worse now,

unmistakably more acrid. His lungs seemed on fire, and he was down on the floor, babbling. He was reciting, of all things—poetry. Stanzas from a forgotten Earth poet who had lived centuries ago, and died from an overdose of laudanum. Baud—yes, Baudelaire.

He had found the poem in a slim volume the old man had given him once.

*"In murky depths within our minds  
there crouch  
A thousand beasts, sharp-janged, and  
angry-eyed:  
Great hulking shapes that glare and  
spit and snarl  
And taint the darkness with their  
reeking hides.*

*But with the panthers, jackals, with  
the lice,  
With the monsters of all shapes,  
In this menagerie that breeds all vice  
There's one the ugliest, wickedest of  
all—*

*'Tis Boredom! Lost in some wild  
dream or other,  
He hides his face, and makes but little  
pothor:*

*But well you know that cursed mon-  
ster, thou,  
Hypocrite reader, fellow man, my  
brother."*

Yes, yes, well he knew. Those hairy hypocrites beyond the bulkhead knew too.

*How about it, you beetle-browed sons of apes? he thought. Boredom is bad, eh? Boredom can kill? Not self-pity, but just living alone with yourself, looking down over the same pair of knees month after month, using the same hands to manipulate the same controls, rolling the same curses out over your tongue.*

*Hell, why should you want to kill me? We've worked and sweated together, haven't we? Haven't we? All these years together—*

He was dragging himself over the star door now, his breath coming in choking gasps.

The portal in the deck seemed to be yawning again—yawning on the abyss of emptiness which had swallowed up the old man. His mind kept see-sawing, going back and forth in time. With a sob he averted his face while a tarpaulin-wrapped lump of unstirring clay seemed to go sliding past him—sliding down and out.

"Good-by, Dad, and—thanks for everything."

"Jimmy, self-pity will tip the scales against you sooner or later, no matter how strong you feel yourself to be."

Raynor's lips tightened and his head came up. The star door was bolted down fast and had been for sixteen years.

His skull a vast, dull ache, his lungs bursting, he arose from the deck and reeled to the inter-ship audiovisidisk at the base of the control board. While slit-eyes watched him from beyond the bulkhead, he clicked the instrument on, and stared down into it.

Her face seemed to float up toward him out of a misty sea of radiance.

"Darling," he whispered.

**A**NNE HOLLISTER was no longer a very young woman. He had known her all the years of his life, and with each passing year her beauty had waned just a little. She was thirty-one, but she was beautiful still, and he loved her now as he had never loved her in her youth. Every cell of his flesh ached when he thought about her, and he had lain awake night after night, wishing that he might caress her.

She was staring up at him now with alarmed eyes, her lashes throwing long shadows.

"What is the matter, dear?" she asked.

"The brutes have revolted," he choked, his features twitching. "They've drilled a hole in the bulkhead, they've—"

A spasm of coughing doubled him up. He heard the rustle of her clothes as he straightened, knew that a convulsive shudder had taken hold of her. In all the years he had known her he had never once taken her into his arms. Never once—God, not ever.

"Jim, it's the food," came from the audiovisidisk. "The concentrate they've been getting is rotten clean through. Jim, I warned you—"

He drew himself up, his lips livid. "And I said I wouldn't; I refused to. I'm still in command, remember."

"You refused to treat them like human beings. Jim, how stupid do you think they are? Rotten concentrates for them, vacuum-sealed rations for the officers. Oh, I know—psychological considerations impelled you to—"

"It is a mistake to assume that exceptional men can endure exceptional privations," he heard himself reciting. "High-grade men are perfectionists. Disgust or thwart them in any way, and they'll sulk till the sands run out. A single fly will spoil the ointment for them, along with the proud idealistic picture of themselves they've built up in their minds.

"When once you've impaired the integrity of your officers they'll be sure to ask why they should exert themselves at all. The assumption that creative minds thrive on obstacles is a tragic fallacy. Genius has to have smooth sailing, or it functions, at best, on a mediocre plane. Jim, lad, remember that as long as you live. The best for the officers, because they are superior men, and must be pampered."

"Your father said that? Jim, you're delirious! You're reciting by rote something your father said, and *it just isn't true.*"

"It is true, Anne. You're just a silly little girl in pigtails, saucer-eyed because

your mother keeps saying it isn't true."

"My mother is dead, Jim," she said. "She went out through the star door seventeen years ago. But I am proud to be standing where she stood, clear-eyed, sane. Seepage fumes are not making *me* rave."

"Fumes—darling, how did—"

"How did I know? I'm not a high-grade girl, but I have plenty of imagination. If I were in their shoes, I'd drill a hole in the bulkhead too. I'm not as important as you are, I'm not in command. I'm just a ration-room stewardess, and all I do is shuttle concentrates through vacuum tubes to your fine, high-grade officers, and to a crew you've felt superior to all your snobbish life."

"Darling, I—"

"Wait, let me finish. Those poor devils in the rocket room are as human as you are." She brought her clenched fist against her breast. "I've got to speak now while there is still time. You just now thought I was a little girl again, didn't you? Perhaps you won't understand, but I've got to try to make you realize what you've done to them."

Her words seemed to sober him, so that he was surprised by the clarity of his thoughts, unable to understand how he could stand calmly listening to her while the sands of his life were running low.

"Dearest," she said. "There isn't so much difference between human beings. They all live, suffer and die. And that's about all they do. My mother told me that the human brain is just an accidental by-product of evolution, brought into being by the use our ancestors made of their hands when they swung from tree to tree, long ago on Earth.

"Clinging fingers and flexible thumbs developed a mass of gray jelly in our skulls which isn't important, really. It's the heritage we share together that matters. Don't think an idiot can't suffer. Don't ever allow yourself to think that.

"An idiot and a man of genius are

brothers under the skin. I am a woman, and I know."

"Darling, what do you want me to do?" he choked. "Melt down the bulkhead and invite them in? Shall I tell them the truth, that our sealed concentrates are nearly gone, that I've been on short rations for a month? Shall I tell them I'm not fit to live because I refused to demoralize my commmand?"

"Jim, it should be share and share alike. Half the remaining supply of sealed rations should go to them, immediately."

A bitter grimace distorted Raynor's face. "Aren't you forgetting that a dead man can't issue orders?"

She shook her head. "No, Jim. But if you die I'll seal up their share, and see that it reaches them. Then I'll lie down with a will, and open the star door wide."

Raynor turned deathly pale. "What do you want me to do?"

"You said something about—about melting down the partition. Could you?"

He nodded. "I could, but—"

"Then do it, Jim. Get through to them, talk to them!"

"That *would* be asking for it," he blurted savagely. "I couldn't survive ten sec-

onds in the rocket room. The fumes would kill me before they could calm down sufficiently to gouge out my eyes."

Even as he flung the words at her he knew that he didn't mean them. Her plea had germinated the instant she had planted it between the turbulent furrows of his mind, sending out tendrils in all directions. It was the answer he'd been groping for, the one way he could get his side across to them before he died.

They were malicious brutes, but he'd not give them the satisfaction of thinking they'd exacted vengeance for an intolerable wrong. He hadn't wronged them, and they'd get no satisfaction out of killing him when they knew the truth. He did not doubt that they'd bear him to the deck notwithstanding, but, being an officer and a gentleman, he couldn't bear the thought of the brutes plotting his destruction with self-righteous snarls.

He felt light-headed, but his thoughts no longer seesawed. He'd show them that he did not fear death. He'd show them that when brutes kill men unjustly, a brand will sear them till they die. He was a little uncertain as to where the brand would come from or how it would

sear them. But the old man had said that when—

"Jim, get through to them, talk to them."

He didn't answer her, simply clicked off the audiovisidisk and turned from the board. He wanted to say, "Good-by, darling," but he couldn't trust himself to speak.

**R**AYNOR knew that what he intended to do would not be difficult. He'd simply turn on the incandescent jets at the base of the bulkhead, and spray the entire surface of the partition with a weaving curtain of gas fire.

When tension bubbles developed in the translucent plastic, the action of the jets was usually sufficient to clear them.

"Keep the regulator caps screwed down tight, Jimmy," he could hear the old man saying. "You can safely warm the bulkhead until a faint boiling is visible, but not an instant longer. Remember that dissolving impurities form slag. If you cloud the bulkhead you'll never get it clear again, and the rocket room will be gone forever."

The old man had been speaking figuratively, of course. The rocket room would still be there, but the old man had meant that what you can't see might just as well not be. Almost savagely he told himself that he had no intention of clouding the bulkhead. He was going to melt it down so fast it wouldn't have time to cloud.

He'd keep the gas fire on until there wasn't any rocket room or any control room. Just one huge, merged compartment filled with reeking fumes and bestial shapes.

The eyes of the brutes were upon him as he stumbled across the control room, and fell to his knees beside the row of incandescent jets. They were watching his every movement, hoping he would die. He could feel their savage hate seeping

through the thick bulkhead into him.

Well, it wouldn't stop him. Nothing could stop him now. Nothing—

Removing the regulator caps from the entire row of jets with fingers that felt like fungus growths sprouting from his palm, he turned on the gas and depressed the ignition bar with a downward sweep of his hand.

The blast that ensued was like nothing he had ever known. It rocked the control room, blackening his face, and hurling him back against the opposite bulkhead with such violence that he groaned and collapsed, wilting to the deck like a man whose knees had turned to jelly.

He must have lost consciousness for an instant, for when next he knew anything, a weaving curtain of gas fire had blotted out the wolfish eyes of the beasts in the rocket room.

His eyebrows had been singed off, and there was a salty taste on his tongue. Groaning, he spat out blood and thumped his smoldering uniform. If his back had been broken, it didn't matter. He still had strength enough left to drag himself over the gas fire jets, and shame them with his dying breath.

"I'll starve myself, but not my officers. Demoralization starts at the top, and spreads like metal rot. You hear? Like metal rot. You hear—"

The heat was sweeping toward him now in suffocating waves, flowing over him, making his eyeballs crawl. A flame curtain a yard from his face, and beyond it, bestial shapes crouching.

Well, he'd show them. "I've stuck to my code, I've stuck—"

He was tearing at his eyeballs, gurgling like a maniac. The heat was like a volcano turned inside out, but he would go on dragging himself forward through the flames until—

"Mike!" a hoarse voice bellowed. "Put those jets out, and turn on the ventilators! That's it—that's it. Now—give me a



hand with him. That's it, easy does it. The poor guy! Oh, the poor guy!"

Although blinding lights were flashing in Raynor's skull he remembered struggling for an instant, clenching his fists and refusing to be lifted. He remembered opening his parched mouth wide, and trying to spew forth sounds.

After that, he remembered nothing at all.

IT was the worst kind of foolishness. He was weeping. Tears were running down his face and he was sitting in a corner of a big, merged compartment staring up at twelve grinning rocket room apes.

He shouldn't be doing that, he knew. He was supposed to be master of the ship, a strong, silent man—an officer and a gentleman.

Some time had passed, but he couldn't tell how much. His thoughts were still a little confused, but he understood enough to know that the rocket room apes were stout fellows, and—*loyal clean through!*

The one who had dragged him from the jets had a strong and powerful neck set on massive shoulders, and a flow of muscles in his arms that reminded Raynor of ripples on molten bronze.

"Buddy," he was saying, his craggy face split in a grin, "your dad knew they'd be two generations of us would have to stay on the job and do our bit. But an officer is sort of sensitive about what goes on inside his head. He has to keep admiring himself, sort of, and your dad figured it would be better if he didn't tell you too much, and let you think you was running the ship.

"Hell, buddy, officers don't run ships. You had to pilot the ship, sure. But you're just a chief officer. You don't *run* the ship. We run the ship. Always have, always will."

"I know that now," Raynor said, very gratefully.

"Buddy, you're a good guy. Always have been, always will be. Natchrally you went off the handle when we drilled that hole in the bulkhead. But hell, buddy, we had to do that. You was feeding us wormy grub."

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize—"

"Aw, forget it, buddy. It's all for the best. Now we're all together, and we can talk to *her*. We sorta figured you'd burn the bulkhead down and get through to us. We figured if we could talk to the judy in the ration room, see her like you do, we could maybe stand the grub. We don't know how long this here voyage is gonna last, or where we're headed, but I gotta hunch it won't be long now. Your dad told my old man the grub would hold out till we got there."

"I rather think it will," Raynor said. "Miss Hollister sent you notes with the concentrates, didn't she?"

The big ape nodded. "She did, on account of she admires us. We run the ship—but don't get to feeling you're not one of us, buddy. My old man used to say that the guy who commands a ship is just as important as the lads in the rocket room. From rocket room monkeys right down to chief officers we all gotta stand together, and get the hell out of our own little corners. Y'see what I mean, buddy?"

James Raynor nodded, swallowing a lump. "You bet I do, old-timer. You mean there's something in each of us that doesn't like barriers."

"Huh? Doesn't like—say, what do you know, Karnovowitch here was saying the same thing, right before we drilled the hole through. I used to think he was ticky in the coco, but now I'm not so sure. You dress up what you know, and it sounds more like something you've been wanting to hear. Maybe Karnovowitch is what you would call a poet. Maybe he—say, maybe you could loan him a book to read something, eh?"

"Maybe I could," Raynor gulped.