

# Imaginative Tales #4

MARCH 1955

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Light mines were the constant dread of all Earthmen during the Vanite war. Now one tracked Brooks' ship, and the crew knew they had only —

# Four Hours To Eternity

by

*S. M. Jenneshaw*

IT was his baby, Captain Robert Brooks thought slowly. There wasn't anybody he could turn to, there wasn't anybody who was going to tell him the answers. Rank had its privileges but rank also had its problems and this one was the great granddaddy of them all.

"I think," he said slowly. "that we have something like four hours to live. Maybe a few minutes less."

His throat felt dry with fear and he wondered if the others felt the same way. All the officers were new, and this was their first engagement. There was Pearsons from Engineering, his pencil moustache dripping sweat but his face looking perfectly calm. Then Mead, his pasty-faced Armaments officer, and finally Bennett, the philosophic communications officer, already looking resigned.

Pearsons broke the silence first.

"You sure it's a mine?"

"I couldn't mistake it, Ensign Mead said shakily, not taking his eyes off the viewplate. "Training films showed it exactly like this."

The captain caught himself looking at the viewplate again. The small, red dot of the *Tanner* crawled steadily across the black glassite while a few centimeters behind it was a tiny, white speck, inching along at the same speed and on the same identical course.

Death, he thought bleakly. Shattered hulls and exploded men and nothing left that would ever see a decent burial in the rich, black soil of Earth. Minor statistics for the casualty reports. . .

The relentless tick-tick-tick of the chronometer interrupted his thoughts once more and he could smell the sweat in the room and feel the fear gathering in the corners like the shadows did when



you switched off the glow-lights.

"What are we going to do?" Pearsons asked calmly, staring at the viewplate.

There was a short silence and then Bennett turned to the captain. "Any orders, Captain?"

*Any orders.* He had been waiting for that. And now, for the first time, he realized what responsibility meant. A ship, a crew of

fifty, and two hundred passengers. Whether they lived or whether they died — it was up to him.

"How long has it been following us, Turner?"

The enlisted man at the viewplate glanced up. "It just came on the screen. I reported it right away, sir."

"We can blast it out of space!" Bennett said suddenly. "We've got

homing rockets on board that could blow it to smithereens! We've. . ."

The captain smiled bleakly. "You do that, Mr. Bennett. And be sure to say your prayers at the same time you launch your rockets. Even though that mine is a hundred miles away, when it goes off, it's the end for us."

Bennett turned ashy white. "But there isn't any weapon like that!" he whispered. "It's impossible!"

"Mr. Pearsons," the captain said grimly. "Tell him."

"It's a new weapon of the Vanites," Pearsons said quietly. "A conventional weapon would be harmless if it exploded a hundred miles away. The shrapnel would be too diffuse, so would the expanding gases, and there's no medium to transmit the shock waves. But the mines work on light pressure. One of them goes off and it will rupture the sides of the ship—and us along with it. I've seen stereo photos and it's not a pleasant way to die."

Bennett wasn't ready to give up. "It must come on us through some electronic set-up. We should be able to take electronic countermeasures, throw it off course."

The captain looked at him in disgust. "We're a passenger ship, Mr. Bennett. You know we haven't the transmitters or the power to do that."

Bennet's face stiffened. "Then there isn't anything we can do. We're as good as dead."

They were waiting for him to tell them that it wasn't true, the captain thought slowly. They were waiting for him to pull a solution out of the hat, to give them hope.

"You're too much of a pessimist, Mr. Bennett," he said with a confidence that he didn't feel. "We're not dead yet and there's a great deal we can do. You can start by calling all crew members who aren't on watch to the control room. Mr. Pearsons, you check the spacesuit locker for useable suits. Mr. Mead, you're in charge of internal security. That means no rumors. Any member of the crew caught spreading them will be court-martialed."

After they had left, he walked over to the viewplate and stared at the crawling dots. The responsibility, he thought, feeling the palms of his hands grow damp. The awful, crushing responsibility, the lives of two hundred and fifty human beings. . .

The steady ticking of the chronometer seemed to grow louder and he glanced sharply at the plastic face. They only had three and a half hours left to live.

Just a little longer and they would have been safe, he thought. A little longer and they would

have been at the rendezvous spot where they were to meet the task force. A few hours more and he would have been one of the few captains in the Terran fleet to take a passenger ship through a Vanite war zone.

But time was running out.

He brushed a tired hand across his forehead and wondered if somebody else wouldn't have made a better captain. Somebody like Pearsons, who always seemed so calm and unafraid. . .

**T**HREE hours and fifteen minutes, Lieutenant George Pearsons thought coldly. One hundred and ninety-five minutes and the life of George William Pearsons would be snuffed out like a candle. A government telegram to his wife and maybe a couple of lines in one of the New Albuquerque papers. And all because . . .

"Mr. Pearsons," the captain was saying. "The suits?"

"There's a full compliment of a dozen spacesuits," he said, trying to keep his voice from shaking in front of the crew members. "They were all tested recently — shoulder rockets and air equipment work perfectly."

The captain grunted and Pearsons swore inwardly, cursing the quiver in his voice which he suspected the captain had caught. But

that was something that had been with him all his life, he thought helplessly. The blue funk that always seemed to fog his mind in time of danger. Once, when he had been an enlisted man, in an ambush near Fomalhaut. . .

He choked the thought back and forced himself to look at the lines of men that filled the control room. None of them looked frightened, he thought sourly, but then they didn't know what the situation was.

"I'll make it short and not too sweet," the captain said quietly. "You know the chances you took when you were assigned to this ship. You knew she was going through a war zone. Well, the worst thing that could happen, has. We've picked up a Vanite light mine. To be blunt, we have something less than three hours and fifteen minutes to live."

Pearsons watched the blood drain from their faces. They were scared now, he thought, feeling a mild surge of triumph. Even Yates, the scowling, shifty-eyed enlisted technician who had been hauled out of the brig so he could be there, was pale.

"We have a chance," the captain continued gravely. "There's a bare chance that a man might go out there and disable that mine. For that, we need a volunteer."

There was a dead silence in the room and Pearsons could feel his stomach curl up into a tight, hard ball. Go out into the black, dreadful silences of space for a rendezvous with a light mine. Go a hundred miles out into the stillness so you lost all contact with the ship, all contact with life itself, and you were absolutely alone in the immensity of space.

There wasn't a spaceman alive who didn't have nightmares about being stranded in the lonely dark, of floating forever in the vast sea of nothingness. You could see it every time a rocket landed at a port. Spacemen didn't head for the quiet, lonely spots. They had to have crowds and noise and drunken laughter to chase away the nightmares of loneliness.

And now the captain was asking somebody to step into one of the nightmares, to make it come true.

Bennett raised his hand and so did one of the crew members — a skinny kid who worked as a corpsman in the infirmary.

"It'll be a tough job," the captain continued. "It'll take a man who knows machinery and electronics, a man who isn't afraid of space. A man who's a hard-headed realist."

Now that was odd, Pearsons thought. The captain wasn't taking any notice of Bennett and the

corpsman.

"There'll be a substantial reward. All advances that a man may have drawn against his pay record will be canceled. So will all past court martials and present brig-time."

Bennett and the corpsman looked puzzled and slowly lowered their hands. The captain said softly: "We only have three hours left. Pretty soon it will be impossible to send anyone out."

He paced back and forth in front of the men, then suddenly slowed when he came to Pearsons' engineering division. Pearsons frowned. Hadley Stevens, and Marshall— all new men and not even rated. And then Yates, older and cynical, the rated man in charge who was always so difficult to handle. Insolent and unmilitary. . .

Pearsons' mind suddenly clicked into high. Raymond Yates. A record that had always fallen a millimeter short of earning a dishonorable discharge. A gambler, a drunkard, a man who constantly drew on his pay and owed everybody on board. Negligent in his duties, sloppy in his appearance, and currently in the brig for making a pass at a woman passenger. And also the best technician in the crew.

Suddenly there was a noise and a pushing in the rear ranks and the captain was stepping forward

smiling, and grasping Yates' hand.

"That's the spirit, Yates! You'll have all the help we can give you!"

After the rest of the crew had left, a group of shipfitters laid out the spacesuit and Yates struggled into it. There was only the captain, Yates, Pearsons, and the man on viewplate watch in the cabin.

Yates hesitated before putting on the helmet. Sweat was digging furrows down his unshaven face and he wiped a damp hand on his coarse, black hair. His eyes were angry slits and he almost spat when he talked to the captain.

"You think you're smart rail-roading me, don't you, Cap'n?"

"You volunteered, the captain pointed out quietly.

"I volunteered my foot! You, you and you — that's how you did it." He moved a little closer to the small figure of the captain. "I ain't forgetting! And when I come back, I'll think of some way to make you pay!"

"You've got two hours and fifty minutes," the captain said, his face not changing expression. "Signal when you're done and we'll pick you up."

Yates glared, then put on the helmet and the gauntlets and lumbered towards the airlocks. He entered the hatch and the big valve closed slowly after him.

Pearsons glanced at the chronometer and thought shudderingly that the captain was wrong when he had said there were two hours and fifty minutes left. It was actually a little less than that.

The quiet whoosh of air made him turn back to the lock. It was really very clever of the captain to send Yates, he thought smugly. Why endanger valuable lives when there were men like Yates around? People like Yates were more like animals than human beings. They didn't think, they didn't actually feel things like other people did. . .

"CAN you hear us, Yates?"  
"Sure, I can hear you. Radio reception's okay."

"Fire your directional rockets a little to the left, towards Deneb. Otherwise you'll overshoot it."

"And that'd be just too damned bad, wouldn't it?"

There was a click in his helmet and the muffled tones of the captain.

"Follow orders, Yates!"

Yates uttered a wordless snarl, then adjusted the rockets. He had two hours and ten minutes left. One hundred and thirty minutes to disable a mine he had never seen before and to save the ship and the two hundred and fifty people on her. And just incidentally, his own life in the bargain.

Outside of the stars themselves, the flare from his shoulder rockets stretching behind him was all that he could see. The *Tanner* was so far away it didn't even hide any of the stars; its comfortable bulk was a pinpoint of black lost in the darkened wastes.

He was alone, he thought. Absolutely alone in the blackness that stretched for light-years all around him.

And then the nightmare came back. The one where he was standing in the middle of a corn flower field that stretched clear to the blue horizon. Then the flowers faded and shriveled and disappeared altogether; he was standing on a field of pure black slate that reached for miles with nothing to break up the landscape. Then the key darkened and the slate grew misty and tenuous and he felt himself falling into space. Alone, absolutely alone . . .

His scream almost shattered his own eardrums. Then his helmet radio buzzed and he heard the rasping, metallic voice of the captain.

*"I thought you were a hard-headed man, Yates?"*

"I'm as hard as anybody," he chattered back.

*"You better be. You're almost there."*

He searched the vacant stretches

ahead and then spotted it revolving slowly in the blackness a thousand yards away, occluding the stars behind it. He braked his rockets and spiraled slowly down to it.

It was a black, metallic sphere ten yards in diameter. He circled warily around it. At first it seemed perfectly featureless with no indentations or projections aside from the rocket ports.

*"Ninety minutes, Yates."*

He was sweating so badly he was afraid he was going to fog the face plate of his helmet.

He circled it again and then made out the thin, sharp lines that marked a square port on the side. He cut off the rockets and his magnetic shoes drew him slowly down to the sphere's surface. A neatly outlined, square port with even a recessed entrance wheel.

He touched the wheel and then abruptly backed away, shaking violently. It was . . . too easy. A mine like this would be tamper proof, at least as tamper proof as the builders could make it. The port and the wheel were probably a . . . booby trap.

But there had to be some way to get in! The Vanites would have had to enter to set up the detonator and the timer! That way would still be there. . .

It took him a minute to see it and then only because a pea-sized



meteorite must have grazed the side of the mine and flaked away the paint, showing an incision almost too fine to be seen by the naked eye.

*"An hour and twenty minutes, Yates. Eighty to go."*

Goodbye blue skies and mountains and fish streams. Goodbye green grass and roses and the feel of the earth at planting time.

He scraped gently at the paint with a magnetic scraper and then he had it outlined. A square port, about the same size as the one on the other side, with little rectangular strips that might be handles set flush in the metal. He stepped on one with a magnetic boot and lifted up. The handle obligingly popped into view. He did the same with the other one, then bent down, straddling the port, and grasped the handles.

And then his stomach turned over and he was almost sick. This, too, could be a booby trap. They might have guessed that he would be suspicious about the other one, so this might have been the trap and the other one the real McCoy.

HE let go of the handles and straightend slowly up. The Vanties. Did they know a lot about human beings, how they thought? He tried to remember past battles and whether the Vanites took cap-

tives. They did, he thought slowly, and they had earned a reputation for being tricky.

He bent down and looked for the scratch he had seen first. It was a pretty even scratch, he thought. Machine made? Maybe. And then he looked closer and saw the tiny fleck of rust against the shine of the bare metal. Metal didn't rust in space . . . but if the scratch had been cleverly planted in the atmosphere of a planet?

He went back and calmly turned the wheel on the other port.

*"You've got seventy minutes, Yates."*

He glanced inside the port, at the tangle of copper wiring amid the resistors and the huge condensers. A hundred thick wires waiting to be cut, he thought. But which one?

There was a flashlight at his belt and he fumbled for it and flicked it around the inside of the port. Copper wires, some thick and some thin, snaking around the different electronic elements. And one, thicker than the rest, carefully wrapped in insulation and resting on porcelain supports. The power cable, he thought, cut it and the mine would be dead!

And then the thought died as suddenly as it had been born. The mine had been triggered, it was in operation, and the power cable

would be hot. How could he cut it without grounding the power supply and causing a minor, electrical explosion that would set off the whole mine?

He hung in the opening, his mind a frightened blank. The minutes were steadily ticking away and he knew he couldn't delay much longer. . .

Then he spotted the thin, red wires that fanned out like a web along the inside surface of the sphere. Two dozen wires leading to . . . where? He let go of the port and blasted a few yards off into space. The mine was a sphere studded with steering rockets. He slowly counted them. Twenty-four. The wires led to the steering rockets. He wriggled back inside the port, took the snippers from his belt, and hurriedly severed the copper lines.

"I think I've got it," he said finally. "Change course and see if it follows."

There was a moment of silence in his earphones. The wires inside the port suddenly sparked but that was all; there was no sense of acceleration.

*"Congratulations, Yates—you've done it!"*

He grinned in the darkness. "It was nothing."

Then there was a new voice in his helmet. The Captain again.

*"Yates—you've disabled the steering rockets and the mine is now a derelict, correct?"*

He felt like swaggering inside his suit. "That's right, Cap'n. You can pick me up now."

*"We can't abandon a derelict,"* the captain's voice went on calmly. *"You know that. You're going to have to stay there, Yates. You're going to have to explode that mine."*

"Cap'n," he said patiently, like he was explaining it to a child, "if I blew it up now, I'd be blowing myself up with it."

*"I'm sorry, Yates, but it's got to be done."*

He froze there in the darkness, feeling a weakness in his kidneys and then a sudden warmth. "I'm not about to commit suicide, Cap'n," he choked. "For you or anybody else. Either pick me up or I'll come back to the ship—there's enough left in my shoulder rockets so I can make it."

*"If you come back, Yates, you'll be shot, I'm commanding you to blow that mine up!"*

The nightmare was back again. He abruptly knew he was going to die out there.

"I won't do it!"

*"That's an order, Yates."*

Yates cursed, the fury boiling up within him. "You knew somebody was going to have to die out here, didn't you? And you thought it

might just as well be me, didn't you? I don't count! I'm not worth anything to anybody, am I?"

The captain's voice was emotionless. "Follow out your orders, Yates!"

"You son-of-a-bitch!" Yates screamed. "You railroaded me!"

There was no answer. He looked out at the stars and the blackness and then felt something wet on his cheeks and knew that he was crying. My Holy Mother of Mary, goodbye . . .

Nobody gave a damn back on the ship he thought sickly, clinging weakly to the port. Guys like Bennett who had a million dollars and looked like movie stars and were born to wear the purple, they didn't care. They never cared if somebody like him lived or died. . .

**L**IEUTENANT Lewis Bennett stood at the quartz port and stared steadily out at the stars. Any minute now, he thought, there would be the flash of light that would mark the end of the mine and the death of one Technician Raymond Yates. Just like that. One quick, blinding flash and Yates would be nothing but drifting atoms and a fading memory for those on board the *Tanner*. The ship had gotten safely out of range, but Yates was caught.

He heard somebody come up be-

side him but he didn't turn around. He knew who it was.

"I wouldn't advise looking out the port," the captain said quietly. "It'll be pretty bright." Bennett didn't answer and the captain said: "Thinking about Yates, Mr. Bennett?"

"Yes."

"It'll be over in a fraction of a second. He won't feel a thing."

Men were as expendable as rocket fuel to the captain, Bennett thought to himself. He said: "How does it feel to kill a man, Captain?"

"You're forgetting yourself, aren't you, Lieutenant?"

"No," Bennett said, full of loathing. "I'm just remembering myself. You sent a man out to his death and I didn't say a word against it."

"It had to be done," the captain said quietly.

"Yates said you railroaded him," Bennett said tightly. "I agree. You sent him out there when you *knew* he couldn't come back! You lied when you told him we'd pick him up!"

"Does everybody think that?"

Bennett turned back to the port. "Ask them."

The captain looked at Mead and Pearson. "Do you men think that?"

They stared stonily back at him and nodded.

"I had to do it," the captain said mildly. "I had to ask for volunteers

to send out."

"You didn't ask for volunteers," Bennett said dryly. "You played God and chose Yates, the one man whose life you figured was of no use to anybody. And who the hell were you to judge?"

"I chose Yates because he was the man for the job, Mr. Bennett." Nobody answered him. "I was following the book," he continued, his voice edgy. "The book says you do not leave derelict mines floating in space. There was only one way for us to destroy it, and that was for Yates to set it off. I'm sorry but that's the way it had to be."

Bennett sneered. "The book! Was it really worth a human life?"

"Yes," the captain said, slowly walking towards the hatch. "It really was."

They turned to watch him as he left and it was then that the mine went off and the flaming light poured through the ports, pulsing in waves that they could almost feel.

IT was half an hour later that Viewplate Operator Charles Turner picked the object up on the plate and told Lieutenant Pearsons about it. For a moment, Mead and Bennett thought it was another mine. But the object kept gaining on them and it didn't have the same dimensions or mass that a mine would have.

Ten minutes later they could see the tiny flare of jets a few miles off. A few minutes after that there was a scrambling sound at the hatch and then the gentle sigh of air filling the chamber. They watched in stunned fascination as the inner airlock wheel slowly turned. Then the hatch rolled smoothly back and Raymond Yates clumped into the room.

"Surprised, huh?"

Nobody said a word and he went ahead unbuckling parts of the suit. "It really wasn't hard," he said expansively. "I snooped around a little bit more and found the timer and just set it back one more hour—gave me enough time to get out of there. Should have thought of that right off, instead of bellowing my lungs out over the radio." He dropped one magnetic shoe to the deck and looked up at them. "Anybody got some coffee? My kidneys sprung a leak out there and I'm dry as a bone."

Bennett was the first one to step forward. "We think you got a dirty deal, Yates. If you want to sign a complaint against the Captain, we'll back you all the way."

He stared at them in amazement. "Complaint? Me? Against the Old Man?"

"He railroaded you," Pearsons said eagerly. "We all know it."

Yates stared at them. "Sure, "he

said finally, "the Old Man rail-roaded me. He had to. I was the only man who could do the job and he and I both knew it. We weren't kidding each other one bit." He hesitated a minute, then glanced at Pearsons. "I take it back. You could've done it. You're the engineering officer, you know a lot about machinery. But you didn't volunteer and now the Old Man and the crew know you got a yellow streak down your back the width of the Milky Way."

"I volunteered," Bennett said stiffly.

"Glory hound," Yates sneered, taking off the other boot. "What would you have done once you got out there? You know enough about electronics to take it apart?"

Bennett started to redden. "He didn't have to order you to commit suicide, Yates. That wasn't necessary . . ."

Yates looked at him as if he had crawled out from under a rock. "You forgot all about the task force we have a rendezvous with, didn't you?" he asked softly. "Its course goes right past that mine — and now think what a derelict mine, due to go off in an hour, would've done to that!"

Pearsons stood frozen by the bulkhead, his face a marble white. Mead and Pearsons stood by the port, their faces a flushed red.

Yates looked at them for a minute, a thoughtful expression on his face.

"There's all kinds of guts," he said suddenly. "There's the kind of guts it takes to go out and do something. That's one kind. And then there's the kind of guts it takes to send a man out on a job when you know he might not come back. That's another kind. And that's a real tough kind to find. Men who have that kind don't come along every day."

There were footsteps just outside the hatch and the captain came in.

"Aren't you out of that suit yet?" he asked dryly. "You're not in the brig anymore and you've got the watch."

"I was . . . just gettin' ready, sir," Yates stammered.

The captain looked at him with a stern face. "You're a no-good, Yates. You give me more trouble than all the rest of the crew put together. And I suppose it's going to be worse now that you're a hero." Suddenly he smiled. "That was a damned fine job you did out there."

"I did my best, Cap'n," Yates said, managing an embarrassed smile.

The captain put his hand on Yates' shoulder and squeezed gently, "That's why I sent you," he said quietly.

THE END