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GALACTIC THRILL KIDS

by ROBERT SILVERBERG

illustrated by EMSH

Yancey was in space at the mercy of thrill-hungry kids who had stolen a ship. But outer space is no place for kids, who are brave only when they have the advantage

THE bar was a dark, dimly-lit place, with buzzing neon signs droning unpleasantly somewhere in the back. Art Yancey glanced uncertainly at the dingy saloon for a moment, then stepped inside, still walking with the rolling gait he had acquired in five years in space.

"Double Scotch," he said hoarsely.

The bartender, a tall, balding man with a curved ski-jump nose, looked down at him. "Got an ID card, sonny?"

"What?"

"You heard me," the bar-keep said. "No ID, no drink."

Yancey looked around help-

lessly. "I'm just off my ship," he said. "I'm a spacer—starship Valiant. I don't *have* an identification card yet."

"Sorry, friend. I don't care if you're the emperor of Mars. I can get my license yanked for serving you, and—"

Yancey scowled. "How old do you think I am?" he demanded.

"Beats me." the bartender said, shrugging. "Sixteen, seventeen, maybe?"

"I'm *twenty-three*," Yancey said hotly. "Spacers have to be small to keep the mass ratio down. I can't help it if I look like a kid."



"I can't help it either," the barkeep said sympathetically. "But I can't serve you. The local police are getting very fussy about underage drinkers, y'know. Why don't you toddle down to City Hall and get yourself a card, if you're that thirsty?"

"Get yourself a diaper too while you're at it," said a drawling voice from further down the bar.

"Care to back that up?" Yancey snapped. "Come on, buddy—"

"Easy, friend," said the bartender. "Go away, will you? I don't want any trouble in here."

Yancey turned reluctantly and walked away, choking his anger. He passed through the photoelectric doorbeam, out the open door, and into the cool night air. He stood outside the bar for a moment, rocking lightly back and forth on his toes, wanting desperately to hit someone or something.

Red tape. That was it. Here he was, a spacer just off his ship, and because he didn't have the right sort of identification card he couldn't get

served in a bar. Oh, of course they were only protecting the youth of the nation, or something along that line—*damn!*

He looked down the busy street, searching for another bar whose proprietor might be more easily swayed. He spotted one about halfway down the block, on the other side of the street.

Then he felt a knee in the small of his back, and heard the sound of giggling behind him. He whirled—straight into a pair of brass knuckles. His head exploded in a burst of multicolored light.

He slid to the ground, bewildered. The last thing he heard was the sound of giggling.

TIME passed. Yancey had no idea how much; he lay quietly, eyes half-closed, listening to the throbbing in his split upper lip. From somewhere above him in the darkness came the sound of voices—high-pitched, youthful voices, with undertones of hardness and cruelty that chilled his blood.

"You think he's all right?" someone said.

"Yeah, sure," replied another, in a deeper, more confident voice. "A little roughin' up never hurts."

"He looks pretty banged up," said the first voice. "We really gave it to him."

"It was fun, wasn't it?" the second said. "Okay, then, shut up. We got our kicks—and he got his."

Raucous laughter at that. Yancey lay still, feeling the bruises all over his body, wondering who his captors were.

A third voice spoke. "We ought to be at the spaceport soon. You got the keys, Whitey?"

The first voice said, "Sure thing."

Jangling of keys. The third voice said, "I'd love to see the look on old man Harmsworth's face when he finds out we've borrowed his private flivver for the weekend."

Laughter again. Cautiously, Yancey opened one eyelid a fraction of an inch. He was in the back of an auto, speeding along a main arterial highway. There were three men—no,

three boys, he corrected—in the front seat. One of them—a blond, tousle-headed boy, probably the one known as Whitey—started to turn his head, and Yancey hastily let his eye droop closed again.

"What'samatter, Whitey?"

"Thought I heard the dope movin' around back there," Whitey said. "Wouldn't want him to slug us from behind."

"Don't worry," said the deep voice. "He's out for a while. We really gave it to him."

And you're real proud of it too, Yancey thought bitterly. *Damned thrill-seeking little rats!*

He knew what had happened now. He'd been spotted by a gang of JD's—juvenile delinquents—the tough kids who hang around a spaceport town and make it a deadly place between midnight and dawn.

They preyed on spacers, who were lonely, rootless men, the kind who would never be missed by a family or a woman. Spacers on leave and strangers in town were ideal quarry.

Yancey cursed silently. He'd heard stories—spacemen kidnapped and spirited off to Tim-

buktu or Zanzibar or even Ganymede—beaten, stranded.

Why? Just for the hell of it. Just to have something to do, to fill empty, useless young lives. Just for the kicks.

They'd fingered him in the bar. He had been talking too loud, probably, and they closed in and nailed him. A little roughing-up in the street, then a quick ride—where?—and the fun would begin. With jetcars common things and small private spaceships by no means rare, these kids could easily strand him wherever they pleased.

In Alaska, maybe. Or Antarctica. Or in Copernicus Crater, on the moon. It didn't matter at all to them. They just wanted their fun.

"**WE'RE HERE,**" the boy named Whitey announced. "Wake up the creep and we'll get movin'."

Yancey felt a hand smack his face twice, hard, and he opened his eyes. "Cut out the rough stuff," he growled. "I'm awake."

"Welcome back from dreamland, spaceman," said the boy

who had hit him. He was tall, with cropped hair, sharp cheekbones, and—Yancey stared unbelievably—a neat row of chevrons incised into the taut skin of his cheeks.

Yancey allowed himself to be dragged out of the car. He was at the spaceport. For a wild moment he hoped he might spot someone he knew and get himself rescued, but the thought died immediately. They were at the far end of the spaceport, where the private vehicles were kept. Millionaire's Row. No one down here would recognize a jetman from an ordinary commercial cargo-hauler.

The boy with the deep voice approached him. In the light of the main control tower, Yancey saw his face. It was a baby's face, with plump, rosy cheeks and a mass of tangled light-brown hair. *The killer kind*, he told himself.

"Keep your mouth buttoned while we're in the port," Baby-face said. He drew a jeweled pushbutton knife from a pocket and let his hand slide lovingly along it. "Just keep your mouth shut, hear?"

Yancey nodded.

They led him silently through the forest of small craft to one ship that stood by itself in a corner of the field. "Up we go," said Whitey, shoving Yancey onto the catwalk that led to the entry hatch.

Without arguing, Yancey climbed up, and the three boys followed him in. They headed for acceleration cradles and started strapping themselves in. The babyfaced boy left his arms free, and trained a home-made zapgun on Yancey.

"Go on, spaceman. Over there and get the autopilot going. And the first funny stuff you pull gets you a soft burn in the gut."

Yancey nodded somberly. He didn't intend to fool around. These kids meant what they said.

He moved toward the control panel and noted it had already been set in a precalculated orbit. He didn't know enough about astrogation to figure out exactly where they were heading, but he guessed it was somewhere in the asteroid belt.

Christ, he thought. I hope they don't give me a spacesuit when they pitch me out. I'd rather pop quickly than starve on some nameless little ball of rock.

"Go on," Babyface urged. "Push down on the blastoff key and let's get moving."

"What about clearance?" Yancey asked. "You can't just blast off whenever you want."

"Shove clearance," Babyface said. "By the time they notice we've hit jets, we'll be back of the moon. Blast off, spaceman."

Yancey stared at him stonily. "What about me? There'll be acceleration."

They giggled again, all three of them—the devilishly innocent high-pitched boy's giggle that Yancey had heard outside the bar. "It ought to be fun to watch you," said the boy with the scars on his cheeks.

Yancey started to say something, then choked it back. The zapgun in Babyface's hand wiggled menacingly. "Come on, spaceman. If we have to kill you now it spoils all our kicks."

"I'd hate to disappoint you,"

Yancey said acidly. He glared at them, feeling like a fly having its wings pulled off, and reached for the blastoff key.

A moment later, the ship roared upward. The acceleration bashed him to the floor of the control cabin, and he lay there, spreadeagled flat against the desk, watching the blood trickle from his nose and run along the floor. They were still giggling gleefully when he passed out.

HE came to some time later, with the ship in flight and the artificial grays on. He pushed himself to a sitting position and looked around. His three tormentors were having a card game up front.

"Hey, look," Babyface said. "Sleeping beauty's up."

"Yeah," said the boy with scars on his cheeks. He threw down his cards and strode through the open bulkhead to where Yancey was sitting. "Stand up," he ordered.

"Why?"

"Because I said so, little boy."

Obligingly, Yancey got to his feet. He was stiff and sore

all over, and his face felt like it had been through a wringer, but he stood up, wobbling unsteadily. He looked up from his five-six height at the tall boy in front of him.

"Well?"

"How'd you like to take us on a tour of the universe, spaceman?"

"What do you mean?" Yancey demanded.

"I mean that we've only got this one orbit, from Earth to Ceres and back. Instead of us dumping you on Ceres, we want you to give us a little joyride around the sky. What say?"

Yancey shrugged. "I can't do it. I don't know how."

He saw the tall boy stiffen. "Don't hand me that. You're a spaceman, aren't you?"

"I'm a jetman," Yancey said. "I don't know any more about piloting a spaceship than you do. You kidnapped the wrong boy."

A fist thudded into Yancey's stomach. "That's for lyin'," the tall boy said. "We don't like liars."

"I'm telling the truth," Yancey insisted. "I don't know how

the damned ship is run."

The boy named Whitey came through the door. "He makin' you trouble, Slat?"

Slat nodded. "Won't give us the ride. We rough him up a little?"

"Might as well," Whitey said. He jabbed out at Yancey's midsection and the spaceman batted away the fist defensively. For a moment there was a crackling silence in the cabin.

"Next time you do that," Whitey said, "I'm going to cut your hand off." He aimed another punch at Yancey. This time the spaceman let it land. It knocked the wind out of him, but he remained standing.

"You're real brave, aren't you?" he asked. "Fighting fearlessly against underwhelming one-to-three odds. I'd love to take you boys on one at a time, instead of as a gang."

That one hit a weak spot. Yancey saw the tall one named Slat go pale, and the row of scars on his cheeks stood out redly. He retaliated the only way he knew how—with a punch.

Yancey stood it for a min-

ute or so, and then lashed back. His first punch caught Slat just below the throat, and the tall boy staggered back, cursing. Yancey started for him with murder in his eyes, but Whitey tripped him up. Babyface appeared from the other cabin and stood over Yancey's prostrate form.

"You're a tough one, aren't you?"

Yancey made no reply.

"You think you're a real powerhouse, spaceman?"

Again Yancey said nothing.

"We'll see how tough you are when we dump you on Ceres in a couple of hours," Babyface said. He picked Yancey up and hit him. Yancey rolled with the punch and absorbed the pain as well as he could. He had the formula, now. *Don't react.* Keep a poker face, don't let them know they're hurting you. They want to see you suffer—and if you don't suffer, it spoils their fun.

He let them beat him into unconsciousness without so much as a whimper.

YANCEY dreamed of Ceres, and it was a nightmare. It

was interrupted, suddenly, as he felt himself picked off the floor and slammed roughly against the wall of the ship. That could mean only one thing: sudden deceleration had taken place.

The alarm bell sounded, and he felt hands shaking him. "Wake up, spaceman! There's trouble!"

Yancey looked up into Slat's hard eyes. The tall boy was worried. "Come on, spaceman. Up!"

Yancey groped to his feet and let the boy lead him to the control panel. A moment's glance told him what was wrong.

"We're not going to get to Ceres," he said simply. "We've stopped—or *been* stopped."

"Stopped?"

"Someone's caught us in a traction beam," Yancey said. "It's holding us right where we are."

"The cops?" Slat suggested immediately. Yancey saw a muscle start to flicker beneath the boy's scarred cheek.

"Could be," Yancey said. "Except the Terran cops don't *have* traction beams. The only

people who do are the Vegans, and as far as I know *they're* not after you."

Slat stared at him for a moment, then ran inside and explained the whole thing hurriedly to his two companions. The three of them came back together, fortified in each other's company.

"You kidding us?" Babyface asked.

Yancey shrugged. "You asked me a question. I gave you an answer. I say some Vegan's slapped us in a traction beam. It's the only way we could be stuck like this. You don't want to believe me? *Don't.*"

They huddled into a worried-looking little group. Yancey rejoiced inwardly at their dismay.

"You know how to get us out of this thing, spaceman?"

Yancey shook his head. "There's no way out of a Vegan traction beam. We just sit here until we find out what goes."

"Where's this Vega?" Whitey demanded suspiciously. "Out near Pluto, maybe?"

"Don't be silly," Babyface

said. "It's a star somewhere."

"I ain't so sure of that," Whitey replied. "What kinda people is these Vegans?"

"You'll find out soon enough," Yancey said. "They're rough customers. I spent a year there."

"We can take care of 'em," Slat said confidently. He glanced out the port. "Look—there's their ship!"

Yancey followed his gaze and saw that there was indeed a Vegan ship up there, typical bubble-form. And coming down on a grappling line was a spacesuit-clad Vegan, crossing the gulf of space between the ships like a spider traversing its web to reach a wasp snared near the outer edge.

"Let's hide," Babyface said. "Then we can ambush him when he gets here."

"Good idea," Whitey said. "Let's stow in the storage locker here. I'll count to three and we'll all jump him."

"What about the spaceman? I don't trust him," said Slat.

"Stash him away with us. If he makes a noise, we'll let him have it."

THEY opened the big locker with the view-niche in its door and bustled in, just as the sound of the Vegan's feet striking the skin of the ship echoed through the cabin. Babyface kicked Yancey roughly to the floor and they drew the door closed.

There was the sound of the Vegan forcing the airlock hatch, the rough clang of metal against metal, and then he came aboard.

"Jeez," Slat whispered, as he stared through the niche in the door. "He's coming in."

"What's it look like?" Whitey asked, his voice muffled and indistinct.

"I don't know," said Slat. "It's big and wearing a spacesuit, and it's got lots of arms and legs."

"We'll jump it when I count three," Whitey said.

"Why don't you wait till it's got its back turned?" Babyface asked.

"Yeah," said Slat. "It's looking right this way. Let's wait till it turns around. God, it's ugly!"

"I've never seen an extra—extra—an alien being before,"

Whitey said. "Except in the newsreels. I remember a pic I saw about a thing from Sirius that had a hundred mouths and—"

"Shut up!" Babyface ordered. "Don't make it any worse."

"It's turning around," Slat reported. "It's looking the other way. We ought to get out after it while it isn't ready for us."

"Okay," Whitey said. "One."

Yancey glanced up. The three juvenile delinquents were poised near the door, getting ready to charge out. Bright beads of sweat were dripping down Babyface's chubby features, and the scars stood out brilliantly against Slat's pale cheeks. Whitey, in the far corner, was clenching and unclenching his fists.

"Two," Whitey said, his voice wavering a little. "He still have his back turned?"

"Yeah," said Slat. "He's just standin' there."

There was a long pause. Then: "*Two and a half.*"

"You guys all ready?" Babyface asked.

"Three," Whitey said.

Yancey watched, grinning. None of them moved. They stood there, glancing at one another, frozen.

"What's the matter, tough guys?" Yancey asked. "I heard him count three."

Slat turned away from the viewing niche. "It's big," he said quietly.

"Yeah," Whitey agreed. "Maybe we ought to wait. Maybe it'll go away."

"Maybe it won't," Yancey said raspingly. "I heard him count three," he repeated.

He looked from one to another to another. They were jelly-faced, quivering with sickly fear.

"You aren't going out there at all," Yancey said. "You're scared green." He stood up and walked over to Babyface. He yanked the zapgun from his trembling fingers, picked the young hoodlum up, and belted him, hard. It felt good to get some of his own back. The trio seemed paralyzed with fear of the extraterrestrial beyond the door.

He shoved Babyface con-

temptuously into Whitey and turned away. "Don't go away," he said. He opened the locker door, stepped out, and closed it again, clicking the lock shut as he did so.

He turned to face the Vegan, holding the zapgun forward. The Vegan, still engaged in some observation of its own, whirled in surprise, and Yancey crackled out three crisp words in a harsh, clicking alien language.

The Vegan responded with a flood of words, gesticulating wildly with its seven thick tentacles. Yancey stepped closer to the bulky, eight-foot-tall alien, and gestured with Babyface's zapgun. He repeated his three words.

The alien waved its tentacles morosely in semi-circles for a few moments. Yancey could see its hideous face behind the bubble-helmet working furiously. Finally it turned and made its way back through the hatch into the airlock. Minutes later, Yancey felt a jolt as the traction beam broke and the Vegan spaceship departed rapidly for points unknown.

HE turned back to the locker and opened the door. The three young toughs were huddled in the back. Yancey trained the gun on them.

"I've got this thing now, and I won't hesitate to use it. I want you to drop off your knives and other weapons at your feet, one at a time. Whitey, you first."

He watched anxiously, wondering whether the boy would gamble and hurl the switchblade at him anyway, but all the fight seemed to be out of him. Gloomily, he unloaded his hardware and stepped back.

"You next," Yancey ordered, pointing to Slat. It was Babyface's turn after that.

"Now back up," he said. He forced the three of them up against the far wall and scooped up the little arsenal lying on the floor. "We're heading back to Earth," he said. "This'll make news when your gang finds out why you three got sent to the Big House to get your psyches reorientated. When they find out that you were scared witless by a cheap Vegan punk!"

"What's that?" Whitey asked wonderingly.

"Yeah," Slat said. "Jeez, what did you do to that thing? Why'd he run away? What about the ship? Weren't there any more up there?"

"No," Yancey said, as he reached for a length of rope and started to strap the three of them up for safe keeping. "There was just one of them—him. And he had the same weakness you guys did."

"Huh?"

Yancey finished the job and looked up. "He was just a kid. Full-grown Vegans run ten or eleven feet high. He'd stolen a spaceship, and he was out for a thrill. Thought he'd kidnap some Earthmen and see how they were made inside, I guess. But when I took him by surprise and started to wave the gun around, he froze up in a hurry. That sort scares easy when they don't have the upper hand."

He saw three red faces, and grinned sardonically. "Hits

close to home, doesn't it? You nasty little toughs are all the same. You fold when the chips are down. I told him to clear out or I'd blast his goddam head off—and he cleared out."

Yancey slammed the locker door and clicked it shut. He turned away to set up the orbit that would take them back to Earth, and paused halfway to rub some of his bruises. They had really given him a going-over. He hoped the Psych Bureau turned them inside-out.

Damned thrill kids, he thought, as he took the *Ceres* tape out of the autopilot and inserted the *Earth* one. *Yellow inside, that's what.*

He thought of the three ex-toughs cowering miserably inside the locker, and of the young Vegan hotfooting it toward some softer solar system, and smiled pleasantly to himself at the realization that he hadn't had the faintest idea how to fire Babyface's zapgun.

THE END
