

11-“Star Light”

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## STAR LIGHT

Arthur Trent heard them quite clearly. The tense, angry words shot out of his receiver.

"Trent! You can't get away. We will intersect your orbit in two hours and if you try to resist we will blow you out of space."

Trent smiled and said nothing. He had no weapons and no need to fight. In far less than two hours the ship would make its jump through hyperspace and they would never find him. He would have with him nearly a kilogram of Krillium, enough for the construction of the brain-paths of thousands of robots and worth some ten million credits on any world in the Galaxy—and no questions asked.

Old Brennmeier had planned the whole thing. He had planned it for thirty years and more. It had been his life's work.

"It's the getaway, young man," he had said. "That's why I need you. You can lift a ship off the ground and out into space. I can't."

"Getting it into space is no good, Mr. Brennmeier," Trent said. "We'll be caught in half a day."

"Not," said Brennmeier craftily, "if we make the jump. Not if we flash through hyperspace and end up light-years away."

"It would take half a day to plot the jump and even if we could take the time, the police would alert all stellar systems."

"No, Trent, no." The old man's hand fell on his, clutching it in trembling excitement. "Not *all* stellar systems; only the dozen in our neighborhood. The Galaxy is big and the colonists of the last fifty thousand years have lost touch with each other."

He talked avidly, painting the picture. The Galaxy now was like the surface of man's original planet—Earth, they had called it—

in prehistoric times. Man had been scattered over all the continents but each group had known only the area immediately surrounding itself.

"If we make the Jump at random," Brennmeyer said, "we would be anywhere, even fifty thousand light-years away, and there would be no more chance of finding us than of finding a pebble in a meteor swarm."

Trent shook his head. "And we don't find ourselves, either. We wouldn't have the foggiest way of getting to an inhabited planet."

Brennmeyer's quick-moving eyes inspected the surroundings. No one was near him, but his voice sank to a whisper anyway. "I've spent thirty years collecting data on every habitable planet in the Galaxy. I've searched all the old records. I've traveled thousands of light-years, farther than any space pilot. And the location of every habitable planet is now in the memory store of the best computer in the world."

Trent lifted his eyebrows politely.

Brennmeyer said, "I design computers and I have the best. I've also plotted the exact location of every luminous star in the Galaxy, every star of spectral class of F, B, A, and O, and put that into the memory store. Once we've made the Jump the computer will scan the heavens spectroscopically and compare the results with the map of the Galaxy it contains. Once it finds the proper match, and sooner or later it will, the ship is located in space and it is then automatically guided through a second Jump to the neighborhood of the nearest inhabited planet."

"Sounds too complicated."

"It can't miss. All these years I've worked on it and it can't miss. I'll have ten years left yet to be a millionaire. But you're young; you'll be a millionaire much longer."

"When you Jump at random, you can end inside a star."

"Not one chance in a hundred trillion, Trent. We might also land so far from any luminous star that the computer can't find anything to match up against its program. We might find we've jumped only a light-year or two and the police are still on our trail. The chances of that are smaller still. If you want to worry, worry that you might die of a heart attack at the moment of takeoff. The chances for that are much higher."

"You might, Mr. Brennmeyer. You're older."

The old man shrugged. "I don't count. The computer will do everything automatically."

Trent nodded and remembered that. One midnight, when the ship was ready and Brennmeier arrived with the Krillium in a briefcase—he had no difficulty for he was a greatly trusted man—Trent took the briefcase with one hand while his other moved quickly and surely.

A knife was still the best, just as quick as a molecular depolarizer, just as fatal, and much more quiet. Trent left the knife there with the body, complete with fingerprints. What was the difference? They wouldn't get him.

Deep in space now, with the police cruisers in pursuit, he felt the gathering tension that always preceded a Jump. No physiologist could explain it, but every space-wise pilot knew what it felt like.

There was a momentary inside-out feeling as his ship and himself for one moment of non-space and non-time, became non-matter and non-energy, then reassembled itself instantaneously in another part of the Galaxy.

Trent smiled. He was still alive. No star was too close and there were thousands that were close enough. The sky was alive with stars and the pattern was so different that he knew the Jump had gone far. Some of those stars had to be spectral class F and better. The computer would have a nice rich pattern to match against its memory. It shouldn't take long.

He leaned back in comfort and watched the bright pattern of star light move as the ship rotated slowly. A bright star came into view, a really bright one. It didn't seem more than a couple of light-years away and his pilot's sense told him it was a hot one, good and hot. The computer would use that as its base and match the pattern centered about it. Once again he thought: It shouldn't take long.

But it did. The minutes passed. Then an hour. And still the computer clicked busily and its lights flashed.

Trent frowned. Why didn't it find the pattern? The pattern had to be there. Brennmeier had showed him his long years of work. He couldn't have left out a star or recorded it in the wrong place.

Surely stars were born and died and moved through space while in being, but these changes were slow, slow. In a million years the patterns that Brennmeier had recorded couldn't—

A sudden panic clutched at Trent. No! It couldn't be. The chances for it were even smaller than Jumping into a star's interior.

He waited for the bright star to come into view again and, with trembling hands, brought it into telescopic focus. He put in all the magnification he could, and around the bright speck of light was the telltale fog of turbulent gases caught, as it were, in mid-flight.

*It was a nova!*

From dim obscurity the star had raised itself to bright luminosity, perhaps only a month ago. It had graduated from a spectral class low enough to be ignored by the computer, to one that would be most certainly taken into account.

But the nova that existed in space didn't exist in the computer's memory store because Brennmeier had not put it there. It had not existed when Brennmeier was collecting his data—at least not as a brightly luminous star.

"Don't count it," shrieked Trent. "Ignore it!"

But he was shouting at automatic machinery that would match the nova-centered pattern against the Galactic pattern and find it nowhere and continue, nevertheless, to match and match and match for as long as its energy supply held out.

The air supply would run out much sooner. Trent's life would ebb away much sooner.

Helplessly Trent slumped in his chair, watching the mocking pattern of star light and beginning the long and agonized wait for death.

If he had only kept the knife . . .