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THE COSMIC SNARE

by

Milton Lesser

Sub-space was a vast nothingness used for instantaneous travel between stellar worlds. It was uncharted, and — Liddell knew — a death trap!

LIDDELL stared expectantly at the blank screen of the transfer unit. It had been blank ever since he had arrived with his wife at the doorway, enigmatically, mysteriously, sometimes frighteningly blank.

"See anything?" Linda asked. Liddell's wife of one month was a tall but trimly built girl in the uniform of the Transfer Service. She leaned anxiously over Liddell's shoulder now as he peered at the dazzling white screen.

"Not yet," he said, licking his lips. "It was just a hunch, anyway."

"What was just a hunch, darling?"

"That we'd see anything now."

"But you said—"

"I know what I said, Linda. That we'd had enough time to get used to this transfer station. That we'd read all the instructions and advice left by our predecessor. That we'd —"

"Then where's our first customer?" Linda demanded with a pout.

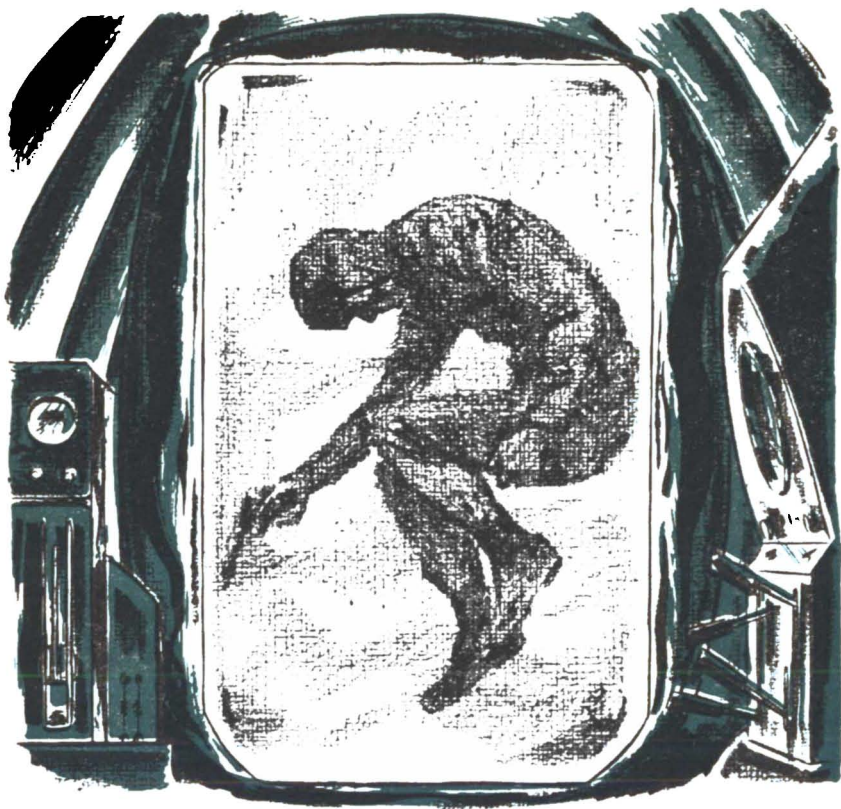
Liddell grinned and craned his neck to peck a kiss at his young wife's cheek. "Don't tell me you're lonely already!" he gasped, feigning amazement.

"No, but —"

Suddenly, the lines of Liddell's gaunt face went serious. "The lighthouse keepers of last century had nothing on us," he said.

Linda nodded. "They were practically in the middle of things by comparison. That's one thing I can't exactly get straight, sweetheart. Exactly where we are, I mean."

Liddell shrugged and offered an expansive gesture which was meant to take in the round globe of their living quarters and the transfer unit. "We're nowhere," he said. "Or we're everywhere. It depends on what sub-space school you be-



long to. You see, sub-space is either utterly nowhere, existing *below* the normal endless but finite, self-contained space-time continuity or else it is potentially everywhere, existing just below the warp and woof of space-time on a thousand thousand worlds”

“Never mind, Lidd,” Linda grinned. “Once you get started on

something like that, you’d keep a gal up all night.”

“Sleepy?”

“A little. That is, as you would say, if there was such a thing as night here. But there’s nothing outside the globe, nothing but that featureless grayness. It doesn’t even swirl. If it just swirled a little, like smoke, that would be some-

thing. But it doesn't even do that."

"Sub-space," Liddell offered. "Absolute nothingness. It's funny, you always picture nothingness as being black. But it's not. It's gray. Plain, featureless, changeless gray."

"Brother!" Linda said. "Can I ever see why they only take husband-wife teams in the Transfer Service?"

"I'll bite. Why?"

"Because a man alone could go off his rocker thinking the things you think. He needs a girl around."

"Does he?" Liddell asked, then waited until Linda had begun to pout before he whirled around and took her in his arms, his back to the blank transfer screen.

"Lidd," Linda said. "Ah, Lidd . . ." But all at once she stiffened in his arms. He could feel her hands against his chest, trying to thrust him away. Her mouth was open but she couldn't speak. With one hand she managed to point.

At the surface of the transfer screen.

"We're going to have company," Linda finally said.

LINDA was in the galley, whipping up a quick meal. Aside from its complete necessity in making the switch-over from normal space to sub-space and back again, that was one of the functions of the transfer unit. Since many of

the outworld colonies still depended entirely on food concentrates and vitashots, a final home-cooked meal would be much appreciated by the traveler through sub-space.

"Scared?" Liddell called over his shoulder.

"You mean that they won't like my food?"

"No, I mean with our first customer?"

"I'm too busy with southern fried chicken to be scared."

"Funny, isn't it?" Liddell mused. "Fifty years ago if you asked a science writer to whip you up a piece about sub-space what would he have said?"

"Oh, something about a silver-hulled space liner shimmering into normal space."

Liddell nodded. "Well, they had the shimmering part right, anyway. But it wouldn't have been a space ship."

"It wouldn't have been a space ship," Linda agreed.

"Because there's no necessity to breathe or to carry out any of the normal biological functions in sub-space. There isn't any heat in sub-space and there isn't any cold. There is only nothingness and nothingness can have absolutely no effect on an organism. In short —"

"In short my friend chicken is going to burn if I keep listening to you."

"— no spaceships. Just people. Shimmering in and out and spanning the chasm of light years instantly."

"Have you any data on our visitors yet?"

"Not visitors. Just one. One traveler."

"What does the screen say, Lidd?"

Liddell read what was there before him for the third time. "Single man. Luna outbound."

"Destination?"

"It doesn't say. Weight, one ninety. The —"

"But we don't collect his fare, so why the business about his weight?"

"Didn't you read the instructions, hon? Because it's forwarded from here, just like we'll forward Mister Smith to his destination."

"Smith? That's his name?"

"John Smith," Liddell said.

"I don't believe it. I never thought there actually was anybody named John Smith anywhere, anytime."

"We," said Liddell, "have a John Smith."

"*Darn* this deep well cooker! It isn't hot enough yet to put a good crust on —"

"A fine time to talk about cooking," Liddell shouted, hoping his voice would carry back into the galley over the click-clacking rac-

ket of the sub-space communicator. "Hey here's more from the Luna outbound station," he added as the transfer screen pulsed and flashed again.

"Such as what?"

"It's still blurry. Here it comes now."

"Well?"

"Hey, what the hell is this!" Liddell cried abruptly.

"Such language."

"It's still blurry. It's flashing on and off, red on and then off to white blank, red on again and off to white blank."

"While you were studying the manuals, need I remind you I was trying to learn how to cook for an interstellar clientele? What does the flashing red signal mean?"

"It means danger," Liddell said. "It means something's wrong and Luna out doesn't have time to tell us what. I don't want to scare you, but better drop your pots and pans and truck something up from the arsenal. I've got to stay by the screen."

There was a clatter as Linda called, "He doesn't want to scare me, the man says. What is it, creatures from outer space or something?"

"Very funny," Liddell said in a voice which clearly indicated he did not think it was particularly funny at all.

THERE was nothing on the screen now but the flashing red and white signal. The complete fragility of their position struck Liddell all at once. The transfer station was a steelite globe a sixteenth of a mile in diameter. It contained the sub-space transfer machinery, complete living quarters for Liddell and his wife and the private and public rooms of a small-sized hotel, as well as repair machinery, an arsenal and a library of the ten thousand six hundred and seventeen possible destinations for an outbound sub-space travelers.

If there was trouble, Liddell thought, any kind of serious trouble — he and Linda could do almost nothing about it. And if ever — for some reason the nightmare thought came to him unbidden — if ever they were set adrift from the transfer station, adrift in the featureless less-than vacuum of sub-space, as had happened once or twice before in the brief history of the service, they would float in a changeless insanity-ridden void forever, their bodily functions suspended indefinitely, only their minds working, fighting the sheer horror of nothingness

"Here's the gun," Linda said. "Did you know you were covered with sweat, Lidd?"

"I was just thinking." He took the blaster and stuck it awkwardly

in his belt. He felt suddenly foolish. The trouble could have been any number of things; it didn't necessarily mean gun trouble. He was on the point of removing the big clumsy weapon from his belt when the screen flashed again.

"He's coming now," Linda said.

He was coming, all right. The screen flashed green for arrival. It was seven feet high and three feet across, that screen, and whoever materialized at the station would materialize in the screen itself.

"What about the danger signal?" Linda asked.

"They always follow it up with a verbal message," Liddell explained. "It usually only takes a few minutes. It —"

"Here he comes!" Linda cried.

Something was shimmering in the screen, pulsing, struggling to bridge the yawning chasm between the space which was not and the universe which was. It gradually took the shape of a man floating in an unexpectedly fetus-like position.

"Lidd," Linda said. "We're getting over the sub-typer."

"A message?" Liddell asked only a small part of his mind concentrating on what Linda had said. The rest of his being was riveted on the transfer screen as the figure there floated closer, still shadowy, but the shadow darkening, solidifying, bridging

"I'll read it to you as it comes.
URGENT LUNA OUTWARD TO
SUB-SPACE WAY STATION.
JOHN SMITH . . . that's strange.
It's stopping."

"It has to stop. Subspace can take only a certain number of verbal units at a time. Give it a couple of seconds."

"How's our John Smith?"

"Still shimmering, but getting more solid all the time."

"Here it comes again . . . IS
ESCAPED LUNA PRISON
CONDEMNED KILLER JASON
SHORT . . . Oh God, Lidd!"

There wasn't a station or budding colony in the galaxy which hadn't heard of Jason Short. His kind was a rarity in the twenty-first century, the strangely mal-adjusted, warped, sneering, conscienceless professional killer. Before his capture, Short had hired out to governments, to private firms, to individuals if they had sufficient capital — as a killer. On capture he had been condemned to death at the luna penal colony but the sentence had been delayed and postponed for several years — all the while Jason Short's notoriety growing — because sociologists and psychologists had insisted on studying Short exhaustively to see if they could prevent a recurrence of his mental sickness.

And now all this, Liddell thought

numbingly, had backfired. Now Jason Short had somehow managed to escape —

Was materializing here, a cold, ruthless killer.

Liddell clawed at the blaster at his belt and brought it up and clear at the precise moment that Jason Short materialized fully in the screen.

There was time for one wild shot, the raw energy searing into sub-space through the screen. Then Jason Short became a solid, bulky but swift-moving figure. He lunged at Liddell and they grappled for possession of the blaster. Linda screamed, but she might have been a hundred parsecs away in sub-space. For all his enormous size and heavily-muscled body, Jason Short moved with surprising swiftness. He used his right forearm like a club, smashing it against Liddell's jaw, stunning him. Liddell went down and Short came down on top of him and the two of them rolled over and over away from the screen, their wildly thrashing arms and legs bringing Linda down on top of them.

All at once, Short rolled clear of Liddell. Struggling for breath, Liddell climbed to his feet, bringing the blaster to bear on the killer triumphantly.

"Hold it!" Short cried.

"Oh, Lidd, Lidd . . . do what

you have to do!" Linda said.

But Liddell let the blaster fall to the floor.

For standing in front of him, waiting insolently, Jason Short had circled his arm about Linda's neck and was holding her in front of him as a shield. In his free hand, Short held a knife, the point barely touching the edge of Linda's ribcage.

"Why," said Short in a pleasant voice, "don't we talk about where you're going to send me?"

LATER Jason Short said, "I see they flashed a danger signal from Luna out. How do I know you won't do the same?" Short was a big man with immense shoulders and heavy limbs but the fluid, graceful movements of the born athlete. Only his eyes, in an otherwise pleasant face, looked brutal. Liddell had never seen a killer's eyes before, but did not have to be told that Short's were killer's eyes.

"You don't," Liddell said. "You don't know at all."

"O. K. pal. Have it your way. I guess I made a mistake at Luna out. I guess I should have killed them. Do you think it matters to me? Do you think it could possibly matter how many I kill now?"

Liddell said nothing. Short licked his lips and studied Liddell's

blaster, which he had retrieved while still holding Linda as a shield.

"Are you going to kill us?" Linda said.

"Lady, I'm not even thinking about it."

"You're not—"

"Yet. The important thing is — where am I going? Is there some way I can go off from here without you knowing where? Or without these machines of yours recording it?"

"The machines record nothing," Liddell said. "It's all up to us."

"Then all I have to do is kill you, and there'll be no way for them to trace me? Is that what you're saying, you sap?"

"That's what I'm saying," Liddell admitted. Linda gave him a startled look but said nothing.

"They must be a catch to it somewhere," Short protested. He almost sounded indignant.

"There's a catch," Liddell said. "Give."

"These stations. It's why they're manned. Don't you think the whole job could be done mechanically?"

"Yes, but —"

"But it's not, Mr. Short. Because there are too many variables. Because sub-space is still unpredictable and the thinking machine has not yet been built which can handle more than a few unpredictables."

"What are you getting at?"

"Just this, Mr. Short. You can kill us if you want to. You can choose your destination, wait while I plot it out on the de-materializer and possibly verify it for yourself if you know anything about sub-space."

"I don't know anything at all about sub-space," Short admitted.

"But," Liddell went on, "you'd be gambling and gambling badly with the unpredictability factor. One sub-space transfer out of two, according to statistics, is not routine. Oh, not essentially dangerous as long as there's someone at the transfer unit station to correct any inconsistencies in transfer as they arise. But if there's no one, you'll float in sub-space forever, not going hungry, not going thirsty, not growing older, but slowly going crazy with changelessness"

"So, I can't kill you."

"Suit yourself."

"We'll get to that later," Short said. "Now, about where I can go: you got any ideas?"

"There are ten thousand and some worlds connected by these sub-space units, Mr. Short. What type of world did you have in mind?"

"Not a new one or a small one. I'd stick out like a sore thumb. I want one plenty far from Earth but still not a brand new, uncrowded

colony. I want a far colony but an established one."

"Deneb Twelve," Liddell said in a very businesslike voice. "You couldn't possibly do better than Deneb Twelve. At the last census it had a population of over a hundred million, but it's more than six hundred light years from Earth, the twelfth planet of a system in which seven, nine, ten, eleven, twelve and fourteen are inhabited or habitable"

"All right, all right. Cut all the details. How do I know you're telling the truth about Deneb Twelve?"

"You don't but you can always check it in our library."

"If you say I can check it, then I don't have to. I believe you. But unfortunately, I know nothing about sub-space."

Liddell shrugged.

"But you're not going to trick me," Short said.

"I didn't say I would."

"I'm saying *I know* you're not." Again Liddell shrugged.

"You want to know why?"

"I'm listening," Liddell said.

"Because I'm going to take your wife with me, that's why. When we land on Deneb Twelve, I'll let her go."

"You can't take her," Liddell said.

"Can't I? Want to get started now, Liddell?" Short asked, wav-

ing the blaster. "I'm ready to get started, if you are."

LIDDELL stared mutely at his wife. Linda's face was drawn and white and for several moments no one spoke. Then Linda said:

"You'd better do whatever he says, Lidd."

"You know something?" Short said, laughing. "You'd better."

Without a word, Liddell stalked toward the de-materializer.

"Sooner or later they're going to catch you, Short," Liddell said an hour later. "Why don't you give yourself up now and get it over with."

"Don't make me laugh. Would you give yourself up? I'm a condemned killer, pal. Sure, maybe they'll catch me on Deneb or someplace, but every day I stay alive is an extra day of reprieve for me, and don't think I don't know it. Now, are you ready with that dematerializer or whatever the hell you call it?"

Liddell nodded and Short said, "Then let's go."

Liddell sat at the plotting table without moving. For a moment he stared defiantly at Short, but the escaped killer got up and placed a hand impersonally on Linda's shoulder. He closed the fingers and Linda's face went chalk-white. He looked at Liddell, challenging him

with his eyes.

"Better do what he says, Lidd," Linda told her husband.

Liddell sat there and didn't answer. Linda turned to Short and said, "Let me talk to him for a minute."

Short shrugged and released her. She came over to Liddell and bent close to him and said, "Listen to me, darling. Do everything he says."

"He's not going to take you with him," Liddell said fiercely.

"You've plotted his sub-space pattern. He could take a chance and kill us both and try the transfer mechanism himself. You forget, he has absolutely nothing to lose."

"Don't you see the way he looked at you? He's not hiding it. He wants you, Linda. If we let him take you to Deneb Twelve, he can lose himself there. With you. It would take the law officers of a frontier world like Deneb Twelve months to find you. I can't let him do it."

"I'll be all right, believe me."

"Linda, listen to me. I know you're saying that because you don't want Short to do anything violent here — to both of us. But there's another way."

"I know. To refuse. To let him go alone — and probably kill us first."

"No," Liddell whispered while Short watched them from across the room, unable to hear the words

they spoke. "There *is* another way. Do you trust me, Linda?"

"You know you don't have to ask a question like that. I trust you, Lidd. I trust you with my life."

"Then listen. I'm going to send you. I don't want to say any more. I don't think he can hear us from where he's sitting but let's not chance it."

"But you said if he took me to Deneb —"

"I'll send you," said Liddell grimly, his voice fading until Linda could barely hear it. "But not to Deneb. Trust me, darling."

"I trust you."

"And we don't have to worry about law officers. I'll come for you."

"But where —"

"Hey, you two," Short yelled suddenly. "That's enough of that. I said I was ready to get started!" He crossed the room in half a dozen powerful strides and grasped Linda's arm. Liddell had time to kiss his wife briefly, quickly, then watched as she went to the transfer screen with Jason Short.

"You sure you won't try any tricks?" Short asked.

Instead of answering Liddell said, "Do you think I'm crazy? You have my wife, haven't you?"

Short laughed and said nothing. With Linda, he climbed the three steps up to the transfer screen. "I

still can't get used to the idea," he admitted. "We stand here, in this screen like this. You press a few buttons, and what happens? We go sailing off into sub-space and the next thing we know we're materializing on Deneb Twelve. It's like magic."

"It's coldly scientific," Liddell assured him. "Sub-space is as real as the normal space-time continuum, as extensive. As a matter of fact, they're co-extensive. They exist together, side by side, but the laws of finite speed, the laws which say you would need all the mass in the universe to travel at the speed of light do not apply in sub-space. Travel is incredibly fast, almost instantaneous between any two points — without the need of acceleration."

"I didn't ask for a lecture," Short said. "Just you send us where we want to go."

LINDA offered Liddell a wan smile. The smile said, better than any words: you're spouting science, the science you love, even at a time like this — and you know something! I love you for it, I love you all the more for it . . .

Now Short and Linda stood within the frame of the transfer screen. Wordless, Liddell took the data on weight and space-shift which he had plotted at the plotting table and brought it to the simple bank

of controls below the transfer screen. Automatically he began to plot in the course by punching half a dozen tabs on one side of the control board. He was aware of Short standing above him, within the frame of the screen, scowling, one hand on Linda's shoulder and one holding Liddell's own blaster — aware of the almost serene smile of trust on Linda's face.

It was better, Liddell knew all at once, far better that he hadn't had the time to tell her. For then her trust would have been shattered by fear

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Short wanted to know.

"I'm ready now," Liddell told him.

"Say so long to the old man," Short told Linda.

"I — I trust you, darling," Linda said. "I love you."

"Now you know," Short chortled. "There's a touching scene. But let's drop the curtain and get on with it!" he added with a broad grin. Short was enjoying himself. Liddell knew. Every moment he had was a moment of freedom he hadn't expected. He would be very dangerous as a consequence. Whatever he did, he knew he had nothing to lose. He had to be stopped.

And Liddell was the only one who could stop him.

Savagely, Liddell threw home the

controls. For a split second, nothing happened. Then, slowly, Linda and Jason Short began to shimmer. Watching them like that, it was eerie. Liddell knew the theory well enough, but this was the first actual transfer he had ever attempted. And Linda was part of it —

The two figures in the screen above him — the woman he loved and the man who had come abruptly to shatter their lives — became no more tenuous than smoke. They seemed to swirl and shift like smoke, to grow thinner, as if a wind had come following blowing. . .

Short's voice echoed strangely from the now almost shapeless fog in the transfer screen. "Deneb," his voice wailed ghostlike. "Deneb, here we come!"

Then the screen was empty. Liddell released the controls and stared for a moment at the blank whiteness his head. He got up and went to the communications board, where he tapped a code message to central sub-space station. The message said:

This is Liddell at sub-space B-11. Received your message and your John Smith. Trouble. Station suspended until further notice. Send no one through as there will be no one to receive them.

The message sent, Liddell replotted the transfer unit, double-

checking his previous findings. He then set the controls on automatic and climbed the steps to the screen. He did not bother going to the arsenal for a weapon. Where he was going weapons would be useless, he thought. Where he was going, no man had ever gone before.

Well, two people had — but two only. And he had sent them.

He was going after Linda and Jason Short.

He took one more look at the mistake he had purposely plotted into the transfer pattern. The mistake which meant that Linda and her captor would never arrive on Deneb Twelve.

Or anywhere . . .

The mistake which left Jason Short and Liddell's wife stranded in sub-space, in the nothingness continuum somewhere between the normal space-time of station B-11 and Deneb Twelve.

It was, Liddell told himself for the tenth time, the only thing he could have done. Trap Short. Trap Linda with him, yes, but at least he could go after them. At least he knew exactly where they were. In sub-space. At the exact point he had plotted on the control board. Waiting. Waiting forever if somehow he missed them when he sent himself through. Waiting in timeless spaceless, airless temperature-less sub-space. Waiting. They would not

miss oxygen. All their bodily functions were suspended. Waiting — possibly to drift forever until their minds were shattered in the awful blank immensity.

A chill possessed Lindell as the automatic machinery suddenly made him shimmer. From his viewpoint within the screen, it looked as if the room and the controls and the screen were themselves shimmering.

He blinked. And opened his eyes.

And stared out on a featureless gray infinity.

On sub-space.

"Linda!" he called. He hadn't meant to shout. He knew there was no air, no medium to carry his voice.

But he heard it — loud, clear.

"Linda!" he shouted again. It was his own voice booming out across the gray void. It was not his imagination. Then was science somehow wrong about sub-space? He didn't think so. But it couldn't possibly be an audible projection of his voice. It had to be something else. Telepathy? It was something like that, he decided. An audible telepathy in a world which didn't obey the natural laws which governed our own universe.

"We're over here, Lidd!" Linda's voice came to him. It was followed at once by a scream and Short's

shout:

"Shut your trap if you know what's good for you."

Liddell swam. The motion came to him unbidden but he felt himself moving through the gray nothingness. He could see nothing except his own arms as he made the swimming motions and moved. Swimming through nothingness? But there was no medium to push against. Another physical law, a law of our universe, Liddell knew which went by the boards in sub-space.

"I'm coming, Linda."

"He's got your blaster. He's . . . I can see you now, Lidd."

There was a roar and a flash up ahead. Something streaked at Liddell through the gray void. Instinctively, he moved aside. It was a beam of raw energy from the blaster and he wondered what would have happened if it had struck him.

He gasped in surprise.

The blaster beam did not fade. It hovered near him. Wondering, he touched it. It was a jagged bolt ten feet long and felt solid as a shaft of steel. Another natural law, Liddell thought. Snafu here. Because the energy beam of the blaster had been transformed instantly into matter. Shrugging, Liddell grasped the beam — which although it seemed as solid as steel had utterly no weight. With it he swam through

the changeless gray murk.

All at once he could see them up ahead, Short and Linda, floating there, two tiny figures a few hundred yards in front of him. Short's blaster roared again — and the roaring was still another violation of natural law. Another beam streaked out and flashed by Liddell. Again it solidified. Ignoring it, Liddell swam forward with the first beam. He began to feel like Zeus wielding a thunderbolt.

He waited until he was quite close to Short and Linda, until Short fired the blaster once more. Then he hurled his thunderbolt.

Short howled with rage and darted away, triggering the blaster again. But this time Liddell was on him before he could take careful aim. Dimly, Liddell was aware of Linda hovering near, touching the thunderbolt gingerly.

Then all his attention was centered on Jason Short. They were fighting for their lives, fighting tooth and nail, where fighting or any physical activity should have been impossible. But what did the edicts of science matter when Short slammed a hard left hook against Liddell's jaw, staggering him spilling him backward through the gray murk?

Short followed up his advantage and lunged after Liddell, straddling him weightlessly as they floated

off, finding his throat with strong fingers, applying pressure.

HE drove Short off him with two left jabs, snapping the bigger man's head back. Short was like a bulldog, though.

Slowly, the fingers around Liddell's throat released their pressure. In a world with no air and where no air was necessary, the choking pressure hadn't damaged Liddell, but his throat ached from constriction alone. He drove Short off him now with lefts and rights to the head. They were weightless, but they hurt. He couldn't explain it, no more than he could explain the sudden transmutation of the blaster's energy beam to solid matter. It was one of the unknown natural laws of sub-space, that was all.

Presently, he was aware that Short no longer fought but hung there in sub-space with his arms slack. He drove a few more left hooks and right crosses into the face floating so near his own, then swam back and clear.

Short hung there, suspended.

"But how," Linda gasped, "how did you ever —"

"Automatic control. I came after you."

"How will we ever get back?"

Liddell looked at his wrist-chrono. "In fifteen minutes, the automatic control picks us up and brings us

back. Are you all right?"

"He didn't hurt me. He didn't have time."

They waited there in sub-space in each other's arms. When, fifteen minutes later, they began to shimmer, Liddell grabbed the unconscious Short's hand and the three of them shimmered together into normal space.

Liddell went to the arsenal and secured Short with arm and leg irons. By the time he called through to Luna outbound with his explanatory message, the escaped killer had regained consciousness but maintained a grim silence.

"You know," Liddell told his wife, "one thing good's going to come of this. I mean, besides recapturing Short."

"Such as what?"

"Such as science always regarded sub-space only as a medium of transfer. But with some of its unusual properties, I'll bet a few first-rate resorts can be built out there."

"You — you're crazy," Linda said, but smiled.

"And what's more —"

"Let me finish for you, darling. What's more, if they're going to build any resorts out there, you're the man to build them. Right?"

"Right," said Liddell, before he kissed her.

THE END