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CHAPTER 1

Scott ran into the situation on a supposedly almost-routine tour of duty on Checkpoint Lambda. It was to be his first actual independent command as a 'Space Patrol commissioned officer.

Otherwise the affairs of the galaxy seemed to be proceeding in a completely ordinary fashion. On a large scale, suns burned in emptiness, novas flamed, and comets went bumbling around their highly elliptical orbits just as usual. On a lesser scale, where the affairs of men were concerned, there seemed to be no deviation from the customary. The Golconda Ship had vanished, to be sure, but it was the habit of that fabulous vessel to disappear once in every four years, while half the galaxy tried to guess where it had gone, and the rest tried to think of ways to intercept it when it came back.

Other human activities were commonplace. Huge bulk-cargo carriers lifted off from spaceports and moved slowly out to emptiness. At appropriate distances the landing grids which had lifted them let go, and the ungainly objects flickered and abruptly disappeared. Actually, they were on their way to destinations light-centuries distant, wrapped in cocoons of overdrive-field which carried them many times faster than light. Sleek, bright metal ships, graceful in outline, shot into being from nothingness and then swam slowly to the point where the same landing grids' force-fields could lock on and let them[^] down to worlds totally new. Mile-long ships with swimming pools and hundreds of deck-levels carried cargo and passengers between star clusters, and small, grubby cargo craft ferried minerals from airless satellites to the planets they circled. Space-yachts cruised leisure-

ly, while battered tramp ships doggedly nosed into queer corners of space upon their sometimes legitimate business.

The galaxy was a very busy place. There was most activity, perhaps, near the yellow sun on whose third planet humanity had begun and from which it had spread to distances incomprehensibly immense. But it was busy everywhere.

A space lane stretched from Rigel to Taret, two thousand light-years from one end to the other, colonized worlds clustered upon it like beads upon a string. Space lanes led to the Coalsack and from the Rim to Betelgeuse. Other surveyed lanes forked, then joined, ended, and began once more.

Sometimes they crossed each other. At intervals there were spaceports for the exchange of passengers and freight between ship lanes. Men displayed great ingenuity in arranging such things.

There was the sun Canis Lambda, for example. Scott was on his way to take command of the checkpoint that floated in orbit around it. Canis Lambda was a yellow type G sun which should have had as many planets as ancient Sol. At some unimaginably remote period it had possessed them. But like Sol, which possessed an unnamed world that blew itself to bits — bits now floating aimlessly between Mars and Jupiter — Canis Lambda had four now-detonated children, reduced these days from mountains and islands to particles of celestial sand. None was large enough to be called a planet and all seemed useless. Yet the sun Canis Lambda burned brightly in emptiness where no less than six man-marked space lanes crossed each other. And men needed a course-marker, a buoy, a transfer-point there. So they built one.

The first two attempts were failures, because they were only buoys. They vanished, and the Five Comets of Canis Lambda were blamed for their disappearance. The current checkpoint was more

ambitious.

Men took an ancient ship that was unsuited for any other use. They drove it to Canis Lambda, took out the overdrive engine and put it in orbit near a mile-thick fragment of an exploded world. They installed radars and telemeters and space-radio equipment. Three decks were filled with growing things to provide food and purify the air. Finished, the former liner was not only a buoy and a checkpoint for space traffic, but it was a hotel and a warehouse and other things besides.

Scott hadn't seen it when he heard about what he was running into, but he'd studied its plans. It had freight doors in its hull. It had lifeboats in their blisters. It had air-locks and any number of conveniences — cabins, a tiny theatre, a restaurant, even a small hospital far down in its stern-most section. Passengers could board it from a liner following one space lane and wait in it for a liner following a different lane to take them to another world. Freight could be transferred to it also. The buoy — the check-point — was a necessary facility for interstellar traffic.

But one day, while Scott was on his way to take it over as his first independent command, several passengers were there, awaiting a ship for Dettra. They were supposed to transfer. But they didn't. This started everything, so far as Scott was concerned.

He heard about it in the control room of the liner taking him to the space buoy. The skipper had checked for passengers to be landed and found that Scott was not only routed for Lambda, but was a lieutenant in the Soace Patrol and headed for duty there. He was traveling as a paying passenger and in civilian clothes, as Patrol men always did when off duty. The skipper had assumed he was only another passenger. But when he realized who Scott was, he urgently invited him into the control room.

"I'd no idea you were Patrol," he told Scott apologetically, "or I'd have invited you here before."

"I've spent enough time in control rooms," said Scott, "not to mind be|ng just a passenger."

"We don't often see a Patrol man," explained the skipper, "and I didn't think —."

"I'm obliged to you," Scott told him. "I haven't worried about a thing since we left Dettra."

It wasn't quite the truth. Checkpoint Lambda was his first independent command, and he'd been assigned to it for a very special reason. The whole project would work out best, and he'd seem better fitted for other commands later, if absolutely nothing unusual happened on Lambda before he got there, while he was there, and after he left. He'd been uneasy on that account alone but so far everything seemed normal.

"I may have a problem at Lambda," said the skipper after a pause. "I'm glad you're aboard to take over if it turns up."

Scott waited. The Patrol was the only interstellar service with authority to order anybody around, but it leaned over backward to avoid any such behavior.

"Just before we left Dettra," the skipper explained, "a ship came in to the space port. She was minus some passengers and some freight she should have picked up at Lambda. But at Lambda they insisted there were no such passengers nor any freight for that ship. They said for her to go on her way. There was no point in making contact."

Scott frowned. At this particular time it wasn't likely there'd be any confusion about passengers or freight at Lambda. It was exceedingly important that everything be right. Within the past months one change in the landing arrangements at Lambda had become necessary. Among Scott's special orders were directions for him to take care of that change. But this was way out of line.

"One of the passengers was a girl," said the skipper.

"She was bound for Dettra. The liner skipper knew her family. She had to be on Lambda! She had to! He put up an argument. So the Lambda Patrol officer came on the vision-screen. He swore at the liner and ordered it on its way. There was some freight to be put off there, too. The Patrol officer refused to take it. He swore again. He was adamant. So the liner had to go on to Dettra. Her skipper told me about it arrhour before we lifted off."

Scott didn't swear, but this sort of event at this special place at this particular time had implications that would have justified much profanity. He said, "And your problem?"

"You," said the skipper uncomfortably. "You're supposed to be landed on Lambda. Before I knew you were Patrol I was wondering what the devil to do if they refused to accept you! I couldn't think of any reason —."

"They'll accept me!" Scott assured him. "Don't worry about that! I'm taking command there. And I'll look into the matter of the passengers and freight." Then he considered for a moment. "I'll ask you to wait nearby until I've checked things, though. The transfer-passengers might prefer going on with you, on this ship, to waiting longer on Lambda." The skipper looked relieved but still uneasy. "I thought it might be — quarantine stuff." "It's not that," said Scott.

He gave no outward sign, but he didn't like this at all. The Golconda Ship was due to land at Lambda almost as soon as he got there. Refusal to exchange freight or passengers could mean trouble then.

"I'll go aboard," he said casually, "and ask you to wait around for half an hour or so. Of course if there's nothing really the matter, you can forget the whole thing. But passengers shouldn't be staying aboard when they're scheduled to leave."

The skipper looked relieved. Scott said, "We're due to break out for Lambda in a couple of hours, aren't we?"

When the skipper -agreed, Scott said casually, "I'll get set for landing,|

He left the control room and went to his cabin. A Patrol man traveled light. There was no great amount of preparation to make. He did write a brief, specific report of what the skipper had told him. He didn't need to draw any inferences. Headquarters could put two and two together. But it would be a long time getting action.

There'd have been no need for a buoy if there were a habitable world within a reasonable distance. But the next port beyond Lambda was six days' journey in overdrive — many light-years in normal space. There'd be no Patrol ship at that port. It could be fifteen days or more before the seemingly innocent news from the checkpoint would reach an operating Patrol base with an available ship. Then it would be acted on, but it could be thirty days or longer before an armed ship could be ordered out and arrive at Checkpoint Lambda. Which would be too late. A tale of passengers not transferring and freight undelivered could mean that the most stupendously profitable crime in human history was under way.

It could also mean murder on Lambda.

Which was exactly what Scott had special orders to prevent.

He looked at his watch. It was midday mess-time by the liner's clocks. He abruptly found that he couldn't eat. But he did look into the liner's dining saloon, and eating seemed less possible than ever. There were families with children. There were honey-mooners. There were elderly people for whom the discomfort of going into and breaking out of overdrive was distressing in the extreme. There were young people. None of them had the least imaginable link with the Golconda Ship, but Scott knew that the dining-saloon on Lambda might have looked like this not long ago. It wasn't likely that it looked like this now.

The reason was the Golconda Ship. Ordinary shipments of treasure by space craft were routinely put under the special protection of the Space Patrol. The transfer of thousands of millions of credits in interstellar currency happened often enough. In such cases the Patrol made a routine check of the ship's proposed passengers, made an equally routine check of the crew, and then briskly examined freight parcels. The checking of individuals would show up anybody with ideas of traveling as passengers, then seizing the ship in space. Examination of freight would disclose ambitious people with ideas of stowing away for any similar purpose. Such precautions had

always been enough. But a report of passengers who didn't transfer to their scheduled ship indicated that something else had happened. To Scott's first independent command. And while he was on the way to it.

The Golconda Ship's crew hadn't been checked. It wasn't necessary. It came from some place, nobody-knew-where, with a cargo of treasure its crew had acquired, nobody-knew-how. In theory, Scott needed only to go to Lambda, take command, and see that when the Golconda Ship arrived there, there was no trouble with the Five Comets. Recent computations had said there could be trouble. Then he was to see that its incredibly valuable cargo was divided into shipments of reasonable size and, in course of time, transferred to a series of other ships which would deliver each fraction of the whole to a different colonized world. That was all. It was almost commonplace. But passengers — including a girl — hadn't left the checkpoint when they should. Freight had been refused. And strangest of all, a supposed Patrol officer had sworn at the skipper of a merchant ship and ordered him to go on.

There should be no weapons on Lambda to back up a threat. A Patrol officer shouldn't threaten, anyhow. He was violating all discipline if he used profanity or made threats of any kind to a civilian. The officer who'd sworn at a liner-skipper didn't sound like a Patrol officer.

Scott very grimly decided that he wasn't.

The Golconda Ship would be the answer. Its fabulous riches and impenetrable mystery made it the subject of feverish speculation over half the occupied galaxy. Four ships in turn had made voyages to an unknown destination and returned. A fifth was somewhere out in space now. The first had appeared from nowhere years ago, with a cargo of treasure that still seemed unbelievable. There'd been fighting on board, and the first Golconda Ship's crew was smaller than even a small space tramp should carry. Apparently they'd killed each other off and were down to a skeleton crew which brought the ship to port. But they kept their lips tight-locked. They had treasure of greater value than any ship on any space-voyage or any sea had ever brought to port before. But nothing criminal could be proved against them. Nothing of any use could be learned from them. Ultimately they scattered, every man a multi-millionaire, and the secret of where they'd obtained their treasure still intact.

Four years later the same men gathered again. They had another ship built. It was a very special ship indeed. They went aboard and out to space. Nobody knew where they went. They were gone six standard months. They came to port again with even more treasure than before. Again they kept their mouths shut. Once more they scattered, and every man was a multi-multi-millionaire. The second Golconda Ship had brought back more wealth than most planetary treasuries contained. And nobody knew where it was found or how it was gathered or even — actually — how much there was of it. But the sudden excess of riches caused a financial crisis on the world where they landed it.

A third Golconda Ship and a fourth had made voyages, each time with a crew whose every member was so many times a millionaire that an estimate of his wealth was meaningless. Now a fifth Golconda Ship was due, to make them richer still. But this time it would not make port where an embarrassment of riches would cause a financial panic. It would land at Lambda.

And this was why a few non-transferring passengers and a threatening Patrol officer on Lambda made Scott feel grim and savage and almost helpless as he watched the diners in this space liner's dining saloon.

They were innocent bystanders. Their lives shouldn't be endangered. If this liner made freight or passenger-transfer contact with Lambda, they would be in trouble — if things were as wrong as they appeared. He, Scott, would have to arrange matters so that he took all the risks. And, acting alone, the risk would be practically suicidal.

He was about to move away from the doorway when loudspeakers all over the ship blared, chorus; *"Attention all passengers! Attention all passengers! Breakout from overdrive coming!*

Breakout from overdrive coming!"

There were unhappy sounds here and there. Overdrive was the only conceivable way by which space traffic could be moved across light-centuries of space. But ways to mitigate the physical discomfort of going into or out of it had not been developed successfully.

"This is a checkpoint breakout, at Checkpoint Lambda," the voice said cheerfully. *"// you wish, stewards will provide you with anti-malaise pills to reduce breakout discomfort. We are required by law to report our passage past the checkpoints set up along the space lanes we follow. Usually that is all that hap-*

pens. Today, though, we have a passenger to transfer by tenacle to the buoy Lambda. It will be interesting ! to watch. This checkpoint buoy was formerly a crack [interstellar liner. In its day —"

Scott moved *tiff* to the control room as the brisk voice described the former liner now floating as a hulk in emptiness. It was still equipped with the solar system drive-engines which could shift its position about the local sun, but they could not conceivably drive it to any other solar system.

Here it was, and here it must remain, depending on passing ships for its contacts with the rest of the galaxy. The voice mentioned antennas and radar-mirrors and telemetering equipment as if they were strange. It pictured the transfer of a passenger by space tentacle as an operation of vast interest. Scott reached the control room and heard a mate off to one side completing the saccharine speech into a microphone. The skipper nodded a greeting. He looked uneasy. Every skipper worried about breakout. There was no authenticated record of a ship breaking out to collide immediately with a planet or asteroid or a sun's blazing photosphere, but a ship did come back to normal space almost at random.

A voice from overhead in the control room said with careful distinctness, *"When the gong sounds, breakout will be exactly in five seconds."*

There was a slow, monotonous tick-tock-tick-tock. It lasted an interminable time. Then a recorded gong sounded, and the same carefully distinct voice said, *"Five-four-three-two-one —"* The vision-screens flickered. Everybody on the liner felt a ghastly dizziness, and the sensations of a spinning, spiral fall. Then there was nausea, quick and sharp and revolting, but mercifully it lasted only a heartbeat.

Then the screens blazed with light. A thousand million specks of brightness glittered upon the formerly

rust-red screens. A tinny voice said, *"Checkpoint Lambda. Checkpoint Lambda. Report. Report,"* and a tiny whining sound began to come from the liner's automatically taped log which was now broadcasting in a high-speed transmission for the checkpoint to record. The Milky Way sprawled across no less than four vision-screens, and the distorted black nebula, the Coalsack, loomed large and near. It was of another shape than when seen from Earth. To the left, and ahead, a bright yellow sun with a barely perceptible disk shone luridly. There were peculiar luminosities close by. They would be the Five Comets of Canis Lambda; matters of interest to professional astronomers but not usually to anybody else. Scott, though, regarded them with a frown. The liner's skipper shook his head.

"Good that we broke out short," he observed. "I'd hate to come out of overdrive close to them!"

Scott said nothing. All overdrive runs were timed to stop short of their destination, with shorter jumps to closer approximation. The odds against collisions on breakout were enormous, and research expeditions had actually penetrated the hearts of those clumped meteoric hordes which were cometary heads and nuclei. But that was a hair-raising trick, and possible only by the most tedious and painstaking matching of velocities. One definitely wouldn't want to break out inside a comet. And meteor-streams trailed most of them. The Five Comets of Canis Lambda were particularly undesirable close neighbors for space craft. Two robot checkpoints in succession had

vanished from orbit around this sun. Still, most ships merely reported their passage there and went on to the infinite emptiness beyond.

"Umph," said the skipper. "We'll go on in."

The operation of approaching a landing was much more complicated on a liner than on a Patrol ship. There was verification of the ecliptic plane. There was careful measurement of distance. Micrometric adjustment of the short-jump relay. A man couldn't time an overdrive jump to less than the fiftieth of a second. A properly timed relay could split a fifty-thousandth. The figures were checked, and checked again, and the settings made and verified. All the while the ceiling speaker continued to repeat metallicly, "*Checkpoint Lambda. Checkpoint Lambda. Report. Report.*" The call had been traveling at the speed of light for almost an hour before the liner picked it up from the yet unseen and unseeable space buoy. The liner's automatic reply was now traveling back to it. But the ship itself would get there before its broadcast.

Another warning to passengers. A gong. A countdown. Then there was dizziness once more, and the feeling of falling, and intolerable nausea. The screens flickered and rearranged the innumerable specks of light which were stars. And then, suddenly, the sun Canis Lambda was blindingly bright with a disk half-a-degree across, and the call from the ceiling speaker became a shout for the fraction of a syllable before the automatic volume-control cut it down.

The skipper looked pleased. One does not often have a chance to show off before a Patrol man. He watched complacently, giving no orders, while the direction of the checkpoint signal was ascertained and its distance measured. Then the liner began to drive toward it on that slow solar system drive by which men first explored the planets of the First System. It was necessary for lift-offs and landings. But Scott stared ahead. The Five Comets were heading in toward the sun; five separate luminosities, some larger and some smaller, some with enormous trailing tails and others with lesser ones. All were concentrated in one very small region of the sky.

Scott didn't like the look of things, but unless he knew their distance he couldn't tell how close together they really were. Even then, distances in space were not easily realized. There was no believable sensation of depth where astronomical objects were concerned. Everything looked flat. It was impossible to see more than angular relationships. Actual distances were no more than numerals on paper. But still Scott didn't like what he saw.

"Very nice work," he said politely. "I'll go get into my vacuum-suit. I'll be back by the time you've raised the buoy."

He went back to his cabin and changed his civilian clothes for his uniform. He put on the Patrol space suit that was so much less bulky than the vacuum equipment used on merchant ships. It took a considerable time. Then he picked up the report he'd prepared and returned to the control room. The skipper was red-faced and angry and apprehensive.

"Look here!" he greeted Scott indignantly. "They got our approach-call. They said, 'What ship's that?' When I told them they didn't answer! They don't answer now!"

As if deliberately to contradict him, the communicator-speaker said harshly. "*There is nothing to come aboard you. No freight or passengers will be accepted. Proceed on your voyage. Message ends.*"

The skipper looked at Scott.

"What am I to do?"

"Proceed on your voyage," said Scott drily, "as far as the space buoy." He hesitated a moment, then said, "As an extreme precaution, put a man by the overdrive button. Set it up to move the ship a short jump away — if they get too insistent."

The skipper gave orders. Even a brief period in overdrive would put the liner beyond this solar system. Up to now, the skipper had been concerned only because he had a passenger who might be refused by Lambda. There was no precedent to tell him what to do. But Scott had asked for a

precaution which made it more than mere irregularity on the part of the checkpoint. There was more wrong here than passengers who didn't change ship and freight that wasn't accepted. Scott had come to that conclusion earlier. The skipper said uncomfortably, "I don't understand this!"

Scott replied, "Presently, you will."

To him the situation was self-evident. The Golcon-da Ship was coming back from wherever it had gone on its fifth treasure-hunting voyage. It was going to make port at Checkpoint Lambda instead of a normal space port. It planned to distribute its riches among the financial institutions of a dozen or a hundred worlds instead of one. It was a very sound idea provided that the secret of its intention — which even now Scott didn't feel he could reveal — and the time of its arrival remained unknown to anybody but the commanding officer of Checkpoint Lambda, until after the operation was over. But that apparently hadn't happened.

Taking into consideration a leak in highly classified information, and the report about the passengers for another liner, and now the insistence that this liner should go on without attempting further communication, Scott could have written a very plausible outline of events and conditions on the checkpoint.

Someone who knew where the Golconda Ship would reappear could have organized what could be the most profitable criminal enterprise in human history. Men could have taken passage from various worlds to Lambda, there to wait for transportation elsewhere. Other men from other worlds could arrive to add to their number. Then, suddenly and without warning, the pseudo-passengers could act. It could be swift and terrible. They'd take the soace buoy, perhaps with crackling blasters. They might capture and imprison the crew and the authentic passengers. On the other hand, they might not take that risk.

In any event, if that had happened, the present occupants of Lambda would be waiting for the Golconda Ship to arrive and to link to the buoy for heavy-freight transfer. Then there would be swift and terrible action. It was unlikely that anybody on the Golconda Ship would survive. And then the captors of that ship would sail away with wealth so vast that divide it as they might, no one of them would ever be less than fabulously rich.

All this was inference. Only Scott suspected it, and there was no Patrol ship which could be summoned and arrive there within weeks. Scott could make a part of the crime impossible. But there were the Five Comets. If any part of the crew, or anyone listed on the passenger list was still alive it would in effect be murder unless he went aboard and attempted the impossible. He had to prevent their deaths, if they hadn't already been murdered. The fact that even the attempt would mean that he might be killed couldn't alter the fact that he had a clear obligation.

But all this was still deduction, even though the facts allowed of no other interpretation. Scott was wriily contemplating the total problem when the communicator-speaker rasped, "*What the devil are you doing? There's nothing to go aboard you and nothing will be received. Get on course and go away!*" ~ Somehow the voice sounded like someone speaking correctly against his usual habit — in order to seem something he was not.

Scott went to the transmitter. He said formally, "Calling Checkpoint Lambda. This is Lieutenant Scott, Space Patrol. I have orders to take command of the checkpoint. I am coming aboard. You will prepare to receive me. Message ends."

There was an indefinable sound, as if someone had uttered a choked exclamation. Then silence. Scott knew what was happening, of course. There was a conference, on the buoy. To decide what to do about him. Scott moved the microphone to one side and

said in an official voice, "Captain, if there is difficulty here I shall commandeer this ship by Space Patrol authority to stand off this checkpoint and warn all other ships of suspicious actions aboard and not to make contact with it. We will request that all ships report the situation to the Space Patrol."

The skipper of the liner gaped at him. Scott pointed to the microphone close to his lips. The sound of

his voice would have changed as he spoke to the skipper, but he'd have been overheard. They've have heard him on the buoy. He could actually have done what he'd just mentioned. But there were the Five Comets. And also there was an unwritten rule in the Patrol that a Patrol man never waited for help, though he might send for it. In the long run, it paid off.

He put the microphone aside. "Keep a man at the overdrive button," he said, frowning. "If anything leaves Lambda headed for this ship, he'd better push it. I don't intend to keep you here, of course. It wouldn't be practical. But I don't like this!"

The skipper opened his mouth to ask a question, but a duty-man across the control room said, "I've got the buoy, sir."

A vision-screen faded out and brightened again with a relayed telescopic image. It showed first a monstrous, glittering mass of unoxidized metal that was a fragment of one of the planets Canis Lambda had lost aeons ago. They'd blown themselves to bits like the fifth planet in the First System. Now it was an asteroid, too small to be called a planet or to have an atmosphere or to be of any use except the one that was made of it. It was a marker. Its orbit around the sun was nearly circular and could be computed with precision. And the buoy stayed close to it. Ships seeking the former liner, now a freight station and hotel, could know exactly where to find it in the three-hundred-million-mile orbit the checkpoint followed. The buoy would, quite simply, be where computation placed the marker. And that was known and printed for every imaginable month, day, and hour far into the future.

It loomed large as the magnification on the screen increased. A twinkling speck appeared beside it. Scott stared and shook his head. The Five Comets on the way, and the buoy not moved to safety? Even criminals . . . But then his lips tensed. Things looked worse than he'd supposed.

The buoy was — had been — a ship not unlike the one Scott was on. Now it sprouted radio and radar and telemetering equipment seemingly by the hundreds of pieces. By the size of the ship, Scott could now guess distances. The glittering marker-asteroid was about two miles from the buoy. They floated in the same orbit, very near each other. More magnified now, peculiar ringed depressions appeared in the substance of the marker. They were craters, like those found on the inner moons and Mars and Mercury in the First System. They were impact-craters from bombardment of the asteroid by rocky masses hurtling through the sky. They were evidence that space wasn't always empty where the checkpoint floated. Two robot checkpoints had vanished from their orbits here, and astronomers blamed the Five Comets and pointed to the impact-craters as proof that they were the cause.

Scott turned his head. There were the vaguely circular patches of brightness against the stars. They were the Comets, on schedule. Their orbits were commensurable, and every so often they reached aphelion all together. This was such an occasion. It had been known for a long time, but the buoy was ignoring it. It floated obliviously in space, some tens of times its own length from its marker-asteroid.

"I'll go down to the air-lock," said Scott. "Keep your man on the overdrive button. After I'm aboard, wait nearby until I release you or at least until half an hour has passed. And —" he passed over his written report — "see that this gets to a Patrol office as soon as possible.

He went down to the air-lock. Liner crewmen waited to let him out. Merchant ships carried many more men than did comparable Patrol ships. They operated more elaborately. Quite unnecessarily now, they checked the tuning of his suit to communicator-frequency to make sure he'd overhear all talk between the liner and Lambda, and that he could take part in it.

For a long, long time there was nothing. He heard small sounds from someplace where a microphone was open. Then a voice in his helmet-phones said ungraciously, "*We'll receive Lieutenant Scott. Put him in a space suit. We'll send over a tentacle for him.*"

The liner skipper's voice came through the same headphones in Scott's helmet.

"He's on his way to the air-lock."

Scott watched the small monitor screen in the airlock wall. Its function was to show the immediate outside of the lock, to facilitate emergency operations of any kind. At first Scott could only see a shining field of stars. Then slowly the glittering metal object which was the space buoy seemed to creep past the edge of the screen and into plain view. Its steel hull was coated with that golden plating which old-style overdrive fields required of ships they transported. There were ports along the fish-shaped flanks. There were cargo doors. There were lesser doors which would be personnel air-locks. And there were jungles of antennae for communication and meteor-watch and telemetry at different spots.

Scott's eyes fixed themselves on an open air-lock door. It could be nothing deadlier than a door already opened for him to enter. But a short-range rocket could issue from it, if any had been shipped to the buoy as freight.

The star-field moved. The liner was shifting position. It changed its angle to the buoy until, if there were a missile in that open lock, it would no longer bear on the liner. It implied an informed uneasiness on the part of the liner's skipper. Scott took time out to approve of him.

"Here comes our tentacle," said the grating voice.

Something slender and worm-like came out of an opening. It writhed and straightened, quivered, and continued to extend itself. It came fumbling across the emptiness between the two ships. Scott closed the inner lock door. He felt his formerly flacid vacuum-suit swell out swiftly. He saw the air pressure gauge needle swing to zero. A flickering yellow light told him that he might open the outer lock-door. He opened it.

It was not a new experience to look out upon infinite nothingness. The liner's artificial gravity made the bow of the ship seem up and the stern down. But he felt that he stood on an unguarded threshold with pure abyss before him. Some hundreds of yards away the space buoy moved very slowly past. That was stability. The liner was stability. But in between lay such a gulf that all his instincts warned him shrink away.

He grew angry, as he always did when he felt weakness in himself. He watched the wobbling tentacle as it groped toward him. It was not like an inanimate thing at all, but it gave an appalling impression of stupidity and of stumbling ineptitude. It reached the liner's air-lock.

Scott hooked his belt to it. It began to retract. It pulled him out of the air-lock. He ground his teeth as he felt emptiness below him — when he knew that he could fall for thousands and thousands of years and never reach anything at all.

The harsh voice said, *"You can go now. He's on the way."*

As if in response, the liner surged ahead. At high acceleration it darted away from the space-buoy. It dwindled...

The tentacle ceased to draw Scott toward the buoy. It held him still in the void. Then it stirred as if impatiently. But the liner was still within space-suit communicator range. When it disappeared in overdrive, though, something would happen. The tentacle could thrust Scott away to its own fullest extension with such violence that when it stopped he'd be snapped off its end to go floating away in emptiness forever. Or it could draw back, pulling him toward the buoy's metal hull with such velocity that he'd crash against the hull-plates, bursting his suit and helmet, turning into a horrible bubbling thing as his blood and tissues changed to steam in emptiness. 'All things considered, those appeared to be the alternatives as soon as the liner went into overdrive.

Scott inconspicuously unhooked his belt. He held onto the tentacle with a space-gloved hand. He'd made a third alternative possible. The tentacle could extend furiously or retract furiously. But he'd be left floating a few hundred yards from Lambda, with a reaction-jet for propulsion as he tried to fight his way inside.

This last, rather than the others, was what he actually expected.

CHAPTER 2

But the liner checked its motion. It stopped some five miles away, where it was merely a silver

splinter in space, far beyond the mile-thick asteroid with the impact-craters on its surface. The skipper's voice came, dourly, *"We'll watch him over."*

Then Scott said measuredly, "I left orders with the liner's skipper, you know."

He held on to the tentacle while his fate was debated. He heard the faintest possible sounds. A microphone was open somewhere. There was argument. He heard voices.

"... crazy fool! He'll ..." *"... that liner ..."* *"... told you to take ..."* *"... what's wrong with ..."* *"... he can't do anything ..."* Then a sneering, *"... nice company for Janet ..."* And then an authoritative *"... Bring him aboard. Then we'll decide ..."*

Scott clung to the end of the tentacle. The liner floated in space, miles away. Her skipper would be watching, of course, and he was showing a sudden perceptiveness. He'd moved the liner. Sound thinking. He wasn't trying to communicate with Scott. Proper behavior — leaving the conduct of this affair to a Patrol man. With a man ready to throw the liner into overdrive, it was safe from destruction by — say — a rocket missile, if any had been gotten to the buoy in the guise of freight. But anything that looked suspicious or unusual would send the liner away, for the sake of her passengers. Anything causing alarm on the liner would be distinctly unwise. Anything causing the liner to linger near the buoy, on orders from Scott with the authority of the Patrol behind him, could be disastrous to an illegal enterprise, because if the Golconda ship appeared and found itself not alone at the checkpoint, it would be very cagey toward both the buoy and the liner. So nobody on the buoy wanted the liner to be dissatisfied.

Scott held on to the tentacle. It began to retract once more. Now it drew him smoothly and steadily toward Checkpoint Lambda. That golden-colored object grew larger, became huge, turned monstrous. Its welded outer hull-surface was very near . . .

Scott's magnetic shoe-soles touched and clung with that peculiar sticky adhesion which never felt really dependable. He released the tentacle, which went into

its small hole in the electroplated metal of the buoy's hull. There was a door there, which did not open. Scott was isolated on the outer skin of what once had been a liner of some thousands of tons capacity. He waited. The scarred and pitted asteroid-fragment seemed overhead. It looked as if it should be falling upon Scott, to crush him. But Scott was accustomed to that sort of illusion. He waited to be admitted. He guessed grimly that either much preparation for his reception was going on, or else that the buoy waited for the liner to go away.

Presently he said in a bored voice, "I'm waiting to come in a lock."

His tone was the kind that already-disturbed men halfway through a crime would not be ready for. It didn't match the situation. They should be uneasy, not knowing whether he knew anything or had guessed everything. A bored tone didn't fit! Criminals in an act of law-breaking could be baffled. They might be uneasy.

They were. There was a delay of perhaps three-quarters of a minute. Then there were clankings, reaching the air in Scott's space suit through his metal soles. A lock-door swung out and open. Scott went unhurriedly to it. He entered, and the sudden tug of artificial gravity restored sensations of up and down. He very matter-of-factly closed the outer door. He felt his suit go limp as air came in. He opened the inner lock-door and walked out of the lock into the ship-turned-space buoy.

There was nobody to greet him. There was no one in sight at all. He heard faint music — Thallian mood-music. He stood still for a moment, awaiting challenge. Then he shrugged and got out of his space suit. He put it on a chair, tugged his uniform into shape, and walked briskly ahead. He knew, of course, that he was watched; if not directly, then by closed-circuit viewers set up somewhere.

He headed for the control room. It was the one part of the ship officially occupied by Patrol

personnel, who operated the checkpoint equipment and occasionally adjusted the buoy's position with reference to the marker-asteroid outside. The buoy had been elegant, once. High ceilings — there was no need to save room in a ship of space — and decorative woods and thick carpets gave this deck the look and feel of an old-fashioned hotel. There was a desk for a room clerk. Nobody was there. Scott passed the door of the dining saloon, which somehow looked more like a restaurant. At one side there was a tiny theater for solidograph film shows.

He saw a girl. She was seated as if watching a film on the round screen Scott couldn't quite glimpse. There was muted music. She did not turn her head. She continued to look at the invisible screen as Scott passed the doorway.

He almost hesitated. He hadn't guessed at women involved in this affair! But she must be watched. There was a specific line of action he must follow if the situation here was to be handled properly. Something had to be done and only he was available to try to do it.

He went confidently to the control room door. Since he was appointed to command here, it made a good impression for him to seem to know a lot about his ship and what he expected of it.

He opened the control room door and two men in Patrol uniforms hastily got to their feet. They weren't Patrol personnel. Uniforms or no uniforms, they were civilians. They saluted with an obvious attempt to be military. Scott raised his eyebrows. He only nodded in reply. One didn't salute on active duty in the Patrol. He glanced here and there. There was a sort of timetable that can be deduced from neglected military quarters. Some things show it if they're not attended to every day. Other items of housekeeping became noticeable a little later. This control room had been

occupied. Overflowing ashtrays proved it. But proper Patrol housekeeping hadn't been done for nearly a week. He could tell.

The two civilians-in-uniform stood stiffly at what they thought was attention. Scott looked at them with a deliberately enigmatic air. Then he said drily, "Rest."

They relaxed, apparently satisfied that they'd passed inspection. Scott went to the checkpoint commander's desk and seated himself. He turned the chair around and faced them. Then he said, "Before he was killed, did Lieutenant Thrums say anything about the Five Comets?"

His predecessor in command had been named Thrums. Scott assumed casually that he was dead. The two pseudo-Patrol privates jumped a little.

"Ye-no, sir," said one of the two. "He didn't."

"Maybe," said Scott gently, "he didn't confide it to you. But he was much concerned. Or maybe he didn't have a chance to tell you before he was killed?"

This was hardly the line an unsuspecting new commanding officer would take. On the other hand it wasn't the way a merely suspicious man would act. The two men in Patrol uniform gaped at him. One of them said uneasily, "He — Lieutenant Thrums, sir — he'd been glum for a long time. So one day he went into an air-lock and closed the inner door and opened the outer one. Then he — walked out, sir. We — we didn't recover the body."

Scott raised his eyebrows again.

"Remarkable!" he said in gentle irony. "It was a remarkable achievement! If the lock was pumped empty, anyone else would have died of oxygen-lack before the outer door could be opened. Or if he let the air escape to space by emergency bleed, explosive decompression would have knocked him cold and he couldn't have opened the door anyhow. Think of a better story and tell it to me later, will you? But right now —"

He snapped at them.

"Go get the top civilian here! The" boss! The man people take orders from! He's gotten you into a

hell of a fix. I have to get you out of it, if you're to be gotten out."

One of the badly uniformed men reached for a communicator. Scott barked, "I said go get him! I didn't say phone him! Get him!"

The two pseudo-troopers almost fell over each other getting out of the door. They were evidently not part of the killing members of a criminal group. An enterprise like the one in hand would need more organization than a bank-robbery or a more or less normal attempt at kidnaping or murder. If it went on from the seizure of Lambda to the capture of the Golconda Ship, it would be even more complicated. Men who could handle blasters would be needed, of course. But men who could carry on ordinary checkpoint routine were called for, too. The Patrol uniform-wearers would be small crooks, called into this really big operation for some supposed special skills. Scott leaned forward to the desk microphone and pressed the G.C. button for a general communication to every compartment in the checkpoint buoy.

"All personnel attention!" he said sharply. "I am Lieutenant Scott, Space Patrol, assigned to the command of this installation. I have just come aboard. The liner on which I came is lying off Lambda, ready to take on any passengers who may wish to avoid the danger the checkpoint faces. The Five Comets of Canis Lambda are headed sunward now. Computation has shown that the nuclei, the heads, of not less than four of the five will cross our orbit at just the time we should be there. The head of a comet is a swarm of meteoric bodies, hundreds of millions of them, traveling in a clump hundreds, thousands, or even tens of thousands of miles across. Two previous robot

check-points at this station were destroyed by such encounters. This installation is not able to move fully out of the way. It has only solar-system drive. But I intend to stay aboard and take emergency measures already planned. But it will be a risky business — an extremely risky business! I urge all passengers and as many of the crew as can be spared to transfer to the liner now waiting nearby. You will have to hurry. The liner will wait no longer than half an hour, because it has the safety of its own passengers to think of. Repeat. You will have to hurry! But I urge all non-essential personnel and all passengers to transfer immediately."

He clicked off the microphone. He expected absolutely nothing from the announcement he'd made. Maybe those who now controlled the buoy would have a good laugh. But it would prepare their minds for uneasiness. Ultimately —

The traditions of the Patrol were many and varied. A Space Patrol man might send for help, but he never waited for it. When a problem seemed insoluble, a Patrol man did what he could to change some part of it, which at worst might cause confusion, and at best might cause it to fall apart. Scott had an appallingly complicated problem on his hands. But if he handled it right and had some luck, he might prevent the capture of the Golconda ship without allowing the destruction of the checkpoint. He might even manage to save the lives of legitimate passengers and crewmen — if any were left alive. But that was questionable. In any case he wasn't planning to capture criminals right now. The Patrol saved lives before it made captures.

The two pseudo-patrol men came back to the control room. With them there was a short, plump civilian. He seemed wryly amused.

"Ho-ya, Lieutenant," he said blandly. "I was afraid it was you."

"They tell me," said Scott formidably, "that you boss operations here."

"Partly, partly," said the plump man as blandly as before. "My name's Chenery. Don't you know me?"

"No," said Scott.

"My name's Chenery," insisted the plump man. "You saved my life once. You'd ought to remember that!"

"I don't," said Scott.

"I was in trouble," said Chenery, speaking cheer-fly. "Bad trouble! I was headed for the gas-chamber

for something I didn't do. Honest! And you found out I hadn't done it, so they gassed somebody else and didn't gas me. And now I'm an honest man and I run the hotel here. Because of you! I appreciate that!"

Scott dismissed the statement. He said, "You heard the announcement I just made. I've a job to do. I want to meet the men who won't go aboard the liner. Trying to keep the Five Comets from smashing us is going to be tricky. I need to know the men who'll help me do it. I need to know the buoy. I want you to guide me and introduce me."

"Right!" said the plump man, cordially. "You did me a favor once. I'll do you one now! I'll show you over the ship and I'll bring you back here safe and sound!"

"Very good," said Scott curtly. He stood up and addressed the two men in uniform. "You stay on duty here. If the liner calls, tell her skipper I'll call him back shortly."

"Yes, sir!" said the taller of the two. He saluted with something of a flourish. It was irritating. Scott felt a certain impatient urge to tell him that the Patrol did not salute except on formal occasions. But he didn't. Instead, he followed the plump man out of the control room.

There was a peculiar silence in the halls and corridors of the buoy. The only sound anywhere was the faint and muted Thallian mood-music coming from the miniature theater. The plump man padded on ahead, making curious sucking noises with his lips. He seemed to think deeply. Presently he shook his head. ' *

"Funny!" he said reflectively. "Plenty funny! Here's a man who saved my life. You still don't remember? Chenery?"

"No," said Scott. Nobody in the Patrol remembered all the names of all the people he encountered in the way of business.

"It was on Glamis," said Chenery. "They had me cold! I was headed straight for the gas-chamber — and you turned up the proof of who it really was. And you don't remember!"

"No," admitted Scott. "I don't."

"That kind of hurts my feelings," said Chenery. "But I'll think it over. Whether you remember me or not, you did me a favor. And we meet each other here. It's a small galaxy!"

They were now on the deck level below the control room, where the desk arrangement of an old fashioned hotel stood unused and gathering dust. The need for dust particles to maintain a proper ion-content in a space craft's air was an old story, but one could tell how long it had been since conscientious housekeeping was done there. Scott estimated seven days, which was in good agreement with the results of poor housewifery in the control room.

Chenery turned into the small theater. The girl still sat there, her head turned toward the screen. But she did not seem to be watching it. It was as if she gazed blindly at it while her thoughts — desperate thoughts — were altogether elsewhere.

"Janet," said Chenery amiably, "here's somebody for you to know. He's Lieutenant Scott, Space Patrol. He just came aboard to take command of the buoy."

The girl turned her head as if reluctantly. Her eyes

fell upon Scott. She saw his uniform. She looked at his face. Then a swift succession of emotions

showed themselves. She was astonished, almost incredulous. Then a somehow terrible hope began to show. But Chenery said blandly, "He came aboard all by himself to take charge of things."

The girl's face lost its look of hope, and bitter disappointment took its place. Then she glanced at Chenery and back at Scott and a sorrowful compassion showed in her eyes.

"I'm showing him over the place," said Chenery brightly. "Did you hear him telling everybody to get ready to leave here and get on a liner he's got waiting?"

"I — didn't really listen," said the girl.

"He'll explain — probably," said Chenery with some zest. "He's an old friend of mine. He don't remember it, but he did me a big favor once. He wants to go over the buoy. Want to come along?"

The girl looked at him unhappily.

"It'll be okay," Chenery assured her. "I gave Buggy a good talkin' to. And I'll be right there. Me and the Lieutenant. It'll be okay, and you can look in the hospital with us right along."

The girl stood up. The look of total hopelessness on her face was somehow harrowing. Scott revised an automatic first guess that against all probability, a woman or women were involved in this affair. This girl wasn't normally an associate of criminals. She was involved, but against her will. And she looked forward without the least hope of escape to disaster more complete than she'd known up to now.

"Janet," explained Chenery cheerily, "she's a nurse. She's been takin' care of a couple of characters down in the hospital. They were on a ship goin' from where they'd been caught to where they'd be gassed. They tried to pull off a trick. They thought they'd burn down their guards and take their ship all by them-

^selves. But they didn't. They got burned down themselves. So they were shifted from the ship they were burned on because they needed a hospital and we got one. Janet's the nurse."

Scott said nothin'g. He realized that his pose of ignoring everything that was wrong here was paying off admirably. Lambda had been taken over by criminals because the Golconda Ship was coming to port here. It might be necessary to convince somebody that everything was normal on the space buoy before they'd make fast alongside. So Scott was being used to test the look of things. So long as he pretended to accept conditions here as commonplace, the members of the criminal enterprise would be heartened. If he showed suspicion, they wouldn't. But he'd be killed after the liner waiting outside had gone on its way. That was self-evident. Still, for the better part of half an hour there'd probably be no attempt to murder him. He had walked into the parlor of men waiting to capture the Golconda Ship. They were watching to see his reactions.

He followed Chenery down another level of stairs. Here were cabins for passengers shifted from their liners to the buoy in order to shift back to other liners going where they wanted to be. Scott did not pretend to be interested in the cabins. It was all too likely that in some of them he'd find evidence of murders done. It was not wise to uncover anything of that sort just now. But Scott was aware that Janet was very pale as he glanced down a corridor.

He saw a scorched place on the wall. It wasn't especially conspicuous, but a blaster-bolt had made it, and blasters weren't normally fired in the passenger-quarters on ships of space. Scott ignored it.

They descended again. There were three levels of passenger cabins, and plainly they were all unoccupied just now. On the last of the cabin decks, though, there was the sound of snoring and a faint, faint odor of drink.

"Somebody," said Chenery brightly, "didn't hear your little speech, Lieutenant. Maybe we'll wake, him up to leave us. But not now. Not just yet!"

"Further downward — sternward — there was a deck for freight, passenger-freight. There was baggage here. On an average, a space passenger carried twice as much baggage as he needed across the space between worlds. Nobody quite realized that shops on a planet a light-century from home would stock just about the same articles one could buy around the corner. So space travelers carried

mountains of baggage. But it was possible to guess the number of passengers by a glance around the luggage-hold. Scott made a guess. Then he realized that men traveling to commit crime would travel light because they'd expect to abandon other possessions when they took the Golconda Ship. There was baggage of the sort normal passengers carry. Scott had a feeling now that they'd never claim it. The girl's utter hopelessness told him much. But he guessed at seven legitimate passengers and perhaps as many as twenty others. He wondered if the baggage master thought it strange when so many travelers with so little baggage had begun to accumulate in Lambda. It wasn't likely he'd been alarmed, though.

Down more deck levels. Two of them were luridly lighted by glow-bulbs exactly reproducing the light-quality of a yellow Type G sun. Here were hydro-ponic gardens, growing lushly in the brightness, taking carbon dioxide and excess moisture from the air and supplying fresh foodstuffs to the Lambda's company. The third garden level was dark, because plants required periods of darkness as well as of light if they were to grow and bear fruit.

So far there'd been no living being in sight. Scott was sure that there were many more men aboard.

Only chosen ones would have been authorized to show

themselves, because they'd be too much of a type to be convincingly either travelers or crewmen.

They'd be blaster-men, with the expressions and the sharp and snappy costuming of their kind. And they'd be amused at Scott's seeming innocence, and they might show it. But it was desirable to know how far Scott could remain innocent of what had taken place here, and what was in prospect. It occurred to Scott that Chenery might have had the idea for the test.

In the main freight space, though, there were two men. This was a warehouse level which once had been a freight hold of an interstellar ship. These two had hairy chests showing and soiled work trousers exuding odors from long-ago-handled freight. They had a falli-board set on a box between them, with the pieces for the game arranged on the triangular pattern of the board. But the men were placed on the board at random: An outlaw-piece was on a black triangle. The game wasn't a game. These men were acting the parts of freight handlers with no notion of how such parts should be played. They looked up cordially when Chenery said, "Ho-ya! This is Lieutenant Scott, the new Patrol officer. He wants to know how things are goin'."

"Pretty good! Pretty good!" said one of them. He spoke to Scott. "About goin' on that liner, Loot'nt, we figure if you're goin' to stay we'll stay with you an' do what we can to help. Okay?"

"Splendid," said Scott. He carefully kept all irony out of his voice and avoided another glance at the falli-board, which a fall enthusiast would have found unbelievable. He gestured for Chenery to lead on.

They reached the main engine room, larger and more spacious even than a cargo hold. In its center there remained the mounting that had held the ship's overdrive unit. This buoy had been refitted for its present use at some space port aground, and had been driven to its present position in overdrive, because

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otherwise the journey would have taken generations of time. But after its arrival, the overdrive unit was removed because the buoy was to stay here for always. The solar system drive remained, of course. Occasionally, for very brief periods it had to be run to adjust the position of the checkpoint to that of the marker-asteroid. The asteroid's positions had been calculated far into the future, and it was simpler to match it than to try to keep to a scheduled placing with shiftings bound to occur when liners stopped and hooked on and loaded or unloaded freight. But Lambda had no other use for drives. Not in ordinary times.

A man in oily garments appeared from behind a disconnected switchboard. He waved a hand and Chenery led the way toward him. Again he introduced Scott, identifying the oily man as the buoy's engineer. But Scott noted that his face and hands showed no trace of the oil so liberally present on his clothing.

"I heard your speech, Lieutenant," said the man in oily clothes. "But you're going to stay, so I stay too."

"Everything's in good shape, then," observed Scott.

"Yes, sir! Everything! I've got a couple of hands — off-duty now — who're good! When you want something done, you call on us!"

Scott said drily, "I'll do that. We may have a tricky time before us, dodging comets."

"You'll have all the rudder you need," the engineer assured him, beaming. "For any kind of driving!"

Scott reacted almost visibly to this remarkable statement. But he nodded and turned to Chenery, and Chenery led the way further astern, downward.

On the way Scott reflected upon the man's assurance that Lambda had plenty of rudder. A space craft didn't have a rudder. It couldn't. There was nothing in space for a rudder to act on, whether between worlds or stars. Off-ground, a ship was steered

by tiny drive-engines which on demand pushed its bow to the right or left, and its stern to left or right. They could also turn the bow — and the ship — up or down. Eight miniature drives, four in the bow and as many in the stern, would swing a ship in any direction. They could even spin it like a top with no forward drive at all, which was unthinkable for a ship with a rudder. But the alleged engineer of Checkpoint Lambda plainly didn't know it. It was evidence that though the men recruited to seize the Golconda Ship might be good at handling blasters, they weren't spacemen.

The inspection party of Scott and Janet and Chen-ery reached the hospital at the very stern of the ship. It was there because nowhere else would it have been practical to lessen or cut off artificial gravity if a patient's need required it. There were glittering white plastic walls. There were soundless floors. There were hospital rooms with equipment ranging from aseptic environment rooms for contagious illness to the items needed for surgery and even dentistry. There were two men seated in a corridor outside a door made of steel bars. Beyond, there was a door with a lighted sign above it.

Lifeboat. Do Not Enter.

"Ho-ya!" said Chenery. "This's Lieutenant Scott, the new Patrol officer." To Scott he said, "These two characters are the guards for the patients I told you about." Then he added to Janet, "Y'want to look the patients over, Janet?"

The girl went silently into the barred room. Scott heard her asking murmured routine questions of the two patients. She changed a dressing on a badly burned arm. The faint, unpleasant odor of a blast-burn reached Scott's nostrils. At least that was authentic. It couldn't be faked.

"The lieutenant," said Chenery amiably, "wants everybody that'll go, off the buoy to a liner he's got waiting. He says there's a chance a comet'll smash

us. But he's goin' to stay aboard and try to pull through it. You two, what d'you say?"

The two men here were singularly hard-featured. They didn't look like guards. They looked bored and scornful.

"The patients can't be moved," said one of them. He made no particular effort to seem other than derisive. "So y'couldn't expect us to desert 'em, would you? Us bein' faithful to our duty?"

The tone was definitely sarcastic. Chenery said angrily, "That's no way —"

"Maybe you can say it better," said the second man truculently. "We ain't takin' orders from you!" Chenery glared. He opened his mouth to speak, and stopped. The girl came out of the barred room. The two supposed guards smirked at her. One, with a derisive glance at Chenery, reached out his hand deliberately to touch her.

Scott took one step and made a chopping motion with his hand. It landed exactly right. Strangling, the man who'd reached for Janet went down. There was a muffled clatter. A blaster spun a half-turn on

the floor. Scott paid no attention to it. He faced the second man, with no weapon drawn but with an expression of such curiosity that the other man gave back apprehensively.

Scott said nothing. Chenery said, somehow shrilly, "Dammit, you tell Bugsy —"

Scott reached out to Chenery. He whirled him about and thrust him through the door behind him. He swept the girl through that same doorway. His motions were smooth and precise, as if rehearsed. He faced back to the second would-be guard of the two injured men. He looked at him, and the man instinctively gave ground again. Scott picked up the blaster the first man had lost from its holster.

"You'd better tell Bugsy," he said evenly, "that I want to talk to him. I'll be in the control room. He can come

there. And tell him I'm liable to get impatient if he doesn't come soon!"

The hospital corridor door closed behind him. He turned to find Chenery in the act of actually wringing his hands. Janet was paler than he'd seen her before, which was very pale indeed.

"Back to the control room," he said shortly. "I've got to speak to the liner. By the way, who's Bugsy?"

He didn't wait for an answer. He led the way briskly. Janet came close behind him. Chenery brought up the rear. He made agitated, whimpering sounds. They went through the engine room. The engineer wasn't visible. But on the level above the warehouse space Scott turned aside from the way by which they'd descended. Chenery said miserably, "Hey! Not that way —"

"Yes," said Scott. "This way."

He had studied the plans of the space buoy when he had been appointed to command it. He made the rest of the way upward by stairs provided for the delivery of baggage and services to the hotel-level rooms. There was nothing secret about the stairway. Scott chose it to check his own familiarity with the space installation he'd never seen before.

They reached the control room. It was empty. Chenery practically blubbered when Scott closed the door behind them. Janet was pale.

"Discipline's gone," said Scott ironically. "I told those two privates to stay on duty here."

Janet said hopelessly, "You didn't really think they—"

"I was making a joke," said Scott, ironically. "Chenery, this place should be bugged. Where is it?"

Chenery gulped. Then he reached under the control desk. He wrenched at something. He showed Scott a tiny microphone with thread-like wires attached.

"Good!" said Scott. "Now listen! I know the men I met were primed with answers for me. Quick work! I

want to know if there's anybody who'll want to leave here. Can anybody leave?" - .

Janet said quietly, "No. There's nobody — left to go."

"Except you," Scott corrected. "Chenery, she doesn't belong in this mess. You're in trouble too, and you know it. But if you'll help her get on that liner, I'll let you go with her! I can't make a better deal than that. You'll have a chance to disappear before this business is known anywhere but here."

Chenery swallowed. Then he shook his head, "I got — I started this. It's too good. It ain't working out the way I wanted it but —" He swallowed again. "She couldn't be got away anyhow."

Scott said, "No?" He pressed a button, grimly. He called, using the inter-ship communicator microphone. There was no answer. He called again. He looked for the light that would indicate a carrier-wave going out. It hadn't come on. The communicator wasn't working.

Lips tensed, Scott pressed the trouble-finder stud that all important equipment carried. A separate, battery-operated device went into action. It checked the circuitry and the elements of the

space-phone by which Scott had tried to reach the liner. There was a humming sound. Something clicked. A slip of paper rolled out briskly for his inspection.

"Power off," said the slip. *"This unit only."*

"It seems," said Scott very coldly indeed, "that somebody doesn't want any messages going out. Which is understandable!"

He turned in his chair. The screens were operating. Only the communicator was turned off from somewhere outside the control room. Scott could see the liner, probably as much as ten miles away. It had drifted out pretty far since Scott came aboard Lambda. It seemed to be waiting to hear from the checkpoint. But before Scott could even try to think how to get power back to the communicator, he realized

that the liner was unnaturally still. He'd instructed it to wait half an hour. Much more time than that had passed. So far as the liner-skipper knew, he'd come aboard Lambda and the rest was silence. Calls hadn't been answered. And there were those huge and increasing misty shapes which were the Five Comets. Comets were not solid. They were swarms of deadly objects, hurtling through emptiness. Even being near them was dangerous though, and the liner-skipper had his passengers to think of.

So the liner was aiming for its next port. Aiming took a long time. Minutes. The liner-skipper was doing the only thing possible. He had no alternative.

The liner seemed to hang absolutely motionless for minutes while its aim was refined to fractions of fractions of seconds of an arc. Scott had a feeling that it called, for one last time. But he couldn't answer.

The liner flicked out of existence like a bubble bursting. Actually it was wrapped in a cocoon of stressed space which carried it away at many times the speed of light.

Six days from now it would return to normal space and try to tell what its skipper knew about events on Checkpoint Lambda. He didn't know much. For one thing, he didn't think of the Golconda Ship in connection with the behavior of the buoy. He'd send Scott's report and his own information to the Patrol as soon as possible. But it would be a matter of weeks before a Patrol ship reached Canis Lambda to find out what had happened.

Scott looked after the vanished liner for a matter of seconds. Then he said evenly, "So that's ruled out. Things look pretty sticky. We'll take a look at the Five Comets again. That situation looks pretty nasty, too."

It was.

CHAPTER 3

The Five Comets moved in toward the sun Canis Lambda. They moved with a seeming deliberation, each in its own individual fashion and from its individual direction. There was one which was very large. Its nucleus — its coma — its head — was the center of a misty brightness scores of thousands of miles across. The actual heart of it, of course, was something else. The substance of the comet was an enormous aggregation of rocks and metal masses floating about each other as they plunged toward the sun. By the effect of sunlight upon them, minute quantities of occluded gases were boiled off into emptiness. Sunlight striking them ionized them and made them into a mist; by another process it drove them away from itself toward remoteness in the form of a long and shining tail.

Another comet was very small. It came from very, very far out in space. It was speeding furiously to overtake the companions it knew only rarely and then for a relatively short time — a few weeks every so many years. It would rush with them around the yellow sun and then speed grandly away into the lonely and dimly lighted void. At the perihelion of this comet, Canis Lambda would be only a star, and not the brightest in the heavens at that. But now it rushed

sunward.

Then there were two comets like twins, identical in size and pushing sturdily together toward the rendezvous of their tribe. Astronomers had likened them to Beila's Comet in the First System, which was ob-

served to have twinned itself somewhere out in the far darkness where comets spend most of their lives. Bella's Comet appeared several times as twins. Then it appeared no more as if one of the twins had died far from the sight of men and the other would not survive its brother. Neither one was ever heard of again.

And there was a fifth comet, quite commonplace as comets go.

They drove in toward Canis Lambda, and in observing them Scott had a privilege many astronomers might have envied. Not many men saw any of the Five Comets. Mostly they were invisible in remoteness. Sometimes one or three or two appeared. Not many ships happened along the space lanes to break out of overdrive when they were visible, and few spacemen stopped to marvel at the wonders of the heavens. When Scott took his first observations in Lambda's control room, all five could be viewed.

He was making his notes when a ship broke out of overdrive two light-hours away — a thousand million miles or so — and it received the metallic-voiced message that Lambda sent monotonously toward the stars. "*Checkpoint Lambda. Checkpoint Lambda. Report. Report.*"

Scott heard the whining, whistling sound which was that ship's log broadcast to be recorded in the checkpoint files. Actually, the unseen ship had broken out, picked up the checkpoint call, automatically responded to it, and was gone again long before its log reached Lambda. But Scott went on with his observations.

He verified the state of things from the control board. It required only the simplest of observations to make sure of Lambda's position in its orbit. It took only looking to see that if the Five Comets were on schedule — and they were — they would fill all space ahead for a completely unbelievable distance with plunging meteors which were really stray fragments of steel and stone. In a way, the hurtling objects would be like so many charges of buckshot fired at one target. They could penetrate each other without noticeable results. But any object moving across their course or in their way would be torn to shreds. And the Lambda would pass through four of the Five Planets' heads. It seemed unimaginable that the buoy could survive.

Chenery saw disaster of another sort. "You don't know what you done then, Lieutenant!" he said frantically. "You don't know what you done! Those were Buggy's men! You got me in bad trouble! Bad trouble!"

Scott said impatiently, "You're in worse trouble than I could put you in! Do you realize that we're headed on a collision-course with a good many millions of bits of scrap iron and rock?"

"How'd I know that?" demanded Chenery fretfully. "Look, Lieutenant! I cooked up this whole idea that's happening here. I hadda get some help. I got Buggy to come in on it. But he's a hard man to get along with. Now he's tryin' to take over! But I had the idea to start with and he'd've played along, him and the guys he's got, but —"

Scott turned to the girl. He offered her the blaster he'd picked off the floor in the hospital area.

"Have you got one of these? No? Then take it."

He turned back to Chenery.

"I've got to shift this buoy out of its present place," he said reasonably. "I've got to put it where it won't be running into certain destruction. We can't run away from it on solar system drive, and I need cooperation! You can't be such an idiot as not to have an engineer and an astrogator to handle the Golconda Ship when you take it! I want —"

But Chenery jumped. He clawed at his garments for a weapon.

"Drop it!" said Scott sharply.

A blaster had appeared in his hand as if by magic. Chenery froze. Then he panted, "What — what was that you said?"

"I named the Golconda Ship," said Scott. "You're here to seize it when it arrives. And you've got to have an astrogator and an engineer to run it if you succeed. Now, I need those men to take my orders for the time being — the engineer, anyhow. And now! Else in a certain number of hours and minutes —"

Chenery panted, "Why d'you think we're after the Golconda Ship? What makes you think that?"

"Because it's coming here!" Scott fumed. "There's nothing else you could be after! But you've got to scrap that scheme and let me try to save what can be saved out of the mess you've made!"

Chenery stared at him, at once aghast and bewildered.

"Look, Lieutenant! You done me a favor, once. What's this? How'd you know — Why'd you come aboard if you knew? You coulda spoiled everything just keepin' that liner hangin' around here, an' warnin' the Golconda Ship when it come. Are you crazy?"

"I obey orders," Scott told him.

It would be useless to try to convince Chenery that he'd come aboard the Lambda because, as a Patrol officer, it was his duty to attempt the impossible. The Lambda was his command, and his first independent one. It should not be here where the liner had found it, with the Five Comets due to cross its path. No matter how wrong or how fatal or how abnormal matters appeared to be aboard it, it was his duty to come aboard and take over. Chenery wouldn't understand that. Chenery was, obviously, a professional criminal. Quite likely he'd never thought of any other profession. His gratitude to Scott for something Scott didn't remember might be genuine enough, but still he'd only see things from his own standpoint.

"But you're tellin' me —"

"I thought you were running things," said Scott. "Bring on your astrogator and I'll show him the state of affairs. He'll check what I've told you."

"He — ain't available, He's Bugsy's man. Bugsy'd have to tell him, and ..."

"That could waste time," said Scott. "All right, bring me your engineer. Not the man you told me was an engineer! He thinks a space ship's steered by a rudder! Get me your engineer!"

"The engineer we got is one of Bugsy's men too," said Chenery unhappily. "And he's drunk right now. You heard him snore. I hadda have some help, y'see, and I called on Bugsy. But he's turnin' out a hard man to get along with. His engineer —"

"Get Bugsy, whoever he may be!" snapped Scott. "Look at that screen! That's what we're heading for!"

He pointed. And the Five Comets of Canis Lambda appeared with appalling distinctness on three of the control room's vision screens. There was a very large glowing against the Milky Way that filled, all by itself, a space fifteen degrees across. Behind it, to one side and even brighter — shining through the misty glow of the first comet's head — there was a similar patch of glowing gas. Separated a little from them were the twin comets, closing in to join the others. And one could see the last, whose tail was more visible than the others because of the angle at which it drove to join the rest. The matter — the mass, the actual substance — of the comets was hordes and multitudes and countless swarms of stones and metal lumps rushing through emptiness with impassioned energy to no purpose that human minds could fathom. All comets were made that way. Their solid part was composed of particles ranging in size from sand-grains to houses to mountains. These particles had every possible form and size and meaningless shape. But they were never seen. They rode in an eerie misty luminiscence. Un-

less they hit something. Then what they hit was destroyed.

In the control room. Chenery seemed about to cry.

"You're sayin'!" — "his voice had gone up a halftone toward shrillness — "You're sayin' we can't

take the Golconda Ship because the Five Comets are goin' to get us! But you could be lyin'! You're Patrol! It's your job to stop guys like me from doin' our stuff! But we' started on this one! We almost got it made! We can't stop now!"

"Get Buggy," commanded Scott. "Maybe he's got some sense!"

Chenery hesitated in apparent soul-racking indecision. Then he went stumbling toward the control room door. He went out. Janet moistened her lips. Scott noticed it.

"Would you want," he asked politely, "to tell me about the taking of the buoy? How it happened?"

She said unsteadily, "I was asleep. I awakened when I heard a scream somewhere and then a blaster-shot. I heard doors banging. Sometimes there were shots and — other noises. Then I heard men running. They came along the corridor my cabin was on, banging open doors as they came. Two cabins away there was a fat man. They kicked open his door and I heard him say, 'What's the matter? What's happening?' And there was a blaster-shot and he cried out — terribly. They opened the door next to mine. I stood — paralyzed. I couldn't believe — And then somebody fired a blaster down the corridor. It hit one of the men who'd been opening doors — almost in front of mine." She swallowed. "They fired at the man who'd shot at them. They rushed toward him. Wh-when they came back, the man who'd been shot in front of my door had crawled blindly a little way. So they skipped my door without knowing it. Down the corridor a woman peered out. I heard her asking anxiously what was the matter, and a blaster fired and — that was all. They went on. To other levels. And there were other shots, some far away." Her voice stopped abruptly. She made a gesture.

"That —that's all..."

Scott said, "But somebody found you later."

"Y-yes. It was — Chenery." Her throat sounded dry. "I think — anybody else would have killed me. But he found me and he was — upset. He told me he hadn't meant for the buoy to be taken that way. He was apologetic. Apologetic! He explained that he'd meant to call for the crewmen, one by one, and make prisoners of them, not kill them. Then he'd meant to capture the passengers the same way. He seemed quite miserable about it! They'd have told afterward, he said, that it was a beautifully handled robbery, the cleverest, biggest trick ever done! You see the Golconda Ship —"

"He didn't expect to take it without fighting!" said Scott.

"But he did! He'd planned to have a banquet ready for the Golconda Ship's crew, to celebrate their return. He'd lead them to tables set with luxuries they'd have missed —"

"The Golconda Ship didn't carry regular crew's rations," said Scott sardonically. "Every man aboard's a multi-millionaire. They wouldn't have missed any luxuries!"

"He thought," said Janet, "that they'd stuff themselves. And there'd be — knockout drops, and they'd wake up to find the Golconda Ship gone, and the passenger-prisoners would tell them how they'd been fooled. Chenery was terribly proud of that plan! He'd have been known as pulling off the biggest robbery in the smartest way in all history. But Buggy took over."

"Chenery's idea wasn't practical," said Scott. "It wouldn't have worked."

"Anyhow — now he'll be known as a butcher.

^nd he said he'd save my life, or try to, so I could explain that he'd only meant the robbery to be the smartest and cleverest ever."

She added helplessly, "I thought he was crazy! P-people killed and he talking like that . . . But he did keep the others from — harming me. He told them I was a nurse and two of them were — wounded. I'd cure them, he said. So I've pretended to be a nurse. I have kept them alive. Maybe."

"Two wounded," said Scott. "Their men, of course. But there was some fighting. That's good."

He rubbed his chin. His expression was wry. Now he began to see something like a complete picture of what the situation in the buoy was — at least the part which made least sense and was the kind that gave the Patrol so many unpleasant problems. It helped to solve them, too, because planetary police and the Patrol together knew that most crimes weren't committed for money. The professional criminal did not practice his profession to get rich. Chenery had the motivation of many members of his craft. He wanted to be known as a genius.

With half of humanity envying the Golconda Ship's crew, and the other half trying to guess their secret, Chenery had planned a robbery which would be not only the most stupendous one known, but one in which he would outsmart all the rest of the human race. His vanity wouldn't be satisfied with the Golconda Ship's treasure. He craved to be admired for his cleverness. So he had really wanted to have as many witnesses as possible, to relate how clever he'd been and how brilliantly he'd worked out his plan.

Scott shrugged. Chenery's ambition had cost lives. It was silliness, but still the fact. Similar silliness has caused wars and cost lives throughout all history. It was still highly likely that Scott's own life would be among those lost in this affair, and it was no comfort at all to reflect that Chenery himself would eventually

be killed through the essential silliness of crime as a profession.

The control room was silent. The checkpoint's identifying signal, though, still went out to emptiness in every direction. It continued to call upon all passing ships to report. It would record their reportings. As Scott moved restlessly about the control room a tape-spool on the wall began to turn. A ship had come and gone, out somewhere, and the whine recorded 'was its log. Perhaps a dozen to three dozen ships passed Checkpoint Lambda daily, but very few opened communication directly.

Footsteps. The control door opened. Scott turned, aware of Janet's fright. Chenery came in. He looked less scared, less uneasy. He had color in his cheeks again.

"Ho-ya!" he said cheerily. "I talked to Bugsy, Lieutenant! Things look better. Bugsy's agreeable. He'll listen. We're goin' to have lunch together!"

It was preposterous. Scott almost did not believe his ears. Chenery turned exuberantly to Janet, "You'll fix it, Janet? We got to work things out. You'll fix something to eat, and Bugsy and the Lieutenant and me, we'll have lunch together and talk things over reasonable. We'll cook up some kinda businesslike deal."

Scott listened unbelievably. When he'd forced himself aboard the space buoy, it had been with a reasonable expectation of being killed. There'd be some hesitation, to be sure, because then the liner still lay nearby and could spoil the whole intended robbery. But he'd been used to test the intended deception of the Golconda Ship's crew. Now Chenery was aware that he knew of the purpose of the buoy's seizure, and more than guessed at the way it was done. And that meant that for Chenery's and Bugsy's safety, and that of every other living man on the ship, Scott had to be killed sooner or later.

On the face of it, then, to lunch with men who intended to kill him was out of all reason. Chenery spoke of a deal to be arranged over a businessman-like luncheon table: Only Chenery would think of such a thing. He might have some incredible proposal in mind that would salvage some part of what he'd lost. And that, naturally, would be the splendid gratification of his vanity. He might have contrived some trick to gain information; perhaps a bargain for Janet's and Scott's escape. But there were too many murders in the past, and too many more in prospect, to make any bargain plausible.

"Lunch, eh?" he said drily. "Why not?" Chenery grandly led the way out of the control room. If he hadn't gone first, Scott would have put him there. But they went, and three of them, down to

the next level below.

They found Bugsy in the lobby of what looked like a hotel. He was seated in an elaborately upholstered chair and smoking a very black cigar. Where Chenery was short and plump, Bugsy was short and square. He was hard-featured, as a man needs to be when he has more blaster-men than specialists among his followers. He regarded them coldly from under thick eyebrows.

"Here's the Lieutenant, Bugsy," said Chenery brightly.

Bugsy said, "Huh!"

He waved a hand at chairs nearby. Scott held one for Janet. This was a situation so near to lunacy that Scott still felt that it was unreal. He was Patrol, and ignoring the past he was obligated to prevent the monster crime now in plain prospect. Chenery was the one who'd found out the destination of the Golconda Ship. Janet was a passenger who knew too much, destined to join the other murdered passengers. Bugsy was the man who'd been recruited by Chenery to make up the force of blaster-men needed for the capture of the checkpoint and the following seizure of the Golconda Ship. And Bugsy was now the man who decided things because he had the most men with the most blasters on the spot.

In a peculiar way, this was another case of something found in all history and all over the galaxy. Always there were men who started things, and other men who took over what someone else had begun. They always assumed that possession meant not only ownership but competence to manage the enterprises they had seized. Very often it meant the total failure of the thing taken over. But these men couldn't understand that. It was an inevitable stupidity of the violent mind.

"Chenery says," said Bugsy in a flat voice, "that you caught on fast to what's happened here."

"What was wrong?" asked Bugsy in the same flat voice.

"Everything," Scott told him without cordiality. "Your men in Patrol uniforms didn't know how to salute. Your freight-handlers didn't know how to play Fali. Your engineer thought space ships used rudders. The guards in the hospital were too smart. Much too smart!"

"No good, eh?" said Bugsy.

"No good!" said Scott coldly. "You should've known it. But I knew something was very wrong before I came aboard."

Bugsy considered, regarding Scott unblinkingly.

"How?"

Scott told him scornfully. The buoy remaining in its proper orbit a mile or two from its marker-asteroid when the Five Comets were approaching and were already closer than any professional spaceman would have waited for. Before that, the buoy's spokesman's insistence that there was nothing to leave it for other destinations, and that it would receive no freight. The arbitrary behavior of its supposed Patrol commander.

"If you're going to pretend that you're a normal space installation," said Scott coldly, "you should know how one ac/s! Your men didn't. They don't know now."

"So this ain't normal," observed Bugsy. "Chenery here don't run the hotel. The Patrol guys aren't Patrol guys. The engineer — Nobody's what he says. You figure it that way?"

"Naturally! Do you think I'm an idiot?" demanded Scott.

"Yeah," said Bugsy. He paused. "You came on board."

He looked at the ash of his cigar.

"I could use you," he said flatly, after a moment. "You could fix things so nobody else'd think there was anything wrong. You could be useful, that way. But I'd be a fool to let you try it."

"He says," interposed Chenery uneasily, "that we got to do something about some comets that are headin' into the sun, here. We're headed to run into 'em."

"Yeah," said Buggy. "I seen a comet. It's got a long tail. Shines in the sky. A scientist fella said the tail was so thin you could gather it up and put it in your hat."

"Not these comets," said Scott. "And it's not the tail we have to dodge. It's the heads. They're masses of hunks of rock and metal. They give off gas that shines."

"Forget the comets!" rasped Buggy. "There's something else I want to know! You came on board. You say you knew there was something wrong before you did come. Why'd you do it?"

"Partly because of the comets," said Scott "In order to find out why the buoy hadn't gotten out of danger when it should have, since it's on a collision course. Partly to find out if there were any pas-

sengers left alive. Now that I'm here, I don't think there are."

"Just why'd you think the passengers stopped livin'?"

Scott shrugged again.

"You came here to take the Golconda Ship," he said. "You took over the buoy as a start. There was some fighting. There are two wounded men in the hospital. Your men. No wounded passengers. No wounded crewmen. Where are the passengers and crew?"

"There's her," said Buggy, indicating Janet. "She's a passenger and she's all right!"

"I'd like to talk to the others," said Scott.

He heard Janet draw in her breath sharply.

"Oh!" said Buggy, his tone pure irony. "When d'you want to talk to them?"

"Any. time after there've been measures taken about the comets," said Scott evenly. "There's no use talking to passengers or anything else unless something's done about that!"

Buggy's features twisted into something that should have been a grin.

"D'you want to know why I don't buy that?" He paused. "When Chenery propositioned me about this bit — takin' the Golconda Ship and ah¹ — I looked things up. How a Golconda Ship landin' has been managed. They hire guards. They buy flatfeet! They set up a security force that costs millions, and they don't care. Nobody gets in miles of that ship while it's aground. They guard it like it was a planetary president!"

Scott frowned, but waited.

"You're no Patrol man!" rasped Buggy. "You took a chance. Sure! Get rid of us and the Golconda Ship! I'll pay you a million or two or ten if you wipe us out protectin' them! They ain't stingy that way! You get us outa the way and tell them what you done for 'em."

Scott shrugged Ms shoulders.

"You sound to me," he said, "like somebody working himself up to use a blaster."

Buggy said, "I am!"

He made a sudden, violent movement. Chenery gasped. Then there was stillness. Buggy's hand was halfway into a shoulder-holster, and there it seemed frozen. Scott had a blaster all the way out.

"You were," agreed Scott. "And if you'd been a little more skilful, Buggy, I'd have had to kill you to save my own life. But there's a Patrol regulation against killing anybody if it can be helped. If I were a private guard for the Golconda Ship's crew that regulation wouldn't apply. So maybe you'll believe I am Patrol now."

He paused.

"You can take your hand away — if it's empty," he added. "Think things over." Buggy's hand came slowly and very carefully away from the holster. "It's quite a problem, working out a way to handle this situation. Everything I've been able to think of so far works out making you a corpse. Sometimes a pretty messy one. So think! Bend your massive brain to the job, Buggy. And when

you've an idea how to adjust matters considering the comets and the Golconda Ship and the fix you're in now, let me know! But there isn't much time!"

He stood up, and gestured to Janet. He took her to the stairway leading up to the control room. He nodded, and went up the stairs behind her. In the control room as the door closed she said unsteadily, "You took a terrible chance!"

"Not as much as Bugsy," he said briefly, "and what I did may be useful. Now I want to look at the comets again."

He pointed to a chair. He busied himself about the instruments as she sat down. It wasn't necessary to

squint into eyepieces of the instruments, they gave their readings on the vision-screens. He punched them into the board-computer. Presently he pressed the integrator-stud. There was a little click. He looked at the slip of paper slid out from a slot in the computer.

"Two hours, thirty-seven minutes, forty seconds," he said in a tone indicating no particular rejoicing. "That's the most probable time for us to hit the first cometary mass."

Janet said, "But is that really a danger? I thought — I hoped —" Then she said in a suddenly level voice, "Absurd! I didn't have any hope."

"I didn't have any lunch," said Scott "and after accepting an invitation for it, too! Seriously, yes. There is hope for the buoy, if that means anything. If Bugsy gives up the idea of interfering — which he probably won't — we can almost certainly manage to get by the comets. We —"

"We?" asked Janet.

"The buoy," Scott agreed. "You and I and our prospects are something else entirely. I think you'd better stay with me. I've something to do. Chenery isn't what you'd call a strong character, and I think he's going to get weaker. Yes. Come along!"

He led the way. His air was purposeful, though there was no apparent utility in anything he might do. If the buoy wasn't somehow moved to safety, it would be smashed by the swarms of stones and metal masses which constituted the real substance of the comets. If it was moved away, the Golconda Ship might not find it, and Scott and Janet would be marooned in space with the buoy's present company. If the Golconda Ship made contact and was captured, the men who'd captured the buoy before would feel it necessary to kill them. They'd know too much. Because every man aboard the buoy, had earned a seat in a gas-chamber by the murder of the Lambda's original crew and passengers.

Scott went along a corridor and opened a door with the confidence of a man who, having been appointed to the command of a space station, has carefully studied the hull-plans and deck-plans and installation diagrams. Such a study would not be enough for a thorough acquaintance, of course. But it was likely to be useful.

The door closed behind them. There was a peculiar singing stillness. This was a service area, so arranged that stewards and chambermaids on a luxury liner could give good service. There was no particular secret about it, any more than there was about the kitchen of the restaurant of a hotel. But passengers didn't see or use such places. Nor would men waiting for the Golconda Ship bother with them.

Scott led the way down a circular iron staircase.

Janet said uneasily, "Where are we going? What do you have to do?"

"I've already done some of it," Scott told her, "under Chenery's guidance. But I'm supposed, technically, to be in command here. As commanding officer, I naturally want to make an inspection of what I command. Without knowing it, Chenery showed me some things I want to know more about."

"But do you really expect —"

"Expect, no," he admitted. "But I think things will eventually be fairly well in hand. That is, if I don't happen to get killed first."

He went on down the stairs. Then he said vexedly, "That's the ticklish part — not getting killed. The odds against that aren't too good."

CHAPTER 4

The Golconda Ship remained out of overdrive in space between the stars — which was an oddity. Men,

as a rule, have a need for the presence of substance nearby. The most nightmarish of all terrors is that experienced in failing, which is simply the feel of nothingness all around. Weightlessness does not cause such terror; for example, in swimming one has no sensation of weight. Being firmly enclosed, even with artificial gravity as in a space ship, will not prevent the terror in the absence of a firm belief that there is something huge and solid and comforting near, which can be reached and at least emotionally embraced. It is irrational, but nobody likes to break out of overdrive unless they arrive where there is at the least a shining sun, recognizable as such, to promise solidity and not less than one planet available to land on. But the Golconda Ship broke out where there was no solar system, and it stayed there.

It was not an ordinary ship. Cargo craft were never graceful. They should have been globes, for efficiency, if landing grid fields could have handled spheres and landed them right-side-up on spaceport tarmacs. But they couldn't. So cargo ships were built in various bulbous, unpleasing forms, to get the maximum of volume with the minimum of hull-material and still be of shapes that landing grid forcefields could juggle deftly and bring to ground upright. Passenger ships were another matter. They traditionally followed the forms of fish — not for speed, because in space there was no resistance, but so they could be touched to ground with exit ports aligned with landing ramps and cargo doors with warehouses.

The Golconda Ship was peculiar in design. It had a shape that landing grids could handle easily, but there were unseemly masses of machinery built out from its hull. The ship itself was a machine for a particular purpose — probably excavation — and every four years there was a new one or a modification of an earlier one. It went out to space. It vanished. Eventually it returned.

And then its crew — invariably the same

— unloaded treasure past belief. Each crew member was a multi-millionaire, even to the oilers in the engine room. Each was close-mouthed. Save for the voyages every four years, they lived in grandeur while every human around them tried to cajole from them some clue about where they found their riches. And all of them remembered, from time to time, the original Golconda Ship on which there had been killings to weed out any of their number who might be talkative.

Where the Golconda Ship had appeared, there was no sun. -There were only myriads of unwinking specks of light of every possible tint and brightness. The nearest would be light-decades away. This was the loneliness, the emptiness, the utter desolation of between-the-stars. It was this gigantic void which made the lifeboats of interstellar ships so nearly useless. Survivors of catastrophes in ship lanes have made port in lifeboats, to be sure. But not many. And those survivors were never quite normal afterward, and never quite unterrified.

But the Golconda Ship stayed in this abomination of desolation for a long tune. Its pilot had to make very many observations. But now he had luck. A very short-period Cepheid identified itself. The information checked with other data. The Golconda Ship was here! So, very deliberately, it turned. It aimed in a new direction. It adjusted its pointing with microscopic precision. If another ship had looked on, it couldn't have noted the new bearing within a degree of arc. The time it would be in overdrive couldn't be known. The nearest of companions couldn't have duplicated its aim, much less the distance it would run before it broke out of overdrive again.

But there wasn't any other ship. This one carried more wealth than any single planet's treasury contained. Therefore it traveled secretly and untraceably, and there was nobody who knew where it was, and very

few who knew where it was bound.

On Checkpoint Lambda, Scott thought very little about it as a ship. To him it was part of a problem. If he solved it, he would live for a while longer. If he didn't, he wouldn't.

Janet asked hesitantly, "Is it all right to talk?"

"Why not," asked Scott, "if it makes you feel better?"

She descended the circling stairway behind him. So far, this area behind the walls was a service area. But below the cabin levels it would become something else. It carried cables to and from the control room. There were cables which had controlled the now-removed overdrive unit, and the solar-system drive, and waste pipes, and controls for the eight small steering-drives that pushed the ship's bow right or left and up or down, and the stern in appropriate opposite directions, in the only way a ship could be steered.

These lower, between-hull bilges, served yet another purpose. They were divided into tunnels leading down all the buoy's length. Through them there could be communication between any two decks. It was a provision for safety. No disaster which let out air from any one level could separate the still-intact portions of the ship from each other. Unless the buoy broke literally in two, there would always be a passageway from bow to stern. One or more tunnels might be broken, and would automatically seal themselves off, but others would remain. Scott went on.

"We're down past the cabins," he observed, when passenger-service equipment disappeared.

Janet shivered. It occurred to him that the cabin where murder had been done probably hadn't been tidied since. Janet would have thought of that. To change the direction of her thoughts, he said, "What did you want to talk about?"

He went on down and down the metal stair-way.

"I'm — thinking of Bugsy. He — would have killed you!"

"Surprised?" asked Scott ironically, "after what's happened already? I'll give him credit for one thing, though. If a man's boodthirsty — and Buggy is — I like him to want to do his killings in person, rather than hire somebody else to do it. And Buggy did intend to do just that."

"But you — let him go free..."

"I could have killed him," agreed Scott. "But I certainly couldn't have jailed him. What else could I do?"

He stopped. Here was another level, with a door in the side-wall — it was metal, here — and two other doors forming the usual emergency air-lock. If the air in any part of the tunnel was lost, the two doors would close. If disaster was foreseen, every tunnel could be closed from the control room until the danger was past.

"Here's the baggage room," he said. "I want to inspect this. No more talk for the moment."

He made sure the compartment was empty. He entered from the tunnel. Janet stood still, listening. The buoy was intensely silent, save for the 'almost inaudible sound of Scott's shoe-soles a little distance away. It was a peculiar singing silence. There was something like the just-ended ringing of a bell in the air. Once Janet heard a clicking noise, and then the ringing sensation increased for a little while. It could have been a micrometeorite's impact on the buoy's hull. It was a tiny and infinitely fragile particle, no more massive than so much foam. But its velocity was enormous. It clicked when it struck, and there was a tiny speck of blue-white flame where it turned to rocky or metallic vapor, with a microscopic quantity of plating from the buoy's hull vaporizing with it. There was no real harm in such things.

A long time later Scott came back. He looked disturbed.

"Hand-grenades," he said distastefully, "in the

baggage. Some of them have been taken out. I brought along a few for samples."

He showed them to her. They were flat, rounded objects which looked rather harmless. He slipped them into his pockets. He led the way down again. He peered out into the hydroponic-garden level, where the air of all the ship was processed by plants growing lushly in blazing artificial light. Curious, he plucked some leaves.

Back in the tunnel he said, "Odd. They burn."

But he immediately began to descend again. The circling of the stairway "became tedious.

Scott said, "I've got two errands. One's in the engine room. I doubt that the man who posed as an engineer is still there. He was there for my benefit. The other thing is, I want to know where Bugsy's men are gathered. He wouldn't let them use the hotel deck. If somebody from the Golconda ship were to come aboard to check things, their piggishness would raise a question. They'll have some place to be drunk hi. This should be the engine room deck."

He listened. He applied his eye to the crack to which he opened the door. He nodded to Janet and went in. He seemed confident that no one else was going to enter. She thought she heard a faint murmur somewhere and grew frightened.

He seemed to be gone a long time and she was trembling when he returned.

"I — thought I heard — voices," she whispered. "I — thought someone was coming down the stairs!"

"When you were a passenger you didn't think about such things," he told her drily. "A wall was a wall was a wall. I don't think any of Bugsy's men — or Chenery's — are curious about the holes and corners of Lambda. It's more likely you heard the sounds of a poker or a crap-game. Which is what I want to *locate*."

Then a door slammed somewhere. The sound car-

ried through metal which would hardly carry voices, but Scott stopped absolutely still for long seconds. Then he beckoned to Janet and made a last descent. At the bottom he opened the door with very great care. Janet was right. She had heard a faint murmur. This was louder. In fact, there was an argument going on.

Bugsy's voice, muffled, rose above the rest.

"But I tell you, that comet stuff is crazy! It's all lies! The Golconda Ship men had him watchin'! He got aboard an' Chenery knew him! So he knew Chen-ery an' filled him fulla lies! The Golconda Ship's comin' here! We're gonna take it when it comes — here! An' we're gonna be rich! What it's bringin' ain't worth a million credits apiece! Not ten mil-- lion! After we take the Golconda ships you can warm y'self with thousand-credit notes in a bonfire! Y'can throw it away."

Scott listened. Bugsy was having trouble with his men. They were uneasy. Chenery's voice came, perhaps more high-pitched than usual. He was scared. But he was placating. He was anxiously soothing.

"But look, Bugsy! The comets are there! You can see 'em in the vision-screens! They're gettin' bigger! We're runnin' into 'em! If we don't move the ship like Scott says —"

Scott was amused. Janet watched his face. She was frightened.

"Forget the comets!" rasped Bugsy's voice. "A scientist fella said you could gather up a whole comet an' put it in your hat! That Golconda Ship's comin'. It expects to find us close to the big rock that's a marker for it. If we're anywheres else it might get cagey and not land. D'you want it to figure out something's wrong and go away, leavin' us to get away from here bywalkin'?"

There were rumblings. Someone said querulously: "We shoulda had our own ship to make sure if any-thing went wrong!"

Bugsy was having trouble with his men. Scott had accomplished that much, anyhow. Chenery was genuinely scared. He had no solution for the predicament Scott told him he was in, but he didn't want to be killed by the Five Comets. If his terror became contagious, Bugsy's men might insist on not being killed by the Five Comets. If they escaped that, they might insist on not having the Golconda Ship see through their pretense of normality. Bugsy hadn't handled that properly — Scott's immediate suspicion proved it. Scott would be the only man capable of luring the Golconda Ship to a mooring. At that point Scott stopped trying to work out details in his own mind. Bugsy's men would begin shortly to insist that they didn't want to go into gas-chambers. They hadn't anticipated any danger at all in that line. Bugsy'd be on a spot.

But it was Scott's present problem to arrange for the survival of the buoy, because it was his first command and he wouldn't face the idea of losing it. Also he had to prevent the capture of the Golconda Ship, because that was his duty as a Patrol officer. Then he had to see that Janet wasn't murdered or injured under his protection. And after that, he would deliver Chenery and Bugsy and all their followers as nearly unharmed as possible to a Patrol ship which wouldn't arrive for weeks, so that they might keep overdue appointments with gas-chambers.

He rather wryly doubted whether Bugsy's or his problems were less likely to be solved.

But Janet was looking fearfully up into his face. He whispered, "They're in the crew's quarters, I think. Not bad! But I'll make sure."

He went down the few steps remaining beyond the door and arrived at the bottom level. She listened. He moved a little distance from the door. She followed. Now he could definitely hear the murmuring of

voices. Neasily every man aboard would be there. They'd have been forbidden the hotel area by Bugsy and Chenery, and they'd have gathered here to pass the time until the purpose of the whole enterprise was to be accomplished. They'd been gambling — for cash only, because the treasure they hoped for was still imaginary. Now, though, they'd stopped their crap-game to argue.

Scott regretfully touched one of the grenades he'd acquired. If Bugsy were in his shoes, he'd have opened the crew's quarters door and tossed in a couple of grenades. Prompt action with a blaster could then have settled the whole affair. To Bugsy, that would have been congenially violent and very likely effective. But Scott couldn't do it. He simply, flatly, couldn't do it. If orders had been necessary, they'd have been issued to forbid it.

He shook his head. Bugsy's voice rose again, "All right! I'll ask him! Chenery an' me, we'll ask him!" A door-catch stirred. On the instant Scott had seized Janet's hand. He drew her swiftly away. Past the hospital space. Past the barred door where two wounded men had been put hastily to make window-dressing for a test of the look of things. Around a corner in the corridor. There he stopped and whispered close to Janet's ear.

"This, I didn't intend! But we're all right!"

The door-catch stirred again and the sound of voices rose in volume. The door closed, and the murmur diminished.

Chenery's voice came fearfully: "I'm not sayin' anything but we oughta make sure, Bugsy! It's your life as much as mine! I'm not tryin' to put anything over! But those comets are there! They're showin' bigger on the screens! We oughta make sure!"

Chenery's voice seemed to be approaching. Bugsy rasped something unintelligible.

"We can ask him!" protested Chenery. "He's your man, not mine! You picked him! An' now he's hurt, but he can tell if the lieutenant's lyin' about those comets!"

Scott murmured under his breath, "They're going to talk to one of the men in hospital. Their astro-gator's hurt. Not a bad break!"

He heard curious rustling sounds which were footfalls on a soundless floor. Then he frowned. Bugsy and Chenery were between them and not only the tube-stair they'd come by, but the normal stairway to the upper levels. Lifts and elevators hadn't been built into the buoy when it was a ship, because emergency locks couldn't be put into an elevator shaft. It couldn't be divided into airtight sections. But there were the two men moving to cut them off, if there should be an alarm.

He got out his blaster. If anything happened to him, it would be the same as if it had happened to Janet. He said reluctantly, "If it comes to shooting, I think you'd better join in. This is no time to be a lady. They aren't gentlemen."

She caught her breath. He didn't look to see if she'd brought out the weapon he'd given her. He watched.

He didn't actually see either Bugsy or Chenery. He heard their almost inaudible footsteps on the supposedly noiseless flooring. He saw shadows moving on a wall. They vanished. Chenery and Bugsy had gone into the barred hospital room where the two patients were.

Bugsy rasped, "*Halley!*"

No stir or answer. Then a movement in the other hospital bed. A voice spoke weakly. The words were slurred.

"Keep outa this!" snapped Bugsy. "Halley, wake up! What's a comet made of? Gas or what?"

Bugsy angrily shook the injured man and demanded information. It could have been brutal; it could have been agonizing. But the man did not respond at all.

"Wake up, damnit!" snarled Bugsy. "What's a comet made of?"

The faint voice spoke again, more distinctly.

"Keep out —" Then Bugsy's voice stopped. "What? Dead?" Movements in the room. Then Bugsy again. "Yeah!" His tone was pure sarcasm. "Okay, Chenery! you ask him!"

Then the faint voice spoke for the third time. And Scott moved faster than he'd ever moved in his life. He was standing in the doorway, blaster out, before Bugsy grasped what the remaining injured man had said.

"Th' lieutenant went past —."

"That's right, Bugsy," said Scott. "Please don't reach for a blaster! If you do I'll have to kill you!" Bugsy whirled, but he'd had his lesson. He did not reach for a weapon. Chenery raised his hands without orders. His throat worked. Then he managed to protest, "I been arguin' with him, Lieutenant! Try-in' to work out a deal —."

Scott beckoned with his blaster. The sound of voices was only a murmur as the captors of the buoy argued with each other. But the raising of a voice here would bring them all out — not alarmed, but ending all hope.

But no voice was raised. Scott took Bugsy's blaster as he came out, grinding his teeth. Scott touched Chenery's, and left it in place. Chenery caught his breath.

"We go back to the control room," said Scott in a low tone. "I've got to put it into Bugsy's thick skull what the situation is. There's just been a development you don't seem to realize yet."

He gestured to point out the way they were to go. It was the regular route upward. There was no point in giving out useful information. As they ascended, they could distinctly hear the voices in the crew's quar-

ters. It was not a murmur now. It was a dispute. Once, men shouted at each other. Bugsy cursed. He knew they should have had a leader suppressing argument and giving orders.

"I was looking into something important," said Scott quietly, "when you came along. When we get to the control room I'll tell you what you don't seem to realize, and maybe you'll act sensibly!"

He was acutely aware of the irony in that statement. There was nothing for his captives to do but die in white-hot meteoric flames, if they could come to no understanding with him, or surrender meekly, with dying a matter of weeks off instead of hours. They might not think it sensible to accept either alternative. But it wasn't easy to think of a third.

"You should," he observed while they were climbing the stairway from the engine room, "you should have had a getaway ship, just in case. You could have made a deal with somebody to come by and take all the freight aboard here as a gift. Space freight is usually pretty valuable stuff."

Bugsy spat. Chenery said unhappily, though he was bewildered by having his blaster left to him, "You'd have to tell 'em what the job was. And they might like it over."

It was true enough. Scott made no comment. They went through the heavy-freight level. There was no one there. The men who followed Bugsy and Chenery wouldn't like to be alone at any time. They would be men who needed constant reassurance of their own importance. They'd be infinitely dependent; they could not satisfy their needs for themselves. And they would constantly need to be with other people. So the big hulk which was the space buoy was empty except in one crowded, smoke-filled place. There, men gambled exactly as they would on any planet between jobs. If there'd been women present, their enjoyment would have been completed. If they captured

the Golconda Ship and escaped with its riches, they would crowd together in other places and continue similar diversions. *The* only real change would be that they'd gamble for higher stakes and the women would be fancier. And for this they committed multiple murder and ultimately faced execution.

Scott drove his captives up the three levels of hydroponic gardens. The middle one was in darkness now. They came out to the lowest of the three levels of passenger cabins. There was snoring somewhere and a faint stale alcoholic smell.

"Who's that?" asked Scott.

"Our engineer," said Chenery helpfully. "He's stayed that way ever since —"

He stopped. They went on. The hotel restaurant level. All was silence. All was stillness.

Doggedly, Scott shepherded the others up to the control room.

"I didn't expect this," he said politely. "I don't think you've realized it. Bugsy, that man you found dead in the hospital. What was his specialty? What did he do? On the way up here it occurred to me that it might be important."

Bugsy rasped, "He was an astrogator. He was—"

His throat clicked shut. He stared at Scott. The blood went slowly out of his cheeks and lips until the stubble of blue beard around his jaws looked unclean. It looked like soot. His mouth opened and closed. Then he stared blankly at the wall and tried to swallow — and failed.

"You needed him," said Scott, "to astrogate the Golconda Ship when you took it. Now you haven't anybody who can set a course — or know where to drive — and nobody who can time an overdrive jump, or get a ship to ground if you found a planet. But it's not likely you can even approach a sun. It's certain you can't find the place you planned to ground the Golconda Ship. My guess would be that without an astrogator you couldn't do more than drive blindly around the galaxy until all of you would go mad — or die."

Bugsy began to swear. Horrible, unbelievable words rose to his lips and came bubbling out. Scott slapped him sharply across the mouth.

"Stop it, you idiot! Stop it!"

Bugsy stopped, numbly. That particular kind of violence wasn't in his experience. To him, violence was blaster-bolts or on occasion admirably-engineered weapons for breaking skulls. But

he'd never been slapped before.

"Whatever you believe or don't believe about comets," said Scott coldly, "you know you've got to have an astrogator. You can't find a sun, or a planet circling it, and you couldn't get to ground if you did."

Chenery was clenching his fists. Janet sat quietly near the instrument board. The blaster she'd held ready during the climb from the buoy's stern now lay in her lap. She was unnaturally composed. Now and then she glanced at Scott, looking somehow confident. But her eyes stayed mostly on the two men Scott had brought here.

He went to the vision-screens. The image of the glittering marker-asteroid had moved little; yards or fathoms only. There were many stars, except in the forward screens. There, huge luminous mists seemed to have leaped toward Lambda since he last looked at them.

"There," said Scott briskly, "are the Five Comets. We're headed straight for their heads. I can get the buoy through them. You can't. I have to be obeyed if we're to make it. And I can astrogate any ship to anywhere it needs to go. But I've no mind to save the lives of a pack of killers only to be killed for it afterward!"

Chenery said pitifully, "Listen, Lieutenant! I'll do anything! What you want? What you want done?"

Bugsy said harshly, "Y'say you can astrogate us?"

"Yes," said Scott. "Anywhere."

"Maybe y'can roll the Golconda Ship alongside —"

"I'm Lieutenant Scott, Space Patrol," said Scott. "I've been given the recognition-signal for the Golconda Ship — which you didn't think of. There's a password to give to assure that ship that everything's all right and it can safely come alongside and make fast"

"What's th' deal?" demanded Bugsy fiercely. "What do you want?"

"I don't know yet," Scott told him. "It just occurred to me that you might have some ideas. I don't trust you the length of a gnat's whisker. That makes it difficult to bargain. You figure out a guarantee that we can believe in for our own safety. If you do, I'll listen. But it had better be good! And there isn't much time. On our present course we'll hit the first mass of meteors in under three hours. There'll be a good many strays barging around before then, too, — strays big enough to wreck us."

Bugsy said harshly, "I don't buy that comet stuff! All I want—"

"If I'm astrogating, it's bought," said Scott grimly. "It's like two cars racing for an intersection, if neither one can stop, they're going to hit! That's no lie. If I don't attend to that, there's no use making a deal."

"Okay," said Bugsy hoarsely. "That's okay with me. The Golconda Ship comes after. You're in. You're safe and she's safe, too, if you want it that way. We cut the take three ways."

Scott grinned at him without mirth.

"That's something I don't buy! I don't buy trusting you for half a second. Think, Bugsy! Use your brains! Figure out something better than your word. And for now, get out! This is my control room!"

He pushed Bugsy outside. Chenery said desperately, "But Lieutenant — what kind of a deal?"

"It's up to you, Chenery," said Scott. "I'd rather deal with you."

He closed the control room door with Chenery outside. He turned to Janet.

"It's the devil to have a conscience," he said sourly. "Bugsy isn't armed and Chenery is. I left him his blaster. I've told him I'd rather make a deal with him. But my conscience wouldn't let me mention that things would be better all around if Bugsy dropped dead. I hope the idea occurs to Chenery!" Janet moistened her lips. "But you offered — you proposed —?" "I pointed out that

they've got to have an astroga-tor. They do. I pointed out that I was one. I am. I said I wanted you safe. I do. I said if they contrived a deal, I'd listen. I will. But I didn't say I'd make a bargain : with them. I won't." She stared at him.

"They need to be kept doing something useless," Staid Scott impatiently. "Such as thinking of ways to outsmart me. But the comets are coming closer. I'm ¹ stalling until they're really close — until Buggy and Chenery have to let me save the buoy in my own way and on my own terms."

"But then —"

"This is my first real command," said Scott vexedly. "Do you think I want to lose it in my first twelve hours aboard? I've got to take the buoy through the comets! I can do it. Buggy and Chenery can't. But after it's through they'll feel cocky. They'll consider (they own me. And they've got my ship! I have to get it back!"

Janet was bewildered. Scott seemed to be talking nonsense. There were at least twenty men aboard with [Wasters they'd used to murder. They expected to do [more. Up to now, they'd tranquilly let Buggy and Chenery do the worrying. But if they began to suspect **lor** to believe the danger from the comets Scott insisted on —

"Can't you tell them how you'll do it?" she asked uncertainly. "You're-asking them to trust you — and they could — but they'll judge you as being like themselves..."

"I can't tell them how I'll do it," said Scott drily. "The mere idea would scare them to death!"

CHAPTERS

The Golconda Ship broke out to normal space again. Once more it was light-years from the nearest trace of solidity. The pilot of the ship — the astrogator — was highly expert. It was not too difficult to take a spacecraft from one planet to another in a solar system. There were orbital motions and meteor streams and sometimes solar flares to complicate the problem, but it wasn't really difficult. It was even simpler to take a ship from one solar system to another, with all the quantities of distance and of speed worked out — provided the distance wasn't too great. At six or seven light-years the pilot would aim accurately and go into overdrive for a specific period, with an allowance for the fact that the star he was aiming for had been moving for six or seven years since it emitted the light he could see. Breakout was usually within a light-week and often much closer than that. The pilot would drive for the nearby sun in one or more short overdrive jumps. Then he would recognize the planetary system and know what to look for. Between nearby systems, astrogation was no great matter.

But the Golconda Ship leaped light-centuries and not for the neighborhood of suns. In such cases, at breakout the pilot wouldn't know exactly where he was. The identity of nearby stars couldn't be easily

established. Unless there was an ultra-short-period Cepheid close by, he could spend days trying to locate himself while errors mounted up.

So ships normally used space lanes, duly surveyed and the stars along it fully described, with checkpoints and other aids to astrogation. But the Golconda Ship could make no use of them without revealing at least approximately where it had come from and roughly where it was bound. At this last breakout for observation it was where no other ships ever appeared at all, and it went through a long, complicated procedure to locate itself. Then it refined those results until it knew exactly where it was. But nobody else in the galaxy did. Then, suddenly, the Golconda Ship vanished.

It was still in the blackness and isolation of overdrive when Scott moved toward a corner of Lambda's control room. An inconspicuous door there opened on a narrow stairway that led down to the next level and opened in the kitchen of the hotel restaurant. When Lambda was a liner, this stair was used to carry coffee and such items to the astrogators, without marching it through the hotel lobby. Having studied its plans, Scott knew even such details about the lobby.

He led Janet down. As they reached the bottom of the stair, she said, "You haven't any real hope, have you?"

"I don't know," said Scott. "I've been too busy getting things lined up. I haven't had time either to hope or despair."

"I haven't had any hope from the beginning," said Janet quietly. "From the first moment I've known there wasn't the faintest chance that I wouldn't be — murdered. But one can only stay terrified so long. The emotion wears out."

They reached the bottom of the stair.

"Then unweave it," commanded Scott. "I need you to take care of a situation for me. Come along!"

He led the way, through the kitchen and past plastic-topped tables where food was prepared. He headed for a corner where there was another doorway. It had been provided for the serving of drinks and snacks in the hotel lobby area. It wouldn't be conspicuous from there.

"This will be a bet," he said over his shoulder, "I'm going to set up a gamble with fate or chance or destiny, — all of which have been known to cheat. But I'm going to ask you to try it."

"What's the gamble?"

"An extension of the privilege of breathing," Scott told her. They neared this other door, now.

"And a long-odds-against, outside-chance of ultimate survival, That's what you gamble for. What I have to put up is simply getting the buoy through the comets. If I can manage that — and I should — you will be temporarily safe and can attend to something for me."

"I don't understand."

"You will shortly," he assured her. "For now, we want to be quiet."

They went out into an alcove of the lobby. It opened almost opposite a door over which there was a lighted panel showing the words: *Lifeboat. Do Not Enter*. From here all the lobby could be surveyed. It was empty. There was the tiny theater, and the wide doorway to the restaurant, and the counter and hotel desk space which made this part of Lambda look so much like an old fashioned hostel. There were upholstered chairs and carpets. There was reading matter on a table or two. And there was that visible film of dust which silently testified that something was wrong.

It occurred to Scott, absurdly, that if someone did mean to deceive the crewmen of the Golconda Ship before their slaughter, a beginning would have to be made by turning the blaster-men aboard into housemaids, dusting and cleaning and polishing to make these surroundings seem lived in.

But he opened the door under the panel announcing that it led to a lifeboat. He closed it with care to make no noise. There was a short passageway and another metal door. Scott unlocked it.

Beyond, there was a lifeboat blister, and the lifeboat *itself*, and beyond that the great mussel-shell valves that would open out to let the boat emerge. He adjusted the warning device which so much impressed passengers when it was showed to them. // there were need for the lifeboats, the standard explanation said, and // a lifeboat was about to open the blister-valves and leave the ship, and // anybody was late getting to the boat, thek attempt to open the inner door would be made known to the lifeboat. So nobody would be left behind. And there was a telephone to the control room, too, in case of a need for last-second instructions.

Passengers were much encouraged by these proofs that everything had been thought of for thek

safety.

Scott led Janet inside the spaceboat and showed her how to close and dog the port.

"Here's what you've got to know," he told Janet professionally. "You unlock this —" he demonstrated it — "and the boat's ready to leave. Only certified spacemen carry a key to release the boats. Then if you throw this lever —" he showed her — "you'll be out of the blister. You're only to do any of this or anything else I show you when there's nothing else to be done. It won't be suicide, of course, but it's definitely a last resort. Understand?"

She nodded. He went on curtly, "This is the drive. You want to remember that in a space boat you use a drive to get going, and you use reverse drive to stop, but you don't use drive to *keep* going. You don't stop! If you want to drive to another boat, or a ship, or whatever, don't aim straight at it. You could crash. Instead, aim to pass it close by. As you pass, you brake with reverse drive.

That's the way to become still in relation to the object and close."

He lectured precisely, lucidly. He gave details. He made explanations. Once or twice he drew diagrams in the dust that lay thinly over the interior of the spaceboat.

He made no attempt to instruct her in anything but the use of the lifeboat as a survival device while awaiting rescue. But in that context he did explain, over and over, how to approach an object in space and make fast to it with the space boat's magnetic grapples. All the while, though, he was aware that the usefulness of this instruction would depend entirely on what he managed to do elsewhere.

Presently Janet said quietly, "Only a ship's officer is supposed to handle a space boat. You're teaching me, though you're Patrol. While I'm doing it, what will you be doing?"

It was a matter of interest only to Janet. The galaxy as a whole was interested in other matters. On a large scale suns blazed in emptiness and novas flamed and comets — including the Five Comets of Canis Lambda — rushed furiously through space upon errands that seemed pure futility. On lesser scales, cargo carriers were lifted from spaceports to where they vanished like burst bubbles, and passenger ships landed, and life went on. ... But practically nobody thought about Checkpoint Lambda.

Even the space buoy's present population didn't think about it especially. Bugsy's men, and the few who had followed Chenery, were gambling in the crew's quarters. They were concerned with how cards ran and dice rolled. Chenery was an exception. He craved to be smarter than anybody else. He'd designed this enterprise. He hadn't wanted violence to be used, but only the threat of it, because that would make him smarter and cleverer and more certain to be admired. He was concerned with the future of the buoy. He was on it. Also, if it wasn't destroyed within the next few hours, he had some claim on the yet-to-be-secured treasure of the Golconda Ship. Bugsy's thoughts about the buoy were more confused. It was part of his character that he counted on one kind of solution for all possible problems. He had a violent mind. Where Chenery saw an obstacle as something to be outwitted, Bugsy searched among possible forms of violence for one with which to smash it. Because the capture of the space buoy might have been hampered by someone getting suspicious while it was being done cleverly, he turned that capture into a massacre. Because the Golconda Ship might avoid even the cleverest of deceptions, he intended to make its seizure butchery. And he didn't quite believe in danger from the Five Comets because human violence simply couldn't be applied to them. But, within limits, he thought of Checkpoint Lambda.

Janet appeared to think of it, and yet not to. Scott explained what he would be doing while he tried to make it unnecessary for her to drive a lifeboat out of its blister and upon the errand he'd assigned her. If she had to do that, and kept her head, and remembered all of his instructions, she

still wouldn't be safe. But her danger would be impersonal. And if she didn't live through it she'd lose relatively little compared to dying in Lambda.

"I'll try it," she said soberly, "but I wish you were going to handle the space boat."

"I'm going back to the control room," he said. "And for the time being I'll do nothing, if possible. But Chenery or Bugsy may do something. So I have to be ready for anything."

He moved to leave the space boat. Janet said gravely, "Thank you."

He shrugged.

"It's not a very good chance. But there aren't many women who could make it a chance at all. I think you can."

He went out. He listened painstakingly at the door beneath the sign that said: *Lifeboat. Do Not Enter*. He heard nothing. A little later he went into the lobby, as a steward might have done serving drinks to passengers.

A little later still, he heard noises down the grand stairway to the three levels of passenger cabins. They were voices. They were coming up the stairs. There was Bugsy's voice, and Chenery's and the voice of a third man Scott hadn't heard before. The third voice said confusedly, "Wha' th' hellsh th' matter? Why'n't you let a fella shleep? Le'me alone!"

There was the sound of a blow and a cry, "Ow!" Then Bugsy's voice, rasping horribly: "Come out of it! Or—"

Chenery protested, "Let me handle him, Bugsy!" Then he said encouragingly, "Not much more, Joey! Then you can sit down. You got to sober up, and fast, but you can do it! Come on, now, up the steps..."

Chenery and Bugsy appeared at the top of the staircase. Between them they hah* pulled and half carried a disheveled man whose head lolled to one side. They got him up to the hotel level floor. When they reached it, Scott was sitting in an upholstered chair as if he'd been there for some time. He put down a magazine, with his finger in it as if to keep a place.

"What's this?" he asked mildly.

Bugsy glared at him. Chenery struggled to hold the sagging third man upright. His attitude toward Scott was ambiguous. Scott was Patrol, and he knew that Chenery was ultimately responsible for the murders on Lambda. But Scott had left him armed, and Chenery believed what he said about the nature and constitution of comets.

"He's the engineer we brought," said Chenery with some difficulty. "He was a spaceman, but he lost his ticket. Bugsy wants to check on what you say about the comets. He's stayed drunk since — you know when."

"A good idea!" said Scott. "Til let you into the control room."

He crossed the lobby and went ahead up to that part of the ship in the buoy, which was Space Patrol territory because it was where observations were made. *From* it, too, all communication was handled, even the purely mechanical checkpoint call for ships to report, and the high-speed recordings and call elicited.

He unlocked the door in a manner suggesting cordiality. He helped Chenery get the stumbling, still intoxicated man inside and to a seat.

Chenery mumbled anxiously, "Where's Janet?"

"Resting," said Scott. "I hope she's sleeping. I found a place for her where she wont be disturbed. She's pretty well worn out. She hasn't had an easy time of it."

The seated man seemed to be about to go off to sleep again. Scott rocked his head back and forth between his hands. It wasn't painful, but it couldn't be endured. The disheveled engineer struggled to escape. He started up confusedly, half way out of the chair.

"Look!" said Scott sharply, holding his face toward the screens. "Look! Comets! We're running

into them! We're going to smash into them!"

The engineer's eyes were bleary, but they cleared as he looked. And then Scott had the unusual experience of seeing a drunken man go cold sober before his eyes.

The first sign of it was that his drink-flushed face lost color. His hands, which had pushed vaguely to escape Scott's and Chenery's grasp, now steadied and closed into fists. His pose lost its slackness. He straightened. And all the time the color continued to drain from his face until all that was left was a terrified grayish tint.

"God!" he gasped. "Are we runnin' into — that?"

Chenery said anxiously, "They're bigger than they were, Bugsy! They're bigger! You can see! We' nearer—"

"You!" Bugsy stiarfed. He was so enraged that he made inarticulate sounds before he could say furiously, "They're comets, yeah! We're runnin' into 'em! Yeah! What are they? Gas or what?"

The unnaturally sobered engineer trembled..

"They're rocks," he said, shaking. "The size of your fist. The size of houses! Mountains! They're all sizes! We got to miss 'em somehow!"

Scott said coldly, but approvingly, "You're a spaceman, anyhow! It's up to you. Bugsy wants to miss them as much as you do!"

Bugsy beat his fists together. He had a violent mind, and to him the answer to any emergency was violence. But even he knew that nothing men could do would conceivably destroy or injure the comets. The nearest of all was a glowing globe some tens of thousands of miles in diameter. There was a smaller one, perhaps not more than a fifth of that size. Then there were the twin comets, almost as big as the first, and the fifth one closing in from an angle which showed its incredible shining tail reacing out toward infinity.

"Then do somethin'!" shrilled Bugsy. But even in panic he raged. "Do somethin' fast!"

"We've got probably an hour and a hah⁵," said Scott calmly. "More or less, of course. Have you thought up a deal to offer me, Bugsy?"

"Do somethin'!" shouted Bugsy at the engineer. "You do somethin' or I'll burn you down!"

The sobered engineer reached out his hands to the control board. He turned a handle. There was an infinitely small lurching sensation. He turned another, and it repeated.

And the objects on the vision-screens moved visibly

as groups to one side. The seemingly stationary areas of mist — doubled in size since Scott came aboard — appeared to flow sedately to the right until they showed on the starboard bow-quarter screen. The masses of stars and portions of comets on the port bow-quarter screen flowed onto the dead-ahead screen. A curious sensation of suspense developed as the ship continued to swing. Presently a portion of the Milky Way appeared where only a little time ago there had been only the Five Comets.

Lambda, obviously, was turning in space. But it was not driving. It stayed in its orbit, traveling at what would have seemed incredible speed had there been any stationary object to measure by.

But the marker-asteroid shared the buoy's velocity. It was less than two miles away. It had no gravitational field to speak of. If it drew the buoy to itself, it was by fractions of an inch in weeks of time. Market and space buoy went on together in a sort of blind companionship toward the meteor-storm, meteor-hurricane, meteor-typhoon which was flinging missiles like some cosmic rapid-fire gun aimed like a hunter's shotgun at its target to secure a perfect, destructive hit.

The buoy was only turning. It had four steering units in its bow, and four by its stern. The shaking, sickened, unnaturally sobered engineer had a steering unit thrusting the bow of the ship to the left. Another steering unit pushed the stern to the right. Still others could lift the bow or depress the stern, and it was possible for both bow and stern to be urged in the same direction, so

the buoy could be made to shift crabwise. But that was for use only when a liner made delicate, painstaking contact with the buoy to put on or take off heavy freight. Now the buoy simply turned until it faced almost exactly away from the spot among the Five Comets at which it had been aimed. The engineer fumblingly reversed the turning controls to stop the swinging.

Bugsy cried fiercely, "Now get goin'! Get goin' away from them comets! There's the marker! Get movin'! Away from it! We got to leave it!"

Beads of sweat st&od out on the face of the engineer. He'd kept himself in a drunken stupor from the time of the murders to the time a little while since when he'd been roused forcibly to have a miracle demanded of him. Maybe he'd wanted to forget what he'd seen when the buoy was taken over. Maybe he'd wanted to forget what he'd done. He'd been sobered, but it could only be temporary. Any spaceman knew something about handling a ship, but when a man has been frightened sober, his sobriety doesn't last.

He wobbled at the control board. He lurched. With an enormous drunken deliberation he put his hand on the solar system drive control.

"This-sh," he pronounced drunkenly, "is the drive. The only drive we got. But it'll take ush away —"

He threw over the control.

And nothing happened. The engineer beamed triumphantly around him, waving a hand as though acknowledging applause. Then he collapsed. He lay on the floor and snored.

The marker buoy continued to float in emptiness nearby. The Lambda certainly wasn't towing it. It wasn't leaving it. It wasn't doing anything at all. Nothing was doing anything. Even the solar system drive — which in any case couldn't have built up counter-orbital velocity in time to keep the buoy from destruction, — even the solar-system drive wasn't even trying.

Chenery said anxiously, "Lieutenant! The engines ain't doing anything!"

"I'd suggest," said Scott in a reasonable tone, "that you take this man down to the engine room, try to rouse him again and see if he can find out what's

wrong. He's an engineer. He's your man!"

Then Bugsy found a use for violence. His eyes glittered. His teeth showed.

"Where's the girl?" he demanded abruptly.

"Asleep, I hope," said Scott. "She needs it. I found her a place where she won't be disturbed."

"How long have we got?" Bugsy demanded ferociously. "How long have we got?"

"We're reasonably safe for an hour," Scott told him. "With luck. But we'll be where we can look for punctures of the hull in an hour and-a-half. In two hours there shouldn't be any compartment in Lambda that hasn't been riddled and the air lost. In three hours there shouldn't be any Lambda. It'll be part vapor and part scrap-metal and most of it will be going with the comets around the sun."

"An' y'won't," panted Bugsy, "y' won't make a deal?"

"You haven't offered me anything I can take seriously," said Scott.

Bugsy spat at him. He went out of the control room, staggering as he walked. He made jerky, uncoordinated gestures, then he disappeared from sight.

Chenery wrung his hands. There were tears in his eyes. Scott regarded him curiously. It was Chenery who'd contrived the enterprise which now was falling apart all around him. He was breaking up with it.

Chenery had wanted to be smart and to be clever, and he'd possessed a cunning which he considered genius. He had a gift for trickery and the devising of pitfalls, and for the victimizing

of his fellows. He'd planned thefts that were clever and unique and he'd prospered. He'd risen to the masterminding of robberies, and he had put a smooth and brilliant polish on their details, In certain quarters he became famous. And he'd developed an impassioned ambition to pull off the biggest and cleverest robbery of all time.

Now he was to die of it. He'd contrived the seizure of the Golconda Ship from information he'd gotten by pure accident. He'd drawn Buggy into the scheme to get the extra needed manpower for his masterpiece. He'd worked out in detail how the crewmen of the Lambda were to be seized one-by-one, to bear witness later to the superlative brilliance of his planning.

And if Buggy had remained subordinate, he might have brought it off, even considering the Five Comets. Because crewmen who were prisoners instead of corpses would have warned him of the need to leave the Lambda's normal orbit and the asteroid which was the buoy's orbit-companion. But Buggy had taken over, and now Chenery wanted to cry because his pride was gone and his vanity shattered. What should have been the most brilliant and spectacular robbery since men had possessions to be robbed of, was now turned into a mere brutal, sordid, murder-filled fiasco. The brilliance and the genius were drained away. If the galaxy ever did learn what had happened here, it wouldn't be a romantic Robin Hood-like tale of wit and daring, but one of foot pads and killers who'd murdered their way into a space buoy to wait for a treasure ship and by sheer stupidity rode it into the Five Comets. Which riddled it, shattered it, vaporized it, and left all the killers astonished corpses in emptiness.

So Chenery wept. Something on the control room wall made a distinctive clicking noise. And another. And another. Scott's jaws tensed.

"Take him down to the engine room, Chenery," he commanded. "I don't think it will do any good, but try it."

Chenery said thinly, catching his breath, "Lieutenant —"

"Here," said Scott. "I'll help you get him on your back. Like this! Hold that arm and get your other arm under his leg, like this! That's right! You can carry him now."

Chenery swallowed. He was a small man, and the helpless and sodden engineer was not. Chenery was almost hidden under his burden. But he said unsteadily, "Lieutenant, I'm sorry! I'm sorry you came — and Janet. But I didn't mean to get everybody killed! It was going to be a swell — a swell job! Only I Heeded some extra men. And it's turned out like this!"

Scott said nothing as Chenery went down the stairs, one foot and leg of the engineer bumping on each step, then across the floor-space below, with the engineer's foot and leg still dragging.

Scott closed the control room door. He locked it. Swiftly he went to the place from which a clicking had come. It came again. It was a tape reel which should be spinning quickly receiving the ultra-fast broadcast of a ship's log which would sound like a rather shrill whine. But this one wasn't. There was another ship out yonder, far from the path of the Five Comets. It had picked up the monotonous checkpoint signal which never ceased to be broadcast.

"Checkpoint Lambda," it said tinnily. *"Checkpoint Lambda. Report. Report."*

On any ship but one, that signal would actuate the log broadcast. But not on the Golconda Ship. It would send a signal composed of a thousand makings and breakings of the log broadcast frequency. It would make clickings instead of whines come from the recorder reel. They would mean nothing to anybody, anywhere, except the Patrol officer in command of Lambda. He'd know they signaled the arrival of the Golconda Ship.

The clicks continued. They said — unintelligibly to anyone but Scott — that the Golconda Ship was ready to make port on Lambda. Actually, it was ahead of schedule because of unusual good fortune in locating itself in the enormous void between the stars. It had fabulous treasure aboard. It had a crew of no-longer-young multi-multi-millionaires, grown bored with riches and finding adventure only in their quadrennial voyages to grow richer still. And now, after six months of this one, they were bored with it.

Scott threw a switch, built into the automatic checkpoint equipment for emergencies. No emergency like this had happened before, but the switch was ready. It cut off the checkpoint taping of its call for ships to send their logs. It substituted Scott's voice on the call frequency. "Calling ship," said Scott sharply. "Calling ship!"

He didn't name the ship he was calling. Another passing vessel might pick up the name. He couldn't know when his voice would reach the Golconda Ship. It could be seconds. It was more likely to be minutes. But checkpoint signals were expected to be fairly clear, even light-hours from the sun, and log broadcasts were received from distances nearly as great.

"Warning," said Scott into the transmitter. "Do not make freight contact with this checkpoint at this time. I am Lieutenant Scott, appointed to command it. When I arrived here a few hours ago I found its original crew murdered and the checkpoint in the hands of blaster-men waiting for you to arrive — object, more murders. It was seized some six days ago. At this moment we are about to drive into the Five Comets, which are crossing our orbital path. When we emerge on the other side of the comets, you may reopen communication. I believe the situation will have changed. I urge extreme caution."

He paused again.

"There is one passenger, a girl, who survived the murder of the other passengers and the legitimate crew. I very urgently request that you make an effort — taking whatever precautions you please — to pick her up. If you do not do this, please inform the Space Patrol of her predicament."

He gave explicit instructions for the rescue of Janet. Nobody would be monitoring the checkpoint's repetitious message: "*Checkpoint Lambda. Report. Report.*"

When he finished, he felt the first moment of actual relief since he'd boarded Lambda. He'd made the first crack in the situation that faced him when he came to take command. Now he had only to get through the comets, prevent his own murder, and then take real command of the buoy. After that there'd only be the matter of handling Buggy and Chenery and their followers — he felt reasonably assured about handling Chenery, though — and then somehow manage to keep Checkpoint Lambda in operation all by himself until some sort of relief arrived.

He didn't try to make plans for all these operations at once. In the nature of things some of them would have to be played by ear when the time came. But he had improved Janet's chances of living out her life as she had the right to do. And he had warned the Golconda Ship.

He wasn't too sure about the Golconda Ship, though. He was more or less skeptical — more skeptical as he thought it over. There is a point where money does things to the people who own it. Unpleasant things. The multi-multi-millionaires who were the Golconda Ship's crew did not lead normal lives. Because they were rich they were lied to by people who hoped to gain by flattering them. They were schemed against by people who would cheat them. They were cajoled by people who would tempt them to dishonesty and provide accomplices to crimes to make a profit out of them. They had to hire guards lest they or their families be kidnaped or murdered if they did not pay blackmail. Men whose lives were filled with the feverish attempts of other people to

get money from them were not likely to stay unaffected by those attempts. They might be poisoned by suspicion and Warped by the constant need to be wary.

In short, the men on the Golconda Ship might act like other men. But it wasn't too likely. Warned by Scott, they might act like rich men; see to their own always precarious safety, go cautiously away, and politely tell the Space Patrol about Janet and Scott in their predicament in the space buoy circling Cards Lambda.

And if they did, Scott couldn't really blame them.

But for the moment he felt relieved. And then he realized that to relax too early might be dangerous.

There was Buggy. He was probably convinced about the Five Comets now. But he had one single answer to all problems — violence. He hadn't been able to threaten Scott before. But there was a way. Scott suddenly realized that there was an exquisitely monstrous kind of violence Buggy could practice, of which the mere threat would subdue Scott completely. There was a way by which he could be forced to take Lambda through the Five Comets, and afterward work desperately to bring the Golconda Ship alongside — contriving explanations for his broadcast as they were needed — so Buggy could bloodily massacre its crew, while he astrogated that ship where-ever Buggy pleased. And then be killed.

Scott found himself growing tense again. He tried to thrust away the idea that it could happen. But he suddenly berated himself bitterly for not having been more careful, more intelligent, more resourceful. Even that he hadn't killed Buggy in cold blood when it was possible.

Because Buggy had gone away from the control room in such horrible fury that he staggered and stumbled as he walked. And only a little earlier he'd asked where Janet was.

Sweat came out on Scott's face as he realized how helpless he was. Buggy couldn't be stopped from having his men search for Janet. Even now they might be hunting over the Lambda — exploring every nook and cranny; every compartment however small; looking even into every cupboard.... Sooner or later they'd think of the lifeboats.

He seemed to hear noises. He wasn't sure, but he believed it. The search was beginning...

CHAPTER 6

There was another small whining sound from a tape reel on the control room wall. A passing ship had picked up the mechanical checkpoint call and had sent its taped log for Lambda to record and the Space Patrol to examine in case of need. That ship had gone back into overdrive and away before its broadcast reached the buoy. Such recordings were useful because, if that ship were to fail to reach its destination, an examination of its log to the last checkpoint might reveal the reason for its vanishing and help prevent another case of the same kind. But the system had other virtues, too. At least one meteor stream spanning the distance between two stars had been guessed at from such records. It had been hunted for and found, and was now a charted space-hazard which all ships avoided. And at least one totally disabled ship was found against all probability when its overdrive blew. But its log revealed some questionable instrument-readings and most of its crew was still alive when a Patrol ship found it.

But there was no record anywhere off Lambda of what might be the trouble there, now. If Lambda disappeared, the liner that had delivered Scott to it would report some irregularities. If the Golconda Ship picked up Scott's message — which it might, or it might not — there would be more information. But there would still be too little to amount to definite knowledge. The record would show only that Lieutenant Scott, Space Patrol, had gone aboard Lambda to take command. It was his first command. And Lambda had vanished shortly afterward, like two robot checkpoints before it. Therefore it would be considered wise to avoid the Canis Lambda system, where two checkpoints and a manned buoy had vanished. So six space lanes would be shifted because it was not practical to avoid the dangers of this solar system — or perhaps because Lieutenant Scott was incompetent. There'd be no evidence for any other

conclusion except the possibly garbled message to the Golconda Ship.

Scott didn't like the idea. As a professional spaceman and an officer in the Patrol he felt that any disaster to anything he commanded should be reported and explained so it need never happen again. But as a man he considered that there were circumstances overriding even that obligation. It was now time to act for the preservation of the space buoy. It no longer had any operating space drive, of course. Not even a hopelessly inadequate solar system drive unit. Used early enough, even that could have taken care of the comet problem. It should have been used. But Lieutenant Thrums had been murdered six days before Scott's arrival and before it was time to use it. Now it was too late. The rest of the buoy's crew had been murdered at the same time, so they couldn't tell Chenery or Buggy of the coming need to drive ten to twenty thousand miles out of orbit — even thirty thousand — to avoid the comet-crossing. When Scott came aboard it was quite too late for any such commonsense proceeding.

But there was another method of escape that could be tried. Scott had devised it nearly at once. It had never been done, but there'd never been the need or the circumstances existing here. Without overdrive or even solar system propulsion Scott proposed to prevent the buoy's destruction.

But he didn't intend to try it if Janet fell into the hands of Buggy's men.

Janet could be tortured until Scott obeyed all of Buggy's commands. If he let himself be killed, though that would make further violence useless, it wouldn't keep Buggy from trying to take senseless revenge upon Janet for his own inevitable doom. Buggy's instinct was to violence, but not necessarily to quick murder. If his purpose was to make someone suffer for hindering his plans, he wouldn't be impatient for the kill. It wouldn't be the death of his victim that he wanted. Buggy wouldn't be a desirable person to hold Janet captive.

Scott found his blaster in his hand. He raged. He even took a step toward the control room door. But that would be playing Buggy's game. Scott had seen eleven men on the buoy, and far down in the stern near the hospital he'd heard the voices of more. He could guess at fifteen to twenty. Probably a score, altogether. And whatever the adventure tape-dramas portrayed, one man against twenty was bad odds. If Scott could cut it down — good. But he couldn't throw away his life. It had to be saved for Janet's protection — even if protection could be no more than a merciful blaster-shot. He had to stay alive long enough for that!

There was a scratching at the control room door. Scott opened it. He had his blaster ready, but it was Chenery, in a teary panic and gasping for breath.

"Lieutenant!" he panted. "Buggy says — do some-thing to protect — the buoy or —"

"What's the deal?" asked Scott. His voice was full

of rage and sarcasm and, it seemed to him, despair. "What's he offering? To commit suicide? That'll be helpful!" ,*

"It's — Janet!" panted Chenery. Tears finally did roll down his cheeks; He was terrified beyond description, humiliated past endurance. All his cleverness had brought him to the realization that he wasn't smart. He faced destruction with the buoy. If Scott didn't yield, he had less than an hour to live. But if he were spared destruction now, he was certain to be killed later because Buggy would see no need to share the treasure of the Golconda Ship. He'd learned it the hard way. Now he had no possible excuse for hope, even if all his most desperate desires were met. If Buggy won in this incredible contest with Scott, Chenery would be killed. If Scott should win, Chenery would die in a gas-chamber. And the only other alternative was that he'd die when all the rest aboard the Lambda did.

"What's the proposition?" demanded Scott, again.

"Janet —" gasped Chenery. "Buggy's got his men huntin' her. He's got a good idea where to look.

He'll take the ship apart, if he has to, and he'll find her! And when he does, unless you —." Chenery choked. Scott's eyes were furious. Chenery felt that he was nearer to dying than he'd ever been before.

"Tell Buggy," said Scott in a voice that crackled, "tell Buggy to take his men out of my way and keep them that way! I'm going to get Janet and bring her back here. If he tries to stop me he'll have no chance to live! I'll get the buoy to safety — for the time being! But only after I've got Janet with me! Not before! And then, when we're through the comets, I'll tell him what he has to do next!"

"You'll — dodge the comets?"

"The comets won't touch the Lambda," said Scott. His voice grated. "Not if Buggy does what I tell him!

Get his men out of my way!"

Such a warning wasn't enough for security while he got to Janet and brought her to a place beside him. For that matter, a place beside him would be the least safe place in the galaxy. Yet nobody would dare to kill him. Not yet. Not even after Lambda emerged from the swarming, miles-per-second rushing masses of stone and nickel-steel that plunged to meet it. There was still the Golconda Ship, and after that Buggy's absolute need for an astrogator.

'Til — tell him," panted Chenery. "I'll tell him!"

He went away, catching his breath in gasps like a panic-stricken child. Scott closed the door again. Seconds later he was speaking very softly into the microphone that would communicate with any lifeboat up to the instant of its launching, "If you have the switch on, listening," he murmured, "stay where you are! I'm not coming for you! I'm playing for time. It's the timing that will settle everything!"

He heard an indistinct response. He looked at his watch and again at the comets. They filled four vision-screens now. They were a monstrous, featureless shining vapor which had no surface. Their identities were lost because of their nearness. Conceivably, if one knew exactly where to look, and at what rate to move one's eyes in which direction, some of the larger solid masses in the mist could have been seen. But there were not many such giants. The shining portion of the comets was very nearly a vacuum. It was probably true that a comet's tail, compressed to the density of breathing air, could be put into something not much larger than a hat. It was of such unthinkable tenuity that the pressure of sunlight itself — to be measured only in tons over the whole face of a planet — pushed the separate gas-ions of the mist away from Canis Lambda to make comets' tails of it. Each of the Five Comets sported a tail, most of it invisible because Lambda was so close. But it was the solid parts

III

that meant destruction.

Scott glanced at the marker-asteroid, floating less than two miles from, the buoy. As he looked there was a lurid flash of blue-white flame. Something solid had hit at the marker's edge. Some tiny member of the comets' swarms had made impact on the mile-thick mass of steel. It had been traveling at miles per second. When it struck, the shock of its arrival could not travel fast enough to let the miniature thing act as a solid body. It telescoped upon its own substance, like a railroad train in a collision. The metal of the asteroid could not yield. Flying object and asteroid-surface exploded in a flame out of hell, and there would be a minute, new hollow pit in the substance of the marker. Anything this size wouldn't puncture the steel hull of Lambda, of course. This might be half the size of a pea. But anything as big as a marble would go through a three-eighths-inch plate. A meteor the size of a baseball could blast a hole by its explosion that would empty a deck level in seconds.

He threw on the GC phone. He spoke measuredly into its microphone.

"Calling Buggy," he said icily. "Calling Buggy. This is to confirm what Chenery will tell you. You're looking for Janet. But I'm going after her. Keep out of my way! If I'm killed, you'll die in forty-some minutes. When she's with me, if you try anything you'll have to kill me first. And then you'll die in the hell-fire this ship will become!" Then he said even more coldly, "Get your men out of my way. If I see one I'll kill him and you don't dare kill me back!"

Inwardly, he knew a bitter pessimism. He'd almost gotten Janet to relative safety, — at least to the point where she'd have a chance in a hundred of surviving until the Golconda Ship picked her up, if it tried. Her chance would be less but still real if the Golconda Ship withdrew discreetly to safety for itself and

only reported his message to the Patrol. A ship would come here to investigate, and somebody aboard it might understand how he'd expected her to survive. But she'd have an infinitely better chance if Lambda survived too. And if he did.

The checkpoint at that moment, though, seemed as helpless as anything in space could be. It was a derelict without a drive. Its velocity toward the crossing-point of the comets was unalterable. Chenery blindly believed Scott could do something, but Chenery didn't try to guess what. He'd ceased, though, to believe in his own cleverness. Buggy might believe in the danger from the comets, but he hadn't stopped believing in violence. And because of that he could still convince himself that Scott was only bluffing. It was touch and go. Buggy was frustrated to the point where at any instant he could convince himself of anything that allowed him to take violent action. He could reason that there was only Scott's word, for the existence of danger and ignore a spreading luminous mist on the vision-screens, and the terror that had sobered a drunken space engineer when he stared at the comets from the control room. This was evidence enough, but Buggy could reject it and react, like a madman.

So this was the crucial moment. Out of pure fury Buggy could destroy Scott and everybody else — including himself — by acting on the idea that Scott must be lying.

But he wasn't. Not even about the possibility of survival. He should and he would be able to get the checkpoint-buoy through the thickest and most irresistible of rushing meteoric swarms, provided that it was here and now and under the current conditions. If Buggy would believe it. But he couldn't be told how it should be done. He wouldn't believe that!

So Scott went out of the control room to act out a lie. The one necessary thing was Janet's safety for

the next forty-five minutes. He couldn't demand that the search for her stop. Buggy wouldn't honor it and Scott couldn't enforce agreement. He had to make sure she wouldn't be found. That Buggy's men would only search where they wouldn't find her. Given forty-five minutes more, he could put the ship in a position of relative safety. It wouldn't be wise to do it earlier. Then, given panic — which he should be able to contrive — he might join her. And then, given unlimited good fortune, he'd have Lambda safe. He could have reasonable hope of survival for Janet and himself. And he might have Buggy and Chenery and then-followers set up for a final, painless journey into official gas-chambers. It was Scott's duty to arrange that. But he almost regretted Chenery.

Such a sequence of events was possible. The outline of actions to produce it was complete in Scott's mind. But when he tried to envision carrying it out, pessimism arose. He couldn't believe he'd make it. But he had to try.

He went down the stairs to the hotel level. The hotel space was totally empty, yet Scott couldn't believe he hadn't been seen.

Buggy would scatter his men, fast, to find out which direction Scott moved to take Janet out of

hiding. He'd have his followers search desperately ahead of Scott. If they found her, Bugsy would hold the whip hand from that moment on.

Scott reached the bottom of the grand stairway to the three cabin levels. He heard rustlings nearby. Once he heard what seemed to be furtive, hurrying footsteps. He was definitely being watched, though there weren't eyes upon him every second. But when he wasn't seen, his footfalls were heard. He went down to the baggage level. The three decks of hy-droponic garden. To the freight warehouse level. On down to the engine room. All was empty, or seemed to be except the last.

In the engine room there were two figures, close by the useless solar system drive unit. One was Chenery. He plainly had desperately tried to get the still-drunken engineer roused to sobering panic again, so he could make the drive unit work again. If he succeeded, and if the engineer accomplished it, it would spoil Scott's intended maneuver. Chenery, of course, couldn't imagine that.

"Chenery," said Scott grimly, "I'll tell you a secret. That's hopeless. The engine can't be made to work. It's a big job."

He heard sounds of movement. He'd outstripped some of the men who'd accompanied him this far. Chenery turned harried eyes upon him.

"I disabled it," said Scott. "It can't be made to work. I need it not to work. It's necessary if I'm to get the buoy through the comets."

Chenery, staring at him, seemed astonished. Scott said, more grimly than before, "And I'll tell you another secret. Bugsy's got men trying to find out where I'm going. I'm going after Janet. I don't want to be followed. So I'm doing something about it."

He turned. He'd come down a straight-line stairway with a right-angled turn at the top. It was strictly utilitarian. Scott deliberately threw a hand grenade. It was one of those he'd taken from baggage on the luggage level. It barely skimmed over the top step of the stairway. Curving down, it hit the wall beyond. It exploded. There was flame and a racking detonation and the top of the stairway was bent and twisted. It was not a practical stairway from that moment on. There were bowlings, above.

Scott went on. He left Chenery making vague gestures to himself, as if he were not quite able to control his hands. The engineer remained semi-comatose. He'd been roused for a moment at the shock of the explosion and had gazed dazedly about. Then he went to sleep again.

There were more levels going down. Scott descended in a cold fury. Normally the tradition of the Patrol was that it had its work to do, and its members chose to join the Patrol to do that work. It dealt to some extent with criminals, who chose their profession with the same freedom.

Ordinarily a Patrol man didn't hate a criminal as a man, however sternly he dealt with what a criminal did. But this was where men only are involved. Had there been only men on Lambda, Scott could have dealt with Chenery and Bugsy without emotion — and would probably have done a better job. But there had been women passengers murdered only to prepare for another crime. Janet was hunted now for further atrocity.

He raged. But he'd learned painfully to distrust all emotion-motivated thinking. He tried again to examine his reasons for doing what he did now. He was heading for the lifeboat's stern. Janet was not hidden there. She was in a lifeboat up near the bow. But no less than twice she'd been seen in the stern, with Scott. It should look as if some special hiding-place had been chosen for her there. And Scott's present armed foray, on top of his savage command that everybody get out of his way, ought to make it look as if he were going to get her out of that hiding-place.

The reasoning checked. It made sense. But it didn't feel right. He had another grenade ready for demonstration purposes, when he heard patterings behind him. He stopped his descent instantly.

The following, rushing footfalls continued. Then a wheezing, anguished voice panted, "Lieutenant! Lieutenant!"

It was Chenery, sounding as if he dreaded equally that Scott wouldn't hear him and that someone else would. He came desperately down the stairs.

Scott said, "Hold it!"

Chenery stopped short so abruptly that he almost fell forward. He clung to the stairway handrail, panting.

"Lieutenant —"

"Well?"

"You said you'd smashed the drive-engine!"

"I disabled it," said Scott coldly. "There's only one way to get the Lambda through the next few hours. A fool using the drive could spoil that way."

"Are you — goin' to get through yourself? Honest, Lieutenant?"

Scott shrugged.

"I'm betting on it. A big bet. My life."

"Listen!" panted Chenery. "I — I don't want to die, Lieutenant! But I — I didn't mean this job to be worked this way! It was goin' to be smooth an' crisp an' smart! Nobody hurt, and the biggest job ever, pulled off like a — like a masterpiece! See?"

"I haven't much time," said Scott impatiently.

"L-look! If Buggy gets away with the Golconda Ship, he's goin' to kill me anyhow! I know it! So I got nothing to lose. But — I've been a fool! And — I got a public. There's people that admire me! But — I'll have brought him here an' planned everything an'he'll—"

"I said I haven't much time!" said Scott sharply.

"Let me — throw in with you!" pleaded Chenery. "I haven't got a chance anyhow! If the comets don't kill everybody, Buggy'll kill me an' he'll brag about it! So nobody can track him, but he'll brag! About makin' me a fool! Let me throw in with you! Maybe I can help! I know that won't keep me from the gas-chamber, but if I got to die I don't want to look like a fool!"

Scott hesitated for a moment. But it was quite possibly true. Chenery's vanity had been crushed and shredded, but he had protected Janet and attempted futile apology for the murders he'd unintentionally brought about. Moreover, Scott believed that he wouldn't live to divide anything with Buggy, and that

he knew it. Whether or not he could be of any real use was a question, but now was no time to debate it- •*-.• ,

"Can you get back to the control room?" he asked.

"I — I think so!" "

"Go there," ordered Scott. "There's an automatic meteor-watch instrument. Do you know it?"

"N-no. But I—"

Scott stopped him. He told exactly where the instrument was on the control room wall. It was a variant of a very ancient device, a proximity-fuse, which had been devised for use in war on ancient Earth. As used now, it gave warning of the approach of objects in space. It ignored all but approaching ones. It ignored micrometeorites. Linkage with a radar-scanner cut off reports of those whose lateral change of bearing indicated that they'd pass well to one side or another. In effect, it gave warning of objects above a minimum size approaching on collision or near-collision courses.

"It's set for one hundred miles sensitivity," said Scott. "There's a pointer to change it. Set it for four hundred miles. Then watch it. If the dial shows probability above five per cent, make sure the alarm-gongs ring, even if you have to turn them on by hand. Understand?"

Chenery said agitatedly, "Yes. But I'm throwing in with you —"

"And I'm giving you orders," Scott told him. "Carry them out or don't. But for now, — don't follow me. Move!"

He gestured. Chenery turned around and trudged up the steps again.

Scott continued his descent. His purpose here was to convince Buggy that Janet was somewhere in these parts of the buoy. To do that, he had to keep attention focussed on himself. The way to do that was to keep in action, even though he acted only to keep attention on himself. And the best action he could take was to vanish.

He did. In the simplest possible fashion. **Between** the engine room and the hospital and crew's quarters deck, there was a half-level, — a space with only half the usual ceiling height. When Lambda had been a liner, by standard spacecraft regulations, she had to carry emergency food supplies for not less than one full standard year for a maximum ship's company. Ship owners protested bitterly against this deadhead cargo. It cut down the paying freight a ship could take aboard. But the requirement was fixed. This half-deck was the space in which those emergency rations had been carried. The practical result of carrying them, of course, was that *if* a ship were disabled in space, and *if* repairs by her crew were impossible, — why — since there was no real chance of any other ship finding it, a year's supply of food meant that those aboard would have so much extra time in which to go mad from despair before they died.

Scott reached this storage area. It was long since three-quarters empty. There were only a few big crates of now undoubtedly unusable rations remaining. The section was dark and the air in it stale. Scott stepped off the stairway and vanished in its obscurity. Then he simply waited.

Again he had bitter doubts. Now he had forty minutes or less before the Lambda would arrive near the estimated point where her destruction might be expected to begin. His guess could be wrong. There might be stray stones or steel objects. They'd become more concentrated near the coma's center. At any instant even now there could be the final event, — an impact no one aboard Lambda would feel, because all would be dead before they could experience dying. But it might be delayed.... All this was chance, and chance would have to decide it. But Scott had to think of other things. If he should get the buoy through the comets, it would have to be because he wasn't interfered with. He couldn't do it with panicky Jillers clamoring that they must be made instantly safe in a fashion they could understand. He couldn't have Buggy's high-pitched and frantic commands that he do something right away or be burned down. He'd need to do what had to be done with absolute precision and without disturbance. He couldn't handle the buoy and at the same time reassure blaster-men who might kill him any instant because they couldn't understand that he was saving them.

There were, then, two actions to be performed. One would keep Janet from being found. The other would keep Buggy's crew of murderers from being able to hinder the preservation of their lives for, of course, gas-chambers.

Scott was now performing the first action by taking no action at all. He sat in the emergency-supplies half-deck, breathing stale air and watching the minute hand of his watch. He'd been followed down from the hotel restaurant level by Buggy's men. They had orders not to let themselves be seen, but to find out where Scott would find Janet. They were now wildly wrong in their guess because he'd made them so. But now they'd no idea where he was.

Minutes passed. Slowly. With a horrible deliberation. There was no noise for a long time. Then somebody dashed down the stairway, going through and past the half-deck. Scott watched him, blaster in hand, as he ran past the darkness of the storage space. If he'd stopped to look, he might have seen Scott as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. If he had, Scott would have needed to blast him. But he rushed by. Buggy's orders, now, were to find Janet. To follow Scott. Everything depended on it. Now there was confusion. Scott had disappeared.

Scott gave him two minutes in which to spread

dismay and to rouse Bugsy to foaming fury. They were very long minutes indeed.

Then he went on to the stairway himself. He followed the same route as the man who'd rushed down. One more level and he listened. He emerged on the very last level of all. There was babbling somewhere. Scott shifted his blaster to his left hand. He weighed a less-than-fist-sized grenade in his right. He threw it. It exploded. Flames and smoke and fumes spread ; an incredible distance. The door of the crew's cabin | disappeared. The door-frame partly crumpled and [partly vanished. There was a crater in the floor. There I were cries. Scott had indicated for the second time that he did not want to be followed. And nobody would make any haste at all to disobey him. Inside the crew's quarters men were dazed and bewildered by the wholly unexpected explosion almost in their midst. Before any of them dared to look outside, Scott was gone on past the hospital — the remaining patient was there no longer — and through another door ! tinder a sign, *Lifeboat. Do Not Enter.*

He closed and jammed it behind him. He went along the brief passage from that doorway to a metal, [airtight door. It was closed and locked, of course. Lifeboats could be entered only when an officer made h possible. Only especially trained men could make good use of a space boat. But Scott had a key for it. He'd let Janet into another lifeboat, far up near the bow. He now used the same key — it was practically part of an officer's uniform — to enter this lifeboat blister. But he didn't enter the boat itself. He -locked the blister-door behind him and turned to that closet within the blister which holds space suits ready but protects them from pilfering or souvenir-hunting crewmembers and travelers. There was only one suit there. He laid out certain of the things in his pockets. The air-lock key. Grenades. His blaster and its holster.

With strict method, he checked the space suit. Air. Batteries. Signs of wear. Space cord. He put it on I and transferred thf kems from his pockets to the suit.

! He was putting on the helmet when a clanging, clamorous gong sounded stridently and persistently in the blister, as it did in every other part of Lambda , where a human being could be.

He knew what it was, — a meteor-alarm giving notice of some sizable object approaching the Lambda on a collision or a near-miss course. Its sound was distinctive and jangling. Bugsy's men would know!

Scott settled his helmet with a professional twist rare even to the men of the Patrol. He opened the small side port that work-parties used when a ship was aground, but very rarely in space.

He stepped out on the outer surface of the buoy.

There were nearly no stars. The Lambda was already within the mist, the infinitely thin shining stuff which was the visible part of a comet. Nothing but that luminous haze could be seen in the direction toward which the Lambda moved. The glittering marker-buoy, only a mile and a half from Lambda, was utterly distinct. But perhaps fifty stars out of billions could still be seen in the direction from which the buoy had come.

It went on toward destruction as Scott stood clumsily in magnetic-soled shoes on the buoy's hull.

CHAPTER 7

A class in nature study on Trent looked fascinatedly through transparent panels at carefully preserved specimens of the fauna and flora of that now long-settled world. Earth organisms brought by the early colonists had long since crowded out the native types everywhere that they were not especially guarded. On another world, the planet Tambu, the chains of volcanos that so impressed the first exploring parties were now tamed, and vast industrial complexes operated on the unlimited power they produced. The watery world of Glair had seemed to defy humanity to subdue its single, limitless brackish sea for merely human uses. But there were colonies on its floating ice-caps now, and processing ships used electric currents to herd marine creatures into motor-driven nets, while electrolytic plants continually extracted rare-metal elements

from the semi-salt seawater. And there was Fournery, and Glamis, and Krail. On Fournery, colonists prepared exportable planetary specialties from the hides of the largest carnivores in the galaxy. On Glamis useful and profitable products were made from the half-animal vegetation whose various species devoured each other and tried to kill men. And even the murderously poisonous Krailian trees called *upas* — from an Earth tradition — were now confined to special forests, and from their venom, men extracted a cure for indigestion.

All through the galaxy it seemed that there was defiance of mankind. And all through the galaxy men complacently made profit out of, things designed to frustrate them. They didn't often destroy the inimical things they encountered. Usually they diverted them from the purposes which were their own, and turned them to use for the purposes of mankind.

But Canis Lambda seemed for a long time to have won a single, isolated victory over men.

Man began to search for planets on which to deposit its ever-growing population. It had found and settled worlds so rapidly, though, that there was now no planet anywhere which did not clamor for more inhabitants. And still new worlds appeared. But Canis

Lambda, burning fiercely in emptiness, still defied men.

Eons since, when humans first blinked astonished eyes at the miracle of fire, in the First System, Canis Lambda had taken measures. Then it had four planets which men might eventually desire. So Canis Lambda destroyed them — shattered them and turned them into jagged, ragged scraps and lumps of broken stone and steel. It left specimens large enough to mock the men who would some day arrive. There were a few asteroids not less than forty miles in diameter. Smaller bits couldn't be counted or even estimated. But none could be of any conceivable use to mankind. And Canis Lambda flamed sullen triumph at its victory for hundreds of thousands of years.

When men did come to it, there was nothing for them to live on or mine or make any use of at all. But they'd have liked to find a planet there. There wasn't one. So they made a robot checkpoint there to do part of what their plans required.

Canis Lambda destroyed it. Men built another. Canis Lambda destroyed that. So then men drove out an ancient space liner which otherwise would have been made into scrap. They put it into orbit around Canis Lambda. And as if for insult, they paired it with a merely mile-thick lump of metal to mark the place where it should be when they wanted to find it. And then ships could make use of Canis Lambda. It was a checkpoint which could be seen and used for aiming from very far away. Ships steered for it. They broke out of overdrive and were assured of clear space to the next checkpoint on this space lane or that by a tinny voice from the buoy saying; "*Checkpoint Lambda. Checkpoint Lambda. Report. Report.*" And then the man-made ships went on, having made use of Canis Lambda despite itself.

But now this would end. The space buoy would be destroyed by four of the Five Comets acting together,

with the fifth coming along a little later to make sure. And then men wouldn't try to use Canis Lambda again.

Scott didn't think of the situation in those terms, of course, but the universe as he saw it from the hull plates of Lambda did not look warm or comforting or hospitable. Where he stood he was in unshielded sunshine from the knees up. His space suit glittered. Over his head the marker-asteroid loomed, — menacingly, it seemed. Behind him, the curve of Lambda's hull showed the sunlight forming a slightly wavery terminator between the utter darkness of shadow and the intolerable glare of the sun. But after a moment the shadow was not absolute black. There was some light reflected from the marker-asteroid, like moonlight on Earth and earthlight on the moon. In it he could see the edges of the plating. But the contrast between the lower parts of his legs on the side from which the sunlight came and the blazing brightness of the rest was extraordinary.

The mist which was the visible part of the comets was lighted by the sun, but it cast no shade. It was too thin. Scott could see to the farthest forward part of Lambda's hull with complete clarity. Even a

mile or two miles of distance showed no change. There was no fogging of any detail of the marker-asteroids' surface. He could see the same scars he'd noted from the control room now hours ago. They were proof that like the planet Mercury of the First System, the asteroid always turned the same face toward its sun. Its day and night were endless.

All this was normal enough. The truly daunting thing was the total extinction of all but a very few of the brightest stars, and those stars ones that Lambda left behind. The buoy was partly into the misty mass which was the head of the first of the Five Comets. The mist wouldn't blur the stars in scores of miles, but in thousands it would extinguish them. It

had before. Yet it offered no resistance to the buoy's motion along its orbit. Scott's body penetrated it at the same orbital speed, but he felt no wind. There was none. Even though the mist was present and vis-able in a vast volume of space, it was nevertheless more nearly a vacuum than physics laboratories could produce.

He turned and plodded toward the buoy's bow. He was infinitely alone, — a small, glittering homun-culus on a shining golden shape, which itself was minute compared to the very minor asteroid under two miles away. And the asteroid itself was an inconsiderable speck in a planetless solar system.

His magnetic-soled shoes felt sticky. Each shoe-sole had to be separated from adhesion to the steel by a process most painfully learned in space. There must be no jerk, or the other foot might be jolted loose, too. To walk an actually straight line was proof of great skill and much experience. The sounds of his footsteps were loud, because there was no other sound at all — at least, not for some minutes.

Then there came a snapping noise. A micrometeor-ite. His shoe-soles had picked up the sound from the plating. It didn't mean much. He passed an air-lock door, a small one for personnel. Even on liners such air-locks were used with extraordinary reluctance. They were convenient in space ports aground, but not many merchant spacemen would go to their ship's outer skin in space suits. For painting or inspection or possible repairs, yes. But aground. Not in space itself. Another snapping, and almost immediately another. The second made a microscopic blue-white flame in the shadowed part of the hull. It wouldn't have punctured Scott's suit, and if he felt it at all it would have been the tiniest of tappings. He went on.

Then there was a harsher sound, equally sharp but many times louder. Something considerable, perhaps

as large as a grain of sand, had hit the buoy. The metal rang. The impact flare was visible even in the sunlight, brighter than the sunlight.

More noises, some of them mere cracklings — impalpable particles called cosmic dust — but some ominously violent. At least one was violent enough to mean a possible puncture of a hull plate, and such encounters were to be avoided. But there'd be no loss of air from within the ship. Plastic bubbles, formed into foam and shrunken by pressure, lay behind each hull plate. A puncture released the pressure and the foam crowded into the opening and sealed it. It would handle only punctures, of course, of not too large a size. But there were relatively very few large objects in space.

More cracklings. More snaps. They were becoming more frequent. But this wouldn't mean that Lambda was nearing the comets' central masses. The frequency of the impacts was increasing too suddenly. It was probably a minor globular cluster of tiny meteoric objects floating about some larger object and that in turn circling the comet-mass itself. Such a cluster might be fifty or a hundred miles across, and it might consist of tens of thousands of rushing rocky morsels, and still contain no more than ten or fifteen to the cubic mile. But near the center of the cluster they'd be denser. And larger.

Scott plodded heavily, alone in a vast emptiness with mist to wall away the stars. To his right, a spout of flame. Twenty yards ahead, another. They were massive enough to kill a man. They were larger than pinheads.

There were four such impacts almost simultaneously. Lambda was plainly nearing whatever the meteor alarm had told of. It could be something no larger than a baseball, or something as big as a house. It need not be on an actual collision course. It could be headed for a near miss which could be anywhere

within a radius of ten miles of Lambda.

In any case there was nothing to be done. If it hit, it hit. If it destroyed Lambda, it destroyed Lambda. The number of cracklings and louder sounds grew greater, plus one or two harsh detonations that would probably test the puncture-sealing qualities of the plastic foam. Scott headed for an air-lock door. He wore space armor and could live where there was no air for a certain period of time. But outside the buoy he could be killed by particles which the buoy's plating would stop or seal off.

He used the key that made lifeboats available and unlocked air-lock doors. He pulled out the small personnel port. He was in the act of entering when the number of crackles and snappings increased to a roar. Even through his space gloves he could feel the tappings and harsher impacts of sand grain morsels. But the pulled-out metal port protected him, and downstream, as it were, he could see the sunlit plating spouting venomous spots of incandescence. It was oddly like the still surface of water in a rain. And then something went by overhead. It went much too swiftly for him to look at it, but it was the size of a hog's head.

The roaring of innumerable impacts diminished as rapidly as it had begun. In seconds the frequency of small tappings decreased. Presently it was only one now and then. The stray cluster of racing missiles had gone by.

Scott went all the way into the air-lock. He put his helmet against the inner wall. By solid conduction he heard what noises there were inside. The meteor alarm had stopped, but he heard sounds which could have been shoutings. He heard something which could have been an explosion. He was sure that he heard a blaster. All of which could add up to pure insanity from terror, or could have been equally insane obliviousness while wreaking destruction upon places where someone suspected Janet or Scott might be hid.

Either event could produce a highly useful state of affairs. Scott went back to the outside of the hull again. Automatically, he tried to look at his watch. It wasn't possible through the sleeves and gloves of his space suit.

He tried to move faster. He estimated that he was just about as far from the stern as the engine room. He'd performed the elaborate maneuvers of which this walk in emptiness was a part, to convince Buggy that he'd gone to Janet's hiding-place, which supposed to be somewhere near the stern. The idea was to have Buggy kept busy searching for it — and him. Buggy was sure he was near the buoy's bottom level. It would never occur to anyone but a spaceman to put on a space suit and return to the control room by the outside plating of the hull. While Buggy was busy tearing the stern apart to find him — and Janet — he might get back to the control room with time to spare for what needed to be done there.

He was a small and lonely figure trudging forward on Lambda's outer plating. He seemed to wade in darkness up to his thighs, while the upper part of his space suit glittered in the malevolent glare of Canis Lambda.

That blazing monster flung up prominences and flares. It produced spots and faculae of enormous size. It was a sun, and it would not be defied and made use of by minute creatures like men! One man in a space suit, trudging on the gilded hull of a derelict without drives, floating to destruction

in empty space . . . one man in a space suit was a wholly contemptible antagonist for the sun Canis Lambda. But that yellow star waited impatiently to see the buoy turn to flame; burst into incandescence, become mere droplets of metal and shreds of ionized gases and even ultimately a short-lived comet itself, which would dissipate to nothingness and be gone forever.

Scott reached his destination, the air-lock through which he'd first entered the space buoy. He opened the outer door and went in. A spouting blue-white flame leaped upward from a place he'd just vacated. It vanished. He closed the outer door behind him. He opened the inner door and entered the ship.

He heard Thallian mood music when he opened his helmet's face plate. It startled him. But it was only hours since he'd boarded Lambda, and it was custom for spacecraft to have some sound produced continually. One didn't notice the sound, and the total silence of space would be nerve-racking. Here where there should be passengers there was music. Elsewhere there was random noise at the very threshold of audibility. Here solidograph films ran continuously in the tiny theatre, whether anyone watched or not. Scott, though, had been hearing quite other sounds for some time now, and music seemed very strange.

He went across the lobby and up the stairs to the control room. He opened the door and Chenery started up with a gasp. He'd been staring at the meteor-watch dial with fascinated, frightened eyes. The indicator needle quivered and swayed. It summed up the reports of all the meteor watch antennae at their different positions outside.

But it reacted only to approaching objects. Departing ones or those not coming nearer did not affect it. The dial needle indicated the moment-to-moment probability that a nearing meteor of sufficient size to be dangerous would pass within ten miles of the buoy. A five per cent probability was negligible. But a globular cluster could be bad! It had just been proven. Chenery watched. He quivered almost in unison with the needle of the meteor watch instrument. But the danger Scott anticipated wouldn't lie in the lower percentages of probable close passings. He knew grimly that presently the instrument would tell of plunging masses of the comets' cores rushing toward Lambda with a total impact-probability of one, when destruction would be inevitable and at hand.

He moved to the instrument board. Chenery said shakily, "You got a space suit on. Where've you been?"

"Out for a walk," said Scott shortly. "I heard noises just now. What were they?"

"M-my men," said Chenery. He swallowed. "•! — used the GC phone and told them wherever they were that I was throwin' in with you. I said not to do anything that'd make things worse for 'em. I brought them into this," he added miserably. "They were my kind of men. They liked things smart and smooth and — no trouble. I figured if you — make out, you could make things easier for them."

"//I make out," said Scott.

He was at the control board. He reached out and touched a control. Delicately. He moved it an absolute minimum of distance. He seemed to wait.

"Then after a little," said Chenery unhappily, "I heard a racket. Some blaster-shots. Yells. Somebody screamed, I think."

Scott had heard the same tumult by solid conduction, when he was in an air-lock while a fire-storm of micrometeorites went past him. He touched the control again. He waited.

"One of your men?"

"Y-yeah," said Chenery. He licked his lips. "A good fella with a pen. He did some good jobs, workin' with me. He had on a uniform when you came here,"

Scott again moved a control. Absolutely nothing seemed to happen. It appeared that he was trying to begin the use of whatever the control governed with a minimum of noticeable effect. But he watched the edge of a screen, where the image of the marker asteroid was divided, with a part appearing on the stern port-quarter screen and another part on the next screen forward. It wouldn't have been possible for Chenery to know if the marker asteroid moved. But Scott could tell. A.

He shifted a control he hadn't touched before. By a hair's-breadth only.

"You think he's been killed? By Buggy?"

"A-all four of them," said Chenery. There was bitterness in his voice. "Buggy couldn't get at me right away. So it'd be like him to — take it out on them."

"And now?"

"He'll still be mad," said Chenery, without hope. "He'll come after me. There — there's no place to go. So I just stayed here."

"That just might be a good idea," said Scott. He took an exhaustive look at the vision-screens. They showed no stars now, only an indefinite, surfaceless lighted mist which was the coma of the first of the Five Planets they must pass through. He seemed satisfied. "But I think we should discourage him from coming here. But one thing first."

He looked sharply at Chenery. Chenery gazed at the meteor-watch instrument. The needle swayed wildly! He licked his lips. It was odd that he could be despairingly resigned to being killed by Buggy, and yet be frightened by the waverings of an indicator needle which could be expected to report the coming of destruction for everybody in the buoy.

Scott threw a switch on the control room's back wall. He said curtly into a transmitter just above it, "Things are going along all right so far. But if I don't call you in twenty minutes, do what I told you. What I showed you how to do. Don't act earlier unless you must. Don't wait after twenty minutes in any case. Otherwise, your situation's taken care of. But don't try to call me."

He turned to Chenery.

"Where's your blaster?"

Chenery brought it out.

"Good shot?"

"N-no," admitted Chenery. "I — we didn't **really** use guns. Only for show. But we pulled off some **jobs** you'd hardly believe!" Then he said, "Morale-effect grenades worked better than blasters. I've got some in my luggage."

"I know," said Scott with extreme dryness. "Come on."

He led the way down to the hotel level. He showed Chenery the way to get behind the curiously old fashioned room clerk's desk with its counter and quaint draperies. It would be a very good place in which to await events.

"Buggy thinks I'm hidden out somewhere in the stern," Scott observed, "and getting me or Janet, he thinks, will end all his problems. So he's not going to give up the hunt down there simply to come up and murder you. Or he may just send up a couple of blaster-men to do it. I doubt that he has much respect for you."

Chenery swallowed.

"And if you started all this business with only four men you could count on," added Scott savagely, "and called in a man like Buggy for the others you'd need, you invited everything that's happened!"

He listened. The plaintive, slightly monotonous Thallian mood music was the only sound, except for a crackling noise out on the hull plates. But it was hardly noticeable. He turned back to Chenery.

"Now, I've got something to attend to," he said shortly. "From here, you command that stair with your blaster. When Buggy's men come into sight, drive them back. Or kill them. They won't expect to run into an ambush. When I hear shooting I'll come out and take part if necessary. But I'd rather Buggy kept busy hunting me astern. I don't want him interrupting what I've got to do. So — be practical! Try

to hit something. When your friends come up the stairs to kill you, you can turn your blaster to rapid fire and wave it at them and you'll probably do all right. But don't warn them to go back! Start shooting!"

Chenery swallowed again. Trembling, he took up his post. Scott went back to the control room. He checked the vision-screens. They showed the same pale radiance all about. One marker asteroid was startlingly distinct, but it was the only thing visible on any of the screens.

Once more he moved controls, two of them. He touched them delicately. Once there was a clicking behind him, and he reached over swiftly and prevented the meteor alarm from sounding. The situation had changed since he'd given orders to Chenery to make sure it rang. Then he'd been on his way to try and fool Buggy as to Janet's whereabouts. Now, he was anxious for Buggy to be directing a hunt for the two of them. He didn't want to disturb him by putting any new ideas in his head. Which was why he hardly moved the controls — to keep Buggy from knowing that anything was being attempted.

He had the controls on full power and feverishly watched the marker asteroid. There'd be changes needed in the control adjustments presently, but he had Chenery on guard against men coming up from below. Meanwhile, he had to get Lambda and the marker asteroid pointing in exactly the same direction. Exactly! Lambda had to shift—

He looked at the control room clock. He grimaced. Time was running very short.

He heard the roar of a blaster on the next deck level down. He hesitated for an instant, because what he was doing was of so much greater importance than anything else. He was attempting to prevent the destruction of Lambda, and his success would depend on how accurately it was done. Interruption, even to use a blaster on Buggy's followers, was more irritating than exciting. He didn't want to interrupt his work to

have a fire-fight with professional killers. But — he had to.

He started down the stairway to the hotel level, a blaster in his hand. He realized distastefully that if he were recognized and word got back to Buggy, that the continuation of what was to be an extremely critical operation might not take place. Nobody could do delicate work with a space buoy while defending himself against Buggy.

These things ran through his mind as he was going to join Chenery in combat against the blaster-men Buggy had sent to kill Chenery.

He reached the landing where the stairway turned. From it he could see very nearly all the lobby. He saw smoke. A blaster-bolt had hit the floor and the floor covering smoked. There were two men near the top of the grand stairway. They had the air of professionals undertaking a familiar task.

The blaster-bolt — neither of them had fired it — was not even a near miss. Chenery had let off his weapon in gasping panic. It had done nothing but make smoke. Scott saw him. The two men on the grand stairway couldn't. Chenery shook as if with the ague. He wrestled with the weapon he'd carried. He was trying to turn it on rapid-fire. He was obviously in the last stages of desperation.

The men on the stair saw a very badly-placed blaster-shot hitting the floor a good fifteen feet from them. It was a strictly amateur shot, and it made only strangling smoke. One of them spoke curtly. The two of them dashed up the rest of the stairway. Scott lifted his blaster with much grimness, and then the totally unexpected happened.

Chenery pulled the trigger of his weapon with the rapid-fire stud pushed in. The blaster made an intolerably harsh and discordant outcry. It seemed to pour out a lancelike white-hot flame which swept crazily across the lobby. It swerved jerkily back. More white smoke billowed up. Then there was an unbearable flash. A blaster-bolt had hit a blaster in the act

of swinging to bear Upon Chenery. The blaster blew apart. A man screamed. Then another blaster flamed momentarily and the seemingly continuous streak of fire lashed through the smoke toward it.

A man fled down the grand stairway, howling. Another man crawled down it, making noises like a suffering animal.

Chenery came out of the smoke, shaking.

"They — they're both gone," he said stupidly. He spoke to himself. He wasn't aware that Scott had come to help him.

"One won't come back," said Scott coldly, from his position on the stair near the lobby ceiling.

"The other may. You'll have to stick it out a while longer, but I don't think they'll hurry. Bugsy's still hunting me. He won't bother with you until he gives up on that."

He went back to the control room. The position of the marker asteroid had visibly changed. The buoy, of course, had been turned about by the shock-sobered engineer, and it was not likely that he'd neutralized its turning motion exactly. Once started on the slowest and most sedate of spins, Lambda would keep it up forever or as long as it remained a solid object. Under present circumstances, that last might not be a long time. But after one glance Scott ceased to look at the screens. Now he absorbed himself in the readings of the meteor-watch instrument. Its needle quivered. It made a sudden wild swing, almost to unity reading. Then it swung back and quivered again. That swing meant a big object approaching the checkpoint buoy from some four hundred miles away, and its return meant that it had an independent motion which had just barely urged it put of the line to make it pass dangerously close to Lambda.

Scott cursed to himself. If Janet could handle a

space boat competently, now would be the time to tell her to take the boat out of its blister and go to the place and take the measures he'd instructed her in. But she wasn't experienced. Her chances wouldn't be improved by such an attempt. Not yet.

Chenery came in. "Lieutenant," he said, agitated. "Did you see it? I fought those fellas! I got one of 'em! Maybe I hurt the other! Me! I fought those fellas!"

"No doubt," said Scott acidely. "Can you do it again? They'll be back eventually with some others. Not yet, but presently."

He turned the meteor-watch instrument back to the instrument board. Painstakingly, he cut down the power handled by one of the controls and watched for results. He glanced at the clock with its sweeping second hand.

"I think I can do it again," said Chenery, urgently. Then suddenly he said, "Yeah. I can! I always thought a blaster was something you let off one shot at a time. But like you said, I pushed down that stud and it was like playin' a hose! I got 'em, that way!"

"A blaster," said Scott grimly, "holds two hundred and fifty charges. With the continuous-fire stud down, it empties itself in five seconds. Then you haven't got a blaster."

He examined all the screens in turn. The marker asteroid looked subtly different. Chenery's eyes fell upon it, but he was absorbed in the remarkable discovery of his own prowess.

The meteor watch instrument clicked. Scott had turned off the warning gong, but his eyes flicked to the dial. The needle quivered and shook. It showed a high-probability approach of solid objects. A single large mass would have given a steady indication. This quivering of the needle meant many objects. In all likelihood another cluster of meteorites traveled together, perhaps with the larger members well sepa-

rated, yet with innumerable sand grains and pebbles rushing with them to cross the buoy's orbit.

The approach was swift. Seconds after the first warning, there was a faint cracking sound.

Whatever it was, it would be larger than a pinhead, but its impact was muffled on the way in.

Seconds later, two more. There was a snapping noise, probably a minute puncture. More crackings. Another snap. A possible second puncture. But there was no notice of air pressure dropping anywhere on the buoy. Punctures, if there were any, were being sealed off by the pressure-foam inside the hull plates. But the number of extremely minute particles increased. Another snapping noise. It was distinct.

A buzzing, from the back wall of the control room. Scott's hand flashed forward. He said harshly, "Janet, what—?"

Her voice in the phone-speaker was not quite steady.

"Something broke through the blister and punctured a viewport of the boat. I thought you should know. I'm saying thanks and goodbye."

He was out of the control room before she finished speaking. He flung himself down the stairway. He smelled the acrid smoke of the burning Chenery's blaster had produced. He reached the alcove once used by stewards for service to the lobby. The door under the *Lifeboat. Do Not Enter* sign. The metal inner door of the blister. He unlocked and dragged at it. It took all his strength to open it. But it opened a crack and air rushed in, and it banged wide. He heard the shrill whistling sound of escaping air. He wrenched at the space boat's port. Janet released it. He dragged her out while the ominous whistling continued.

He slammed the inner door shut and panted with relief. It occurred to him absurdly that he'd told Janet he was setting up a gamble with fate, to gain for her an extension of time in which to breathe and an outside chance of ultimate survival. Now he felt that the bet had been refused. A deep and bitter anger filled him. But this was no time for anger. Air can pass fast through an opening to space. It hadn't been three minutes since the impact of a pebble spoiled his special plan for a better chance for Janet. Now she'd have to take the same chance he had — nearly! But not quite. Now the air-leak from the lifeboat blister was sealed off by the inner lock door. He'd gotten to Janet in time. But he began to feel a deep indignation. It seemed to him that fate was cheating.

"You're all right?" he demanded.

"Quite all right." She moistened her lips and said, "I — couldn't possibly have gotten that door open."

"I'm not sure you've gained much because I could," he told her. "Things aren't going as well as I hoped."

There was the faint, mournful Thallian mood music in the lobby, as they crossed it to reach the control room. In addition to that sound there were cracklings, tappings, and now and again louder impacts.

They reached the control room. Chenery stared. Scott's dash out and now his return with Janet made him blink. But he knew nothing of where Janet had been. Scott had said she was resting and, he hoped, asleep.

She looked at Scott. He was back at the instrument board. He looked at the screens. The marker asteroid had moved still more. It looked nearer, now. much nearer.

She said uneasily, "Is Buggy —?"

"He's still with us," said Scott. "He sent me a message. I'd been so indiscreet as to say I'd found a place where you wouldn't be disturbed. He thought he knew where it was. He wants to have me where I can't refuse to do anything he commands. I think he's getting a little skeptical about the Comets. They haven't destroyed us yet. So he began to hunt for you and sent me word to do something right away, or else. The implication was that you'd suffer for it."

"Then what— ?" ,-

"I still need fifteen minutes," said Scott grimly. "They could be denied me by the comets. But

Bugsy's more likely to cut them short. With just fifteen minutes more — maybe twenty — I can make the buoy relatively safe. Then I can try another trick to make you safer. But I'm beginning to doubt I'll have the time."

Chenery drew a deep breath. Then he said, "I'll make sure you get it."

Scott did not turn his head. Janet continued to look at Scott.

Chenery said, "You don't believe it? Look! I just handled two of 'em! And what've I got to lose? I'm in a bad fix! Bugsy's men did the killings, but I get part of the blame. Bugsy's killed my men and they were good fellas. He's goin' to kill me, unless I kiU him. And if you need fifteen minutes or the Comets'11 kill all of us — why not?"

Janet looked at him. He believed it was approvingly. And he'd protected her on the buoy until Scott arrived. He obviously felt that he was obligated to help her.

Scott made measurements on the screen. Chenery said proudly, "He don't think much of me, Bugsy don't. I got the two men he sent to kill me because they didn't think much of me, either. Bugsy'll never think I came huntin' him!"

Scott said shortly, "Ambush is your bet."

"Yeah," said Chenery, nodding complacently. "They run into me here. They'll never think I'll go to meet them! So I meet 'em as far down as I can, and they'll run into me before they could imagine it. And they won't believe its me until they start dyin'!"

Scott compressed his lips.

"Your blaster—?"

"Grenades," said Chenery zestfully. "You know where they are! I used them for moral effect on jobs. They stop people chasin' you. I got a reputation for plannin' things. I got this all planned. Even if I get killed, this way I won't look like a fool. And I got a public."

He nodded grandly. Scott was skeptical. But Chenery walked out of the control room and down the stairs. Scott suddenly believed him. And Scott's own expression became embittered. He had to stay here in the control room. Unless he handled certain small control levers exactly right, making them do specific things with specific energy at exactly the proper times, there was no hope for the buoy or any of its occupants. But it was humiliation to stay here, twiddling levers, while Chenery went to what certainly would be his death.

A tapping sounded somewhere on Lambda's hull. It was an isolated meteoric particle. The noise was muffled by the pressure-foam that could seal off punctures sometimes more than an inch in diameter.

Then the meteor-watch instrument clicked. Scott glanced sharply at it. The needle seemed frozen at maximum indication. It wasn't reporting a small and blindly rushing globular cluster of tiny missiles now. Not this time! Its sensitive point was four hundred miles away, farther from the sun, in the line of the center and the heaviest concentration of celestial debris. But by the action of the needle Scott knew that it wasn't reacting to even close clusters of relatively small missiles, such as had passed Lambda before.

This was the main group of the main masses of the first of the Five Comets. It was more than four hundred miles away, but it was incomparably larger than anything experienced up to now. The meteor-watch instrument registered just about what about it would record if a giant planet plunged headlong to obliterate and utterly destroy the completely helpless Checkpoint Lambda.

CHAPTER 8

The space buoy had one completely unimportant ability left to it. When it was a liner, it was able to travel in overdrive at a high multiple of the speed of light, a hundred and eighty-odd thousand miles per second. As a buoy, Lambda had retained its solar system drive which could, in tune,

build up to a speed of some hundreds of miles per second. But now, using its singular resource for movement, it had achieved an enormous speed, and it was now necessary to check that headlong pace.

Lambda, though, showed no outward sign of life. Its clusters of communicator-antennae, the radar-bowls, and the eccentric radiation-receivers, which constituted the meteor-watch system — all these looked to be without purpose. It was pure irony, apparently, that Lambda's mechanical space-call continued to go out. By microwave the buoy repeated endlessly: "*Checkpoint Lambda. Checkpoint Lambda. Report. Report.*" And it happened that at just this moment, somewhere in the Canis Lambda solar system a ship broke out of overdrive. Its control room screens showed the enormous filmy luminosity which was the Five Comets congregated almost into one, in the act of crossing Lambda's orbit to destroy it.

Nobody noticed that detail. The log tape whirred, and the recorded log covering weeks of journeying along a space lane was broadcast into emptiness. In half an hour or so the broadcast would reach Lambda. It would be recorded there for such use as the Space Patrol might later determine.

If Lambda still survived.

In its control room Scott paced back and forth. He was ashamed. Chenery had gone proudly down toward the stern of the ship with a blaster which was almost useless. He intended to throw certain small grenades that had been designed to be frightening rather than lethal, — though they did enough destruction when they went off. He expected to be killed. But Scott was still in the control room, watching the changing distance between asteroid and buoy. He was operating the steering units with meticulous care. It had been their function when Lambda was a liner to move the bow to right or left or up or down, and the stern to the left or right or down or up. They'd pointed the former liner where it was supposed to go.

But now, since Lambda was a checkpoint and a freight station and a place where passengers changed ships, the steering drive units had another function. Now, when ships had passengers to put off or freight to take on, these drive units made the exchanges possible. They oriented the buoy so that Lambda and the visiting ship were strictly parallel, bow to bow and stern to stern. But they might still be separated by distances from yards to quarters of a mile.

When the port-side bow steering unit pushed to the right and the starboard-side stern unit did the same, the whole ship moved to the right. Sideways, to be sure, and at no high speed, but under perfect control. If both bow and stern steering units thrust to the left, the ship moved that way too. Excess momentum could be checked by reversing the steering-thrust. So ships and buoys came together, these days, by using their steering units to move them as a crab walks.

And that was the only ability left to Lambda of which Scott was making use. He was moving Lambda closer to its marker-asteroid, which was like a mountain of steel.

There was a tapping on the buoy's hull. It was something meteoric. Scott made an impatient gesture with his space-gloved hand.

"Cherney's an idiot!" he said bitterly. "He fought by accident, he won by accident, and now he's gone down to take care of all of Buggy's blaster-men, — and he thinks he'll make it! By accident! And I let him! I let him! Because I have to run these infernal steering units!"

"Couldn't you explain —?"

"Explain? No! It's past the time I told Buggy we'd smash into the comets. He doesn't believe in them any more. He thought I was a liar before. He's sure I'm a liar now!"

"Explain to me?" repeated Janet. "Couldn't you tell me what needs to be done? Let me do it? Can't we get into a space boat?"

"And let Lambda go smash? There'd be no space call to contact a passing ship. A space boat's

communicator won't carry more than a few light-minutes! We'd never be heard! We'd die in the boat!"

There were other reasons. Scott's previous plan for Janet now seemed impractical. He'd meant for her to drive her boat to the sunward side of the asteroid while he'd moor the checkpoint nearby. No matter what happened to him after that, with Lambda helpless to move any distance, Bugsy would have to keep the buoy's space call going out, so sooner or later some other ship would approach — like the liner that had brought Scott — or possibly a Patrol ship. Or, least likely but most to be desired, even the Golconda Ship. And when that happened, Janet could intervene and ask for help via the space boat communicator, and Bugsy and his companions would only be taken off Lambda with suitable precautions. And Janet would be truly safe.

But without Janet in a space boat outside Lambda, Scott faced total frustration. His plans hadn't included anything specific for his own safety. He wasn't making such plans now. But as a Patrol officer he was enraged at the idea that Bugsy and his followers might get off scot-free, possibly even rich by their eo-terprise.

Unless he got Janet away, there'd be only Bugsy and his followers aboard when a Patrol of any other ship appeared. They'd have had time to make things tidy; to clean up and wipe out bloodstains and to make sure that no evidence against them remained. There might be moral certainty of murders done and bodies done away with. But there might be no proof that would hold in a criminal court.

"Look!" he said, "there's another lifeboat down three decks. I'll take you there."

"No!" said Janet. "You've got to get the buoy where it must go! You just said why! Show me how to handle that! Show me how to work it, and if Bugsy comes —"

There were more tappings. Somehow the spacing of these impacts from particles in space was different from the two previous increases in impact sounds. In a normal orbit, a space buoy like Lambda might collect many micrometeorite impacts. They were negligible. But these tappings were of sand grain volume. Since they might indicate the probable presence of larger particles, they were not to be disregarded. Scott had the feeling that from now on they'd continue to increase in number, and larger and ever larger missiles would flash past or into Lambda until the really massive objects arrived.

"What I'd like," he said wryly, moderating his tone and his temper at the same time, "what I'd really like would be simply to have Bugsy and his blaster-men locked up somewhere where they couldn't bother me. Then I'd begin to feel some confidence. But since I can't —"

Then he stopped short.

"Locked up," he said in a queer tone. "Yes . . . locked..."

He stared at nothing, for a moment. Then he said, "There are rations of sorts down there. Yes. Either Bugsy and his group or you and — I think —"

But he didn't say what he thought. He went quickly to a closet in the control room. There were always space suits available in control rooms. Control rooms were the brain centers of space ships. If a compartment was punctured and one part of a ship lost its air, it was a man from the control room who put on a space suit and inspected the damage. If there was an emergency anywhere, it was the men of the control room who couldn't waste time finding space suits so they could take care of it. They had to be right at hand. Scott brought out a space suit.

"Put this on," he commanded.

He helped her. He checked the suit. Signs of wear. Batteries. Air.

"You fasten the helmet, so," he told her. He demonstrated how, and then stopped to look at the screen with the asteroid on it. He changed the setting of a control. He went back.

"The air adjustment's automatic," he said. "You have a blaster. In emergencies it can be used to

burn away debris. It can also be used for self-defense. Now, open your face-plate and listen!" He took her to the instrument board. He showed her the controls, eight in all. Four were for the bow steering units and four for the stern. As he was explaining their use, something seemed to happen to the edge of the sunlit asteroid. There was a part cut out of it. The dark area increased. It was shape. It was a shadow. It was Lambda's shadow. He stared at it, and drew a deep breath of relief. When he spoke, his voice was almost unsteady because this was so perfect an accident for his present purpose.

"We want that shadow in the center of the face of the asteroid," he told her. "Remember, we can't steer in any ordinary sense. We're moving sidewise. We have to move one end or the other **forward or back** to turn. And presently we have to stow **op and flop**. We mustn't crash into anything! Use **both bow md** stern units to stop as well as drive. We **should mop** dead short of our target and then ease ahead.

Somewhere in the ship there was an explosion. A scream. Then there was the roarings of blasters. "I'm needed below," said Scott grimly. "Try **to** handle Lambda as I've showed you. The shadow will help a lot. Try to get it centered, and get as close as you can to the asteroid. And — you may not like the idea of using your blaster, but if you need to, do it. I'm going to need you alive, later." There was another explosion, not as near as the first. Scott swung his space helmet over his head and opened the face plate.

"I'll see you presently," he said. "I think we may make out now! I'm going to lock them up." He ran out of the control room door and down the steps to the lobby. He pelted across the lobby and down the grand staircase. He heard blasters going off somewhere below. Then an explosion which was not a blaster. He clattered on and came to more stairs, almost falling because these stairs were steel and his shoe-soles stuck to them.

He reached the luggage level. He saw a dead man there, and the scorched area and damage that a small grenade had done. Chenery had evidently been here. The traveling bag in which Scott had found grenades was open. Scott took what were left. Chenery had probably been filling his pockets when someone came up upon this deck. At a guess, Chenery'd thrown a grenade at random and this was the consequence. There was a blaster on the floor, which was scorched as if the weapon had been fired right there.

Another explosion and the sound of blasters pouring a deadly fire into something. Still another explosion. Scott raced on down no less than the three levels of the hydroponic gardens, of which one was dark in simulation of the night hours plants must have to thrive and prosper^

The blaster-fire stopped. There was silence for moments, while Scott swore at his metal shoe-soles. Then he remembered and pulled the heavy slippers out of his belt pack. When a space suit was needed for emergencies inside a ship, there were times when magnetic-soled shoes would be a nuisance. As now. Impatiently, he put the slippers on, and the magnetism became merely a hindrance instead of a handicap.

He heard a voice, shrill and hysterical. It was Chen-ery.

"Come on!" he cried between pantings. "Come on an' get killed! Y'played me for a fool, huh? I got more brains than all of you! Y'think you're smart, Buggy? I'm smarter!"

The sound of two grenades roared, close together. There was an outcry after the second. Chenery yelped in triumph. It was bad tactics for him to show his position by such a shrill clamor. But Chenery was not himself.

Scott reached the main freight hold. There was another dead man on the floor. His blaster had detonated with the grenade that had killed him. Scott couldn't spare the time for an appropriate reaction. He heard Buggy, farther away, screaming with rage and shouting orders so thickened by fury

that no one could understand them. And then Scott came out on the stairway leading down into the engine room, and he saw the battle.

There was smoke, where blaster bolts had scorched paint, and grenades had detonated near inflammable stuff. Scott could see two men behind a set-up of machinery. They fired furiously at the edges of a massive metal mounting for the overdrive equipment left over from the buoy's days as a liner. Chenery danced and shrilled hysterically behind the mounting. From time to time he lobbed a grenade over its top.

Scott grimly opened fire from his elevated position. The clothing of a man behind a disconnected switchboard burst into flames. He leaped convulsively and disappeared through the doorway to other stairs astern. Scott fired again, and another man's shoe caught fire. He fled. Another man ran. Chenery howled crazily at them and plunged hi pursuit.

"Chenery!" roared Scott. "Chenery!"

He fired at yet another man whom he could see and Chenery couldn't. It was a near miss, but Chenery plunged into this formerly concealed antagonist. They went to the floor together and Scott could not fire again. A blaster went off where they struggled.

A blaster bolt missed Scott's ear by inches.

"Chenery!" he roared. "This way!"

The two intertwined figures seemed to collapse. One lay still. The other twitched. Then blue-white, brilliant blaster bolts came streaking toward Scott. He fired savagely and drew back. Chenery had cut down the number of Bugsy's fighting men, but there was Janet. The way to make her safe was to lock up Bugsy and his men, since he'd joined Chenery too late for total victory. So the imprisonment of the men now searching for him with blaster bolts must be his primary purpose.

He was in the level above the engine room. There was a side door, which was in one of the inter-level stairway tubes, leading from top to bottom of the buoy. He tossed a grenade. The stair appeared as the tube was ripped open. There were bales of merchandise. He flung blaster bolts into them. Dense smoke and then flames leaped up. One bale was Durlanian floss. It swelled as it burned and the reek of it was unbearable. He hastily closed his helmet face plate and went coldly about the process of imprisonment. He smashed the other stair-tubes with grenades. He scattered inflammables and shot blaster bolts into them.

Flames leaped up to the ceiling, but they'd exhaust the air of oxygen and go out before they could do any great damage. Afterward, with the air tubes shut off, the air would be unbreathable to anyone not wearing a space suit like Scott's. And there were no more in this part of the buoy. There'd only been one in the stern lifeboat blister, and he was wearing that now.

He retreated to the next deck above, and the next and next, setting fires and jamming all air-locks, closing off all supplies of purified air and leaving behind him only compartments filled with smoke-saturated gas that no man could breathe and live.

He'd just come to the bottom one of the three passenger cabin levels when the deck shivered under his feet. There was a gigantic crashing sound. Loose objects fell.

He raced up the grand stairway. As he reached the top, there was a second monstrous crashing. Again the floor quivered underfoot. He redoubled his speed. Across the lobby. Up the last stair. He burst into the control room. Janet had her face in her hands, sobbing. The vision-screens showed what should have been impossible. The portside screen showed the scarred crystalline, utterly bright metal of the asteroid only yards away. The buoy had just rebounded from the second of two slow, ponderous, power-filled collisions with it. Janet hadn't slowed it quite enough to prevent an impact.

Scott swiftly adjusted the steering drives. Lambda then neither drifted away nor floated back to a third contact. He ran his eyes over the air pressure repeaters, indicating what the condition of the air was in every compartment of the ship. None showed diminished pressure. Some showed an

increase. That was where the fires Scott had set expanded the air. They'd cool off presently. Janet sobbed again.

"What's the matter?" Scott demanded. "No leaks show up. Not yet, anyhow! We bumped, but there's

apparently no damage. And Buggy and his men are locked up if ever men were!"

She tried to say, "Chenery," but a sob cut off the word.

"He's dead," said Scott. "But he had the time of Ms life getting killed."

"N-no!"

She pointed a shaking hand at a speaker. Scott didn't understand. The speaker was the one belonging to that closed-circuit communicator system by which crewmen in different parts of the buoy could communicate with the control room. Then he guessed, and turned it on. Janet had evidently shut it off. He heard Buggy's voice, unspeakably malevolent, "Don't rush me, Chenery! You'll get it! Janet said he'd be back soon. Don't be in a hurry for what's comin'!"

Scott felt himself going pale. He heard Chenery, "To hell with you! You won't get anything from the Lieutenant. An' I had the gas-chamber comin' anyways!"

Scott cut it off. His hands clenched. He said unsteadily, "I thought he was dead. It's Chenery. And Buggy's got him and I — thought I saw him killed...."

Janet said in a thin, shocked voice, "Buggy called. He said he had Chenery. He said you put something over on him. He said you lied about the comets. Comets are gas. He said he'll do horrible things to Chenery if you don't do as he demands. But he said he knows how to beat the fix you've tried to put him in. He knows how to beat it! And if you want to live —"

"He's bluffing," said Scott grimly. "Except about Chenery. He probably isn't bluffing about that!"

He went to the instrument board. The vision-screens showed half the universe as a shining mist, with one angry haloed yellow sun in the center of it. The other half of the universe was the surface of the asteroid, seen from close by. It was rent and torn and irregular. It was scarred and pitted by old bombardments.

The shadow of Lambda lay long and sharp-edged over its small, steep mounts and hollow places. Lambda, though, was not in its center. It was definitely close to one edge. Scott bent close suddenly, and watched the surface of the metal mountain flow smoothly past. Lambda was not perfectly still in relation to it. It would have been remarkable if it had been. Very, very slowly the crystalline surface seemed to move. Actually it was the buoy which moved, a little way only from its scarred companion.

"He's got Chenery," said Scott with surpassing bitterness. "And his mind works as only his can. He knows he's beaten. He's imprisoned in the stern levels. He knows, now, that you're safe, and he can't threaten me with crimes against you. And he knows he was wrong about the comets. He knows that! He heard the impacts on the hull! So there's only one thing left for him. He'll demand that I fix things for him — immediately! He knows it can't be done. But he can make threats, and then carry them out..."

Janet said desperately, "But he — but you —"

"He wins," said Scott very grimly indeed, "You're safe, Janet. You stay right here, and whether it's the Golconda Ship or a Patrol vessel that gets here first, you'll explain everything to them. Buggy's in the stern. You're in the bow. There's no breathable air between them, either inside or outside Lambda. Nobody can get at you. You're safe. You may be lonely, but you'll be all right." Janet said, trembling, "But you! What are you going to do?"

"What can I do?" he demanded sardonically. "Refuse to listen and let Buggy kill Chenery as slowly as he can? Pretend it doesn't happen because I can shut off the sound? I'm going to get Buggy! And as many of his men after him as I can. I don't expect to save Chenery, but I'll make it

quick for him, — he had the gas-chamber waiting, anyhow. I have to do something!"

"But there's me! And you'll get killed! I'll

__ in __"

"You'll do nothing," said Scott in a flat voice. "I'm doing this!"

He went out of the control room. It was wiser not to talk with Buggy. It might gain time for Chenery. But it would still be wise to hurry. There were two ways by which he could reach the stern decks, where pure air still existed. He'd been seen and shot at in a space suit, so Buggy might guess he'd come through the compartments where a man without a suit would suffocate. But Buggy wouldn't guess at the outer plating of the buoy.

So Scott went to the air-lock. He pulled off the slippers that partly negated the magnetism of his shoes. He twisted his helmet tight. He went through to the golden-colored outside of the hull. There the look of things was quite unlike what anyone would have imagined.

When he stood upright, the light around him was neither burning sunshine nor the abysmal black of night. Lambda hung, it seemed, beneath and very close to the tormented crystalline metal of the asteroid, whose sunward face formed a ceiling over the former space craft. Sunshine smote fiercely beyond its shadow and the incredibly brilliant surfaces of metal crystals reflected that sunlight into the shadow cast by the space buoy. The glittering specks of brilliance were reflected as if by the facets of ten thousand monstrous jewels. The effect was of fantasy, of eerie magic. In places the glittering metal was no more than thirty feet from the checkpoint's plating. In other places it was fifty and a hundred feet above, like a gigantic dome lined with jewels which glittered.

Scott stood erect, but he couldn't spare time for scenery. He saw to the edge of the asteroid, which on one side was relatively near. There was, of course, utter silence where he stood. But he could tell that Lambda was in the very center of a meteoric avalanche. He could see streaks — never objects — which nevertheless were solid things pouring past the edges of the buoy's multi-million-ton protector. It was the asteroid which was taking the bombardment anticipated for Lambda. Once a portion of its edge crumbled and broke away. As its comet-ward surface separated, the kind of bombardment it was enduring and the impacts on the fragment could be seen. It went tumbling toward the sun, exploding in flaming detonations where missiles struck and turned themselves and it into incandescent vapor. It split and broke again, and its fragments flamed and spouted and went on and on out of sight.

Scott marched sturdily toward the stern. He was bitter. He'd done everything he could to make Janet safe, but he doubted that he had thought of everything. He felt the tiniest of stirrings underfoot. It seemed to him that the motion of the space buoy had changed, but he could not be sure.

Then a great section of the asteroid split. It had been struck by one of the true giants of the meteor tribe. A mass of something unnameable a full hundred feet across had crashed into the asteroid's vulnerable surface. It traveled at thousands of miles per second. It turned to vapor more lurid than the sun, and with a shock split off a vast triangular block an eighth of a mile on a side. Such a monstrous object could not be driven rapidly sunward by impacts — and explosions — of ton and five-ton and ten-ton missiles. Slowly it separated from the asteroid's main mass, and as slowly the side of the fragment undergoing barrage-like attack appeared. The surface toward the sun was unbearably bright. But the side that should have been in shadow was incandescent. Scott went on, his purpose being to enter the stern-most lifeboat blister and come off it into the buoy's

stern section with his blaster going and grenades exploding ruthlessly. He was filled with fury

that this course was necessary. He did not expect to rescue Chenery. He did not expect to survive himself. But he couldn't abandon Chenery to Buggy's obsession with violence. Scott tried to hurry, because Buggy might have become too impatient to wait, and might try to intoxicate himself with violence toward Chenery, before Chenery was fortunate enough to die.

But then Scott saw the edge of the asteroid very near. He saw the motion of the Lambda in relation to it. And then, ahead, he saw disaster past endurance. *Ahead*. He wanted to run to the spot and perform the impossible and turn aside the buoy's stern. Because Lambda was turning slowly. Its sternmost part would swing out past the broken edge. It would reach into the hurtling masses of rock and metal which could no more be seen than the flame of an atomic torch, but would have exactly the effect of one upon a giant scale.

The hull shivered a little underfoot. If Janet, in the control room, had discovered what was about to occur and hastily and desperately applied the maximum correction of applied steering thrust, — if that had happened, the feeling and the result would have been the same. But if Janet, in the control room, had seen Scott about to throw away his life for what a woman might consider the most absurd of reasons, a point of honor. . . . If Scott saw it that way, it was quite possible that she'd desperately and defiantly let what was happening, happen.

The sternmost part of the space buoy swept slowly around. Its uttermost part reached beyond the shelter of the asteroid. Nothing was visible there except the lucent mist that blotted out the stars. Nothing was there. But things passed through that space, — things that had just barely failed to detonate themselves upon the asteroid's major bulk.

Slowly, deliberately, inexorably, the blunt stern section swept out. And there was light. Invisible particles from sand grain size on up poured past the steel edge of Lambda partner. They struck Lambda's metal. They detonated. The result had the exact look of an atomic torch, vaporizing metal to a completely perfect line.

There was no added flare when the air in the lowest deck poured out. Anything alive in it, obviously, would be unaware of that or anything else. One fraction of a second, Buggy would be alive and malevolent and frenzied. A minute fraction of a second later, Buggy would be dead without having had time to experience the change. And this was true of anyone in the second deck level too.

And then the long, slender Checkpoint Lambda, pivoting, swept past the point where the core, the heart, the center of the first of the Five Comets rush- ed past. The last and sternmost three of her deck levels had ceased to be. They'd been amputated and vaporized and carried away by such a cautery as no man had ever witnessed before. There had been no sound. No violence. No shock or impact anywhere, because when an impact passed a certain stage of ferocity, it wasn't an impact any longer, but an explosion.

Scott hadn't been disturbed .physically. He'd heard nothing and felt nothing. The buoy's stern had been removed. There was nothing left for him to do.

Presently he trudged forward again. He was uncomfortable about Janet's handling of the buoy. The proper place for it was, of course, as near as possible to the center of the asteroid's sunward face. There was the maximum of shelter. He'd take charge and get it there, and keep it there during the rest of this meteor-storm and the ones to follow as the Five Comets vainly bombarded Lambda's marker buoy and shield.

But there was something else. He resolved that Janet should never know of any inadequacy in her operation of the steering drive units. They were tricky. She was without previous experience. He'd never tell her she should have been quicker to correct the buoy's course. And of course — though this didn't occur to him — she would never defend what she had done.

When he reached the control room and took over the. controls again, he treated the event as something which couldn't possibly have been avoided, — as a consequence of the two bouncing impacts of the buoy upon the asteroid. That would be a wholly legitimate explanation. The Patrol

inquiry would accept it. As a matter of fact, he didn't need to discuss it with Janet at all. He ignored it except as a narrow escape for both of them.

And Janet's defensive, defiant expression gradually disappeared. She listened humbly to his technical discussions of the sidewise astrogation of checkpoint buoys, should she be needed for it during the rest of the emergency. The total time of passage through the Five Comets would be something like four hours fifteen minutes.

After that the checkpoint would still be in orbit, where it ought to be. It would be rather less than two miles from the glittering metal mountain that had sheltered it. And the checkpoint's space call would continue to go out with mechanical tedium and regularity.

"Checkpoint Lambda. Checkpoint Lambda. Report. Report."

The Golconda Ship arrived two days later. It had spent most of the interval listening suspiciously for sounds in space. When, at last, the tape-reels in the control room clicked repeatedly instead of reeling and whining as a log was recorded, Scott used the emergency switch and on space call frequency he opened communication. He reported, precisely, just what had happened and the state of things in Lambda. He and Janet were, now the only living occupants of the buoy. He could he observed, clear the air of the freight compartments so cargo could be put aboard, by the Golconda Ship's crew. He could cut off the artificial gravity to make that operation easier. But there were only the two of them aboard. Trans-shipment of the Golconda Ship's cargo would have to wait for the coming of replacements for Lambda's crew. He gave the impression that he didn't particularly care whether the Golconda Ship made use of Lambda or not. He didn't. It was available, but —.

So the Golconda ship presently appeared. Scott was not thrilled, either by the incredible wealth of its cargo, or by making the acquaintance of multi-multimillionaires.

A space boat came aboard, its occupants armed to the teeth. They found Scott's account completely accurate. They were inclined to approve of Scott. It seemed to them that their treasure would be quite as safe under his guardianship as in a Patrol base. Some of them seemed to envy him. After all, a multi-millionaire didn't lead a really normal life. He was hounded by people trying to get money out of him. Scott wasn't. The Golconda Ship's company had little or no adventure except a voyage once every four years to acquire more wealth to make their lives more unnatural still. Scott had had an adventure any one of them would have been glad to experience, — if he only could be sure of living through it. They decided to land their treasure on Lambda and proceed as planned.

Their leader came to tell Scott of the decision. Scott was talking to Janet at the time. He'd been annoyed by the need to attend to the queries of the Golconda Ship's crew. He and Janet were finding, continually, new things they wanted to talk to each other about. Janet's expression was softer and more relaxed and very curiously wistful.

The leader of the Golconda Ship enterprise told Scott somewhat pompously of the decision they'd made. He considered that he conferred a great honor. In a way, he did. He felt that Scott would be made famous by his prowess and this expression of confidence by the richest men in the galaxy. And this was not untrue. But he wanted to go on and discuss details.

Presently Scott said impatiently, while Janet waited until they could talk uninterruptedly again, "That's fine! That's excellent! I'm sure we can work everything out. But I'm busy just now. I'll be very much obliged to you if, just for a little while, — just for a little while — you'll go to hell."