

STOWAWAY

by Mack Reynolds

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It would be grueling enough to be the only woman on board a spaceship fending off forty-five horny spacemen -- but how much worse would it be if you couldn't pass a panty check?

LIEUTENANT Johnny Norsen, his lanky body sprawled uncomfortably in an acceleration chair, was playing Spartan rules with the darts, and paused only momentarily before each shot. Spartan rules were pretty Spartan, but in spite of the handicaps he hit the bull's eye six times out of six and grunted-in disgust.

He complained, to no one in particular, "This was a swell game when we first brought it aboard. Now everybody is as good as- it's possible to get. We might as well flush it overboard."

No one in particular happened to be Dick Roland, ship's navigator. He looked up from the onion skin, paper bound history he was reading. "Ummm," he said vaguely. "Maybe we could toughen up the rules."

"How?" Norsen grumbled. "They're as tough already as it's possible to get them. We'd have to close both eyes, or something." He shifted in his chair, yawned and recrossed his legs. "What in the kert are you reading?"

"Decline and Fall of the United States. Ancient history. What do you think of it?" The navigator was young, rather handsome in an easy-going sort of way, but almost colorless in his lack of aggressiveness.

Johnny Norsen yawned again. "I don't like history, so I've only read the book four or five times." He looked up at the earth time chrono on the wall. "Let's crack today's video-news."

Dick Roland followed his eyes. "We've still got five minutes to go," he protested mildly.

The other was irritated. "Five minutes, ten minutes, what's the difference? Today is today. It's not as though we were cracking next week's news. Besides, I think Doc Thondon's crazier than a makron. What difference does it make when we show a news wire?"

He knew the answer to his own question as well as anyone else in the New Taos, but it wasn't something to talk about.

Dick Roland said, "I think it's a good idea. Keeps us interested in things. Every day we look forward to getting the news. Sure, it's a full year old, but that doesn't make any difference."

to us. We haven't heard it yet. Doc Thorndon says it's one way of keeping space cafard from hitting the crew -- something new every day, something to look forward to."

Norsen screwed up his angular face. "Where'd Doc get the idea, anyway? We never did before."

Dick closed his history and tossed it to the wardroom table. He'd read it half a dozen times already, himself. He said, "You know Doc. Always reading those old books. From what he says, back in ancient times they used to pull the same idea - weather station men who were stuck up in the Arctic and snowed in for maybe six months at a crack. They'd have a file of newspapers on hand, and each day they'd take one off the top. The news was exactly one year old, but it didn't make any difference to them. They hadn't read it before and so it was as fresh as though it'd just happened. When their supplies came in, in the Spring, they'd get another batch of papers."

Lieutenant Norsen looked up at the chrono again. "Well, it's time now. Let's crack today and want to see if there's anything on Jackie Black. It's about time for him to pull one of his jobs again. That little makron is sure giving the S.S.B.I. a run for their credits."

Dick Roland was on his feet and getting the video-news wire from its built-in file. "Ummm," he said. "Most effective criminal for the past century. If he keeps on making haul after haul, he ought to be set for life pretty soon."

Ensign Mart Baki, his chubby face questioning, and his mouth still working on some tidbit or other, hurried through the wardroom door. "Haven't started the video-wire yet have -" He saw they were about to run it and interrupted himself. "Good," he said, and slumped into a chair.

"Be ready in a second," Dick Roland told him.

"Good. By the way, you fellows hear the news?"

They weren't particularly interested. There wasn't any news that could develop on a space cruiser on a year long trip.

He said, nonchalantly, "Commander Gurloff thinks he'll turn around and head back home."

They spun on him. "What!"

He grinned at their excitement. "April Fool!"

They stared at him, then their eyes went to each other, questioningly.

Doctor Thorndon entered the tiny officer's mess and wardroom just in time to pick up the end of the conversation. He said soothingly, "Never mind, boys, he's not down with cafard. It's a joke."

"A joke?" Johnny Norsen grumbled. "Why the fat little makron had Dick and me believing

him for a minute. What's this about April something or other?"

Doc Thorndon settled into a chair. He was a cheerful, rolypoly man, his cheeks still pink from the cold, his hair thinning and graying. He was about forty-five - old for the space service.

"April Fool," he said. "It's a time-honored jest. By the ancient calendar there was a day in the Terran year during which persons played practical jokes on each other. When the victim became indignant, the perpetrator merely called out April Fool! and the other was forced to admit himself duped."

They still didn't quite get it. Doc Thorndon added, patiently, "If we were still following the old calendar, this would be-April 1st, All Fool's Day, as they called it."

Dick Roland said, "Well, anyway, here's the video-news for last April Fool's Day." He dimmed the room's lights and flashed the video wire on the wall so that everyone could read it.

Over an hour later, he said, "Should we run it again now, or should we wait another couple of hours."

"Three times is enough," Johnny Norsen said, "We'll get tired of it otherwise. Remember it's another twenty-four hours until we get another one. Let's sit around and discuss it for awhile."

"Yeah," Mart Bakr said. The chubby third officer shook his head in reluctant admiration. "Did you see that item about Jackie Black? They almost got him there on Calypso, but he's too slick for them."

Johnny Norsen grunted contemptuously. "I don't think that was him at all. Too big, for one thing. I wouldn't be surprised if Black was still on Earth. They've been reporting him on every planet and satellite in the system, but I'll bet he never left Neuvo Los Angeles, where he put up his last--"

"Caper," Doc Thorndon said.

The other three looked at him. "His what?" Mart Bakr asked.

"His caper," the doctor repeated, pleased with himself. "It's a new word I ran into today. Criminals used to call a crime a caper."

Dick Roland shook his head and grinned. "What a hobby. Prehistoric slang."

There was a gentle knock at the wardroom door and the four of them looked up at the messman who stood there, somewhat nervous at being in officer's country.

"Yes, Spillane?" Johnny Norsen said.

The messman cleared his throat. "Could you tell me where the skipper is, sir?"

"I think he's sleeping, Spillane. What is it?"

"Well, sir. Well . . . there's a stowaway on board." He cleared his throat again and said, "We found her in the number eight compartment." His eyes went from one to the other of the others. He added, decisively, "Yes, sir."

Doc Thorndon was the first to explode. "Her!" he blurted.

Mart Bakr started suddenly to laugh. His chuckle swelled into a roar and the others turned to stare at him in his turn. He was finally able to get out, "April Fool! We all bit again. April Fool!"

Spillane looked blank.

The faces of the others relaxed. Even the angular features of Johnny Norsen twisted themselves in a wry grin. He said, "You certainly caught us, Spillane."

The messman looked anxiously from one of the ship's officers to the other. "Yes, sir," he said. "What?"

Johnny Norsen scowled and said, "Run along now, Spillane. It was a good joke. Congratulations."

"Joke, sir? What joke?"

Doc Thorndon had settled back into his chair now. "Oh, come along, Spillane. We -"

A new voice, pitched low, and somewhat timid, said from the doorway, "Could I come now?"

Johnny Norsen was facing the other way. He didn't turn to look at her for a full minute. Instead, he closed his eyes and muttered in pain, "Oh, no. Forty-five men and one woman in a ship that's to be in space for twelve months!"

SHE wasn't beautiful, nor even pretty as current tastes went but she had something, very definitely. She was about five foot five and probably in her middle twenties. Her attractiveness lay in a certain eagerness, a brightness, an interest in what was going on about her, no matter what it might be. Yes, she had something, very definitely. it was hard to put your finger on it.

Right now, she was attired in a simple sports dress, wrinkled and somewhat soiled from a long period in hiding among the supplies in compartment eight. Her eyes went nervously from one to the other of them and she self-consciously brushed her clothes, avoiding her breasts and hips as though not wishing to bring her sex to their attention.

Johnny Norsen blurted, "Holy jumping Wodo, Miss! Do you know where you are?"

She looked down at the steel deck, toeing in like a little girl who'd been caught at something naughty. Her voice was very low. "Yes, sir," she whispered.

"Oh, you do, eh?" Norsen rasped.

Mart Bakr spoke for the first time since the apparition had appeared. "Don't pick on her Norsen," he said truculently. "Can't you see the poor kid's scared?"

The first officer spun on him. "Scared?" he said bitterly. "We're the ones that ought to be scared." He turned back to the girl. "Come on, Miss. Let's go see the captain."

Mart Bakr and Dick Roland, the latter's eyes still popping, started to follow into the corridor. Johnny Norsen grunted, "You two had better stay here. This many of us can't crowd into the skipper's quarters." He added, sarcastically, "Besides, it's probably going to be a t hot in there."

He made no protest when Doctor Thorndon followed and the three of them, ship's first officer, stowaway, and ship's doctor made a procession down the corridor past a score of mouthed crew members.

"Oh, brother, a dame on board," a jetman muttered happily.

"Knock it off, Johnson," the first officer snapped in irritation over his shoulder.

They rapped at the Captain's cubbyhole which doubled as his living quarters and the space cruiser's office. A voice from within growled, "What the kert is it?"

Norsen fingered the door release and entered, followed by the two oilers.

There was a flat silence which Johnny Norsen broke by saying dryly, "A stowaway, sir. crew found her in the number eight compartment."

Commander Mike Gurloff had been relaxed on his bunk, staring unseeingly at the overhead. Now he spun around and came to an elbow, blinking.

"Holy jumping Wodo!" he blurted.

"Yes, sir," Norsen said. "That's what I said. Probably the first female stowaway on a military craft since the beginning of inter-galactical warfare." He added, as though anyone needed reminding, "A year long cruise - forty-five men and one woman."

Doc Thorndon closed the door behind them. He said, softly, "We're only three days out, Mike." He was the only man aboard who habitually called the burly commander by his first name. "We could turn back."

The skipper brought his feet around to the floor and sat up. He stared at the girl, almost vacantly, then lowered his shaven head into his hands. He was a big man and toughened by long years in the space service which had seen him rise to the position of the outstanding officer of his generation. He sat there like that for a full five minutes.

Finally he took a deep breath and brought his eyes up to her. "What is your name, Miss?" Then he cleared his throat and said, more gently, "Don't be afraid. What's your name?"

"It's Kathleen . . . sir." She added, after swallowing, "They call me Kathy."

He continued to look at her, and she said, nervously, "Kathleen Westley."

"All right, Miss Westley. Now tell us about it." He indicated the swivel chair at the desk, the only chair in the tiny room. "You might as well sit down."

She sat in the chair, knees together and her hands in her lap, and looked less frightened now.

Gurloff said, "Tell us about it."

She swallowed once more and said, "I don't see why women aren't allowed in the Space Service." There was an edge of defiance in her voice.

Doc Thorndon said softly, "There are various reasons, Miss. Some of them medical, especially in inter-galactical travel."

"Well, I don't see -"

Commander Gurloff said, "It doesn't make much difference right at the moment, does it? What are you doing aboard my ship, Miss Westley?" His face was expressionless, almost afraid though. he was too tired to care.

She tossed her head infinitesimally, and her lower lip protruded. "I . . . I've always wanted to be a space man."

Inadvertently, Gurloff's eyes took in her full breast, her rounded hips. He said, wryly, "I'm afraid something went wrong with your ambitions twenty-five or so years ago."

The girl flushed, but her face remained defiant.

Doctor Thorndon said, "To make it short, Miss Westley, do we understand that you stowed away on this vessel to prove that women are quite as suitable for space travel as are men?"

Her mouth tightened stubbornly and she nodded.

Commander Gurloff asked, "And did you know that this vessel was to be in space for a period of over a year, Miss? A year is rather a long time."

Her eyes widened at that. "A ...a year?"

Gurloff grunted, suddenly weary of the interview. He said, "Mr. Norsen, take our . . . our passenger back to the officer's mess. I suppose she's hungry." He thought it over briefly. "She can have the second and third officer's stateroom. One of them can bunk with you, the other the ship's hospital." His mouth tightened. "See that the lock on the door is in good repair and that she has a key."

The skipper's eyes went back to the girl. He said, "Later - we're going to have lots of time

Miss Westley--later, you can give us any further details about your decision to become a . . . spaceman." He motioned with his head and Johnny Norsen took her by the arm to lead her o

Gurloff said, "Do you mind staying a while, Doctor?"

After the first officer and the girl had left, Doc Thorndon sank into the chair she had vacated. He waited for the other to speak.

Commander Mike Gurloff sank prone on the bed again and his eyes focused on a rivet in overhead. He said, "Possibly she's the straw."

"The one that broke the camel's back, eh?"

Gurloff said, "Doc, have you wondered why we've been sent out on a cruise less than two weeks after the last one? Out on a cruise that'll take over a year? A year! And half of my men on the verge of space cafard after finishing the last trip."

Doctor Thorndon nodded and rubbed the end of his nose with a forefinger. He said, "No, I haven't wondered. I know the reason, Mike. By the way, did you know that they sent us off in such a hurry that our supplies of books, games, music wires, video-wires - all of our means of entertainment, in short - were 'accidentally' not replenished? Nothing, that is, except last year's news wires."

Mike Gurloff's eyes came around to him and his lips thinned back over his teeth.

Doc Thorndon nodded again. "The men are reading books that they've already read a dozen times over; playing games they're sick and tired of; seeing video-shows they've already memorized. They'll never get through the full year, Mike. Cafard will have us in less than six months."

The skipper's face went blank again and he stared vacantly at the overhead.

Doc Thorndon said, "They've got you this time, I'm afraid, Mike."

Gurloff bit out stubbornly. "The crew is with me. We're the proudest ship in the fleet. We've got a record that's the envy of the solar system. We'll -"

The doctor shook his head. "I'm afraid you're going to have to turn back, Mike. I can't guarantee this crew's mental health for a period of a year."

Gurloff held a hand up, clenched the fist. "We've got to make it!"

He came to his elbow again, faced the other. "I've got them this time, Doc, if we can just make this trip. Don't you see? The filthy makrons can't stand outspoken criticism. They hate my popularity I've been accumulating with the public. I've become the spokesman for the opposition, and they've tried to keep me quiet by a series of cruises that seemed impossible to succeed. They've sent the New Taos to spots that required a full fleet, and we came back with the information they wanted. They sent us on assignments impossible to achieve, and we

achieved them. And each time we won out, we gained that much more of the public's approval."

Doc Thorndon allowed a half smile to touch his mouth. "Sure, Mike. And each time we returned from a cruise, you made a withering speech against the powers that be, against the present administration. And, each time, they've pulled the same trick; they've sent you out on another long cruise to get you away from Solar System politics. Each time they figured to be rid of you and this time, Mike, I'm afraid."

"Yes."

The skipper glared at him.

Doc Thorndon held his palms up in a hopeless gesture. "If you try to complete the trip, your whole crew will be down with cafard in months. If you return, before completing your assignment they'll have a legitimate excuse for courtmartialing you." His voice went gentle now. "Personally, Mike, I'd stick it out with you. I'm behind what you stand for. I think every man on the ship is also. But -"

Gurloff said, in sudden enthusiasm, "I'll give them a talk over the inter-communication system. I'll explain the whole thing. Let them know why we've been discriminated against like this, Why we've been sent out repeatedly, without sufficient rest periods between."

Thorndon rubbed the end of his nose again and scowled. "You'll do nothing of the sort, Mike. At first, they'd all be with you. But, as the months went by and as the grief piled up, they'd begin, subconsciously, at first, to see that it was you alone who was bringing such strain upon them. There'd be too much of that strain, finally, Mike. They'd turn on you."

Gurloff slumped back into his bunk and thought about it.

"They'll know sooner or later anyway," he growled. "You said that we've got a full year's supply of news wires on board. It won't be long before somebody runs off that one telling about my last speech, just before we left. Then they'll know why the New Taos was sent out again so soon. That is, if they don't know already. Maybe somebody heard the talk, or read about it while they were ashore."

Doc Thorndon grinned. "I doubt if anybody heard it except me. They were all too busy with wine, women, and singing, to listen to speeches. And I took care of the wires. I've made arrangements so that the Video-news wires are run off one a day. The cruise will almost be over before they come to that speech of yours." His face soured again. "But the point is, Mike, that we're not going to last that long. Even if this girl . . ."

He broke off and stared at the other. Finally he said, slowly, "You know, Mike, maybe we're wrong. Maybe she's not the straw that broke the camel's back. Maybe she's a second backbone for the poor beast."

Gurloff scowled over at him. "I don't get you, Doc."

"You will, Mike. You will. Maybe we'll be able to take this next twelve months, after a . . . The Doctor licked his upper lip, thoughtfully. "I think I'll just go and see Miss . . . see Kathy now. I've got some things I want to talk over with her.

THE conversation between Doc Thorndon and Kathy had been a lengthy one, and the officer and crew of the space cruiser New Taos would have been surprised at the ship's doctor the way he thought they knew so well for his gentle kindness. In fact, it could hardly be described as a conversation at all, since it started as an argument and wound up as a series of commands not too softly spoken.

Doc Thorndon shook his finger at her, not disguising his irritation.

"You just think you can't sing. Let me tell you, you can sing. Can and will! just remember you've the only feminine voice on board. To a man, a woman's voice sounds better than any masculine one particularly after a few weeks in space, not to speak of months on end. Any woman's voice."

Kathy had her eyes on the floor and her lower lip was out in what was almost a pout. "I don't see why --"

Thorndon grunted, "You don't have to see why. I'll do the seeing why, and the thinking, Kathy. I've let it go out over the ship that we are to have a . . . a show in about a month. The men are already spending almost full time in preparation. They're making costumes, arranging scenery, composing songs. It's keeping them busy. Busy, understand?" He paused momentarily realizing that she didn't know just how important that was.

He finished with, "We've made an agreement, Kathy. Now let's stick to it."

She said, stubbornly, "I still say I can't sing, and, what's more, I've never done any acting."

"You've got a month to learn," Doc said sharply.

Kathy twisted in her chair, shrugged her shoulders. "Seems to me," she pouted, "the doctor on this ship is more important than the captain."

His mouth remained expressionless and she didn't know him well enough to see the amusement in his eyes. He said, "Believe me, Kathy, on a ship faced with space cafard, he's the most important man on board."

KATHY sat at the small table in the officer's wardroom and eyed the three of them severely. She said, "Johnny, Dick, Martie - I won't have any more of this bickering. Either you'll be nice or I'm not going to . . . to put up with it. I'll go in and talk with 'Commander Gurloff for the next two hours, and then the officer's share of the day will be through."

Mart Bakr flashed an irritated glance at the lanky Johnny Norsen. "It's his fault," he grumbled. "He wants you to himself all the time. I thought it'd be a good idea if we went into the galley and whipped up some taffy or --"

Johnny Norsen was on his feet. "Why you chunky little chowhound, I'll --"

Mart Bakr jumped up to face him, his face livid, "Don't you call me names, you long leg makron!"

"Please!" Kathy breathed, putting her hands over her ears.

The usually easy going Dick Roland reddened angrily, "Watch your language, Bakr," he snapped.

AS HEMING, Space Rifleman, 2nd Class, hurried down the corridor and into the crew mess, bearing his invaluable burden importantly. He looked about the compartment in surprise.

"Where the kert is everybody?" he said. Only three others were present.

Taylor was nearest the door. He stuck his head out, looked up and down the passageway outside. "Any braid around?" he asked.

Heming shook his head. "The officers are all up forward. just gave me the video-news for today. Holy Wodo, I expected everybody off watch to be waiting here for it."

Taylor said, "We got two shows today, Jak. And everybody but us four is watching the second one."

Heming didn't get it. Scowling questioningly at them, he went to the projector and began to insert the wire.

Woodford, 1st Signalmann, explained. "Rosen and Johnson are having it out with stun guns down in the tract-torpedo room."

The space rifleman stared. "A fight! You mean that they're having a fight?"

Taylor said, "That's right." He seemed pleased about it. "A fight it is. The screwy makron got into an argument about Kathy and they decided to have it out. The Doc is refereeing the thing. He made 'em turn the stun guns down so they can't hurt each other too much."

"Doc Thorndon?" That was as surprising as the fact that a fight was taking place at all. "That doesn't sound like the Doc; he's the one that usually cools everything off."

"Let's see the wire," Woodford complained. "Now that I think about it, I'm sorry I didn't come down and see the fight. It's just that I can't wait to see whether or not they got this Jackie Black yet." He shook his head in reluctant admiration. "Now, there's a guy for you. Slick as they come, and tough as they come, too."

Taylor added, "They'll get him. just wait and see. The Solar System Bureau of Investigation gets them all, sooner or later. They'll -"

Heming snapped, "Like kert they will! You just never hear about the guys they don't catch. they don't give them no publicity. Ten credits says they haven't caught Black by the time we get this here trip."

Taylor said sourly, "You know gambling isn't allowed in space."

"Put up, or shut up. I say they won't catch Jackie Black by the time we get back."

Taylor flushed angrily. "All right, all right. I'll just take that."

"Let's see the wire and knock off all this argument," somebody else put in.

The news video began to flash and they lapsed into silence.

IN THE brief darkness of the shadow of a space rifle, Mart Bakr whispered hurriedly, urgently, "I could come to your room later, while Dick is on watch and while Johnny Norse is sleeping. We --"

"Why, Martie," she said scoldingly, but keeping her voice low. "I . I think you're insulting me."

He protested, vehemently as possible in his whisper.

ON WATCH in the control room, Petersen said to Ward, "You know, when she first came aboard, that is, when we first caught her, Kathy didn't look so good to me. Nice girl, you know, but not what I'd call pretty. But these last six months with her being the only gal on board --"

Ward said coldly, "Just what do you mean, Petersen?"

The other shrugged. "You know, like that old', old gag they used to tell about the soldiers in New Guinea in the second - or was it the third or fourth World War. The one soldier'd say to the other one, 'You know, the longer I'm here the less black they look to me.' "

Ward spun him around and rasped his coverall front. He bit out between his teeth, "Listen, you makron, you're talking about Kathy, understand! Watch your damned mouth!"

KATHY, Doc Thorndon, Mart Bakr, Johnny Norse and Dick Roland sat in the officer's wardroom, preparatory to showing that day's news wire. In spite of the importance of this news break in the day's monotony, the eyes of all three of the younger men were on the girl.

Used, by this time, to the attention, Kathy was able to ignore it. She said, "Just who is that Jackie Black that you're always talking about?"

"The last of the Robin Hoods," Doc Thorndon said softly.

"Robin Hoods?" she frowned.

"Bet you five credits it's something he dug up out of one of his old books," Johnny Norse snorted.

"You'd win then," Doc said. He turned his face to Kathy to explain. "The original Robin Hood was an outlaw who robbed from the rich but gave to the poor - a very long time ago. Since then, every time a bandit makes a practice of being kind to the poor, they've called him

Robin Hood." He added, dry of voice, : "Very seldom do they deserve the name."

She was interested. "Oh? Well, what was his name, again"

"Jackie Black," Mart Bakr offered. As usual, he was sitting on the edge of his chair, eyes riveted on the girl to the point that should have caused acute embarrassment.

She went on, "Yes, this Jackie Black - that's a silly name, isn't it? Does he deserve the name, Robin Hood?"

Doc Thorndon shrugged, wrinkling up his cheerful face. "I suppose you'd say he does. Probably the principal reason he's eluded the authorities for so long. He has had considerable support from the rank and file citizens."

Johnny Norsen said, "Well, what is it that he got this time? They've got half the police on three planets on his trail and as far as I can understand, all he stole were some papers."

Dick Roland said, "I heard some rumors, just before we left Terra, that the papers were inside dope on a bunch of the bureaucrats - really incriminating. The story is that Jackie Black figures on blackmailing them."

Doc Thorndon grunted. "Doesn't sound like the sort of thing he'd do. Blackmail is a pretty nasty business."

Mart Bakr said, "Well, let's get on with this news wire. Maybe they've caught him by now."

SHE was on her way to the crew's mess, but Dick Roland found time to slip a note into her hand, flushing furiously as he did. She winked, infinitesimally, but hurried her way past him.

His heart thumped over twice, then curled up in its corner and glowed heat. Did that wink mean . . . ?

Kathy entered the crew's mess and smiled at the assembled men who were off duty.

"All right," she said cheerfully, "it's your day - or night, whatever it is - who can tell on a space ship? What shall we do this time, boys? Do you want to draw lots to see who plays cards with me?"

One of the spacemen growled, "I don't see why the officers get your company the same amount of time we do. There's five of them and forty of us. It ain't fair."

She looked at him in mock reproach. "Why don't you get up a petition?"

Woodford muttered, "On a space cruiser, on a mission? They'd string us up by the thumbs."

Kathy tossed her head and laughed at him. "You see. You don't really care. My company isn't nearly as important to you as you'd make believe."

Jak Heming scrambled to his feet and faced the rest. "She's right! Why don't we? Why

should forty of us have to share her time equally with only five? It's not as though this was an ordinary situation. How often do you have women aboard a space ship? I say, let's all sign a petition. We should have Kathy's company six days out of the week, they, only once."

"Boys, boys," she laughed.

But they continued to mutter among themselves and the sounds of their voices went high.

THERE was an almost inaudible knock at the door.

"Who's there?" Kathy called.

"It's me."

There was silence for a moment, then, "Just a moment - me."

By the time she opened the door, he was glancing fearfully up and down the corridor. He slipped in.

"Why, Johnny."

"Darling!" He reached for her but she avoided him as adroitly as possible in the tiny quarters.

"Why, Johnny Norsen. You know you're not allowed in here. What would Commander Gurloff say? Besides, I thought you were the one who was so sorry to see me on board."

He was hurried, but emphatic. "Look, darling, Kathy. I didn't know then.

Her eyes were mocking.

He held out a hand. "This ring. It was my mother's . . . I . . . I want you to wear it." His angular face was very intent and very sincere.

Her eyes widened now. "Why, Johnny -"

"Listen, sweetheart. I know, these aren't the circumstances. That nothing could . . . well, develop here in the ship. But when we return, when we're back on Terra again, I'm going to give up the space service and we can -"

She interrupted him with a finger on his lips. Her eyes were on the floor now so that he 'Couldn't see the glint of amusement, but she said softly, "I'll keep the ring, Johnny. We can talk about it when . . . 'when we're back again. No, you'd better go." She avoided his arms . "Everybody would be angry they knew you'd been in here."

After he'd gone, she put the ring in a small drawer - with a dozen others.

THE SICK CALL was almost daily growing in magnitude and Doc Thorndon didn't like it. Not a bit. The cruise still had half way to go. He was amazed that they'd hung on this far, actually, but six months was still too long a period to stretch before them.

He applied various tests to the last of his callers and then flicked a stylus against his teeth in irritation as he considered the findings.

Rosen said, worriedly, "What is it Doc? Not . . . not cafard, is it, Doc?"

Thorndon looked down at him and laughed gently. "Ever had even a touch of cafard, Rosen?"

"Well, no sir. But I saw a man with it once." Rosen's eyes went nervously about the ship's hospital. The room was about the size of a bedroom of a Pullman of the 20th Century. It had two bunks, one above the other, a tiny folding table, a medicine chest built into the titanium alloy wall, a lavatory.

Doc Thorndon chuckled. "Don't worry. You'll know it when you get space cafard."

Rosen shuddered. "Yes, sir, I know. The fear of black space. The terror of free fall. Complete, berserk hysteria." The little crewman's eyes went empty.

Doc patted him on the shoulder. "Forget about it, Rosen. Haven't you heard? There hasn't been a case of cafard on this ship since I've been ship's doctor." His face tightened subtly. "By the way, what's this I hear about some of you crew members tapping the tract-torpedoes for alcohol and brewing up some jungle juice?"

The crewman was surprised. He hadn't heard about it. But he came to his feet and began shrugging back into his coveralls. He said, warily, "Where'd you hear this, Doc?"

Thorndon laughed cheerfully. "Never mind, and don't worry about it, Rosen. In fact, it wouldn't hurt you to try a little of it. Get your mind off your worries."

Rosen looked at him, shocked. Nothing was more taboo in space than drinking.

"Get on with you," Doc laughed and shooed him from the room.

After the other was gone, the doctor sank down to the side of the bunk and emptied his lungs in a sigh which touched on despair. Six more months to go.

Kathy put her head in the door and said, "Doctor Thorndon?"

He looked up. "Come on in, Kathy. I'm through for the day and I have some suggestions for you."

She entered and closed the door behind her. She leaned back against it and looked at him thoughtfully, and once again he reminded himself that she wasn't attractive-really. It was her aggressive personality, that and her obvious femininity. You seldom saw mammary glands . . . He pulled his mind away from that trend of thought. Doc was masculine too, and not that old.

"Well, Kathy?" he said wearily.

She said, "I think I've finally figured out just what you're doing."

"You have? Well, I'm not surprised. You're not a very stupid person, Kathy." He didn't stop as he talked. "How many of 'em have proposed to you this week?"

"Four. Lieutenant Roland, and three more of the crew members."

He snorted, amusedly. "I'll wager you'll have hooked two thirds of them before the cruise is over." The amusement left him. "If it's ever over."

"If it's ever over."

She said, very softly, "It's even more than usually important that the ship get back, isn't it?"

He looked up at her, without speaking.

She said, "I've been picking up odds and ends, here and there. I don't know too much about politics, but from what the crew says, and the officers too, for that matter, Commander Mike Gurloff is pretty big potatoes in reform politics back on Terra."

Doc rubbed the end of his nose with a thoughtful forefinger and wondered just how much to tell her.

She said, "It's pretty important that he get back, isn't it?"

Doc Thorndon said slowly, "More than just get back, Kathy. He's got to return with his reputation as strong as ever. He's got to be able to throw into their faces just what tricks the present administration has been pulling on him."

She sank into the one chair the room boasted. "Are we going to make it?"

Doc pursed his lips. Finally he said, "The odds are against it, Kathy."

They sat silently for awhile.

Doc took a deep breath. "By the way, Kathy, I just had Rosen in here, you know, the signalman. He's in the first stages of cafard. He doesn't know it yet, but he is."

Air hissed through her teeth.

He nodded, seriously. "We've got to snap him out of it, but quick. One bad case, and it'd spread through this ship like wildfire. Now this is what you'll have to do . . ."

She listened very carefully and nodded. The two of them looked like a pair of conspirators leaning toward each other, their faces very serious.

COMMANDER GURLOFF looked up C and down the corridor, spotted no one and slipped into the ship's hospital. He closed the door and turned to Doc Thorndon who was lying on the bottom bunk reading.

Doc looked up from his book and said, "Hello, Mike. Have aseat."

Mike Gurloff scowled at him, but lowered himself into the indicated chair.

He said, , Doc, what the kert are you trying to do with my ship and crew? The whole command is falling apart."

Doc Thorndon put a finger in his place. "Oh?" he said.

"Yeah, oh. Don't act so innocent." Gurloff hesitated, then went into the matter that bothered him in some detail. "Doc," he said, "You've always had a lot of leeway on the New Taos. Of course, it's not just the New Taos, any ship's doctor on any space craft on a long cruise has a lot of leeway - as much as he needs to fight off the threat of space cafard. Maybe you've had a lot more than most, but maybe that's because you've accomplished more than most."

The doctor reminded him softly, "We haven't had a serious case of cafard since I've been aboard, Mike."

In an earlier age, Commander Gurloff would have knocked on wood. Now he shuddered. "All right," he said, "I'll take that. But this time, Doc, I'm afraid you're going too far. What's this about stun gun fights between crew members down in the torpedo room? What's this about gambling going on, more or less openly, and the crew being on the verge of mutiny because of it? What's this about Kathy? What's this about Mart Bakr and Dick Roland starting a fist fight in the wardroom the other day? And Rosen going on duty soused to the eyeballs?" His voice became more incisive. "Discipline aboard this ship is falling apart, Doc. And, to my surprise, I seem to find your meddling finger in every case I note that's adding to this collapse."

The doctor nodded, "That's right," he said agreeably.

"That's right?" Gurloff blurted. , "What do you mean? I come in here expecting you to have some explanation of your actions and you merely say it's true, that thing I've accused you of is true."

"It is," the Doctor said mildly.

"That you're inciting the crew to mutiny, that you're encouraging fighting and drink, that's true?"

"Yes," the Doctor said.

Gurloff blinked at him. Stared a moment. Then came to his feet. He stood, looking down at the other, the back of his hands on his hips. He was incredulous.

He snapped, "Doctor, you realize a crew without discipline incapable of running a ship?"

"Let us say that it's incapable of running a ship indefinitely."

"And you say that you're deliberately encouraging a collapse of half the rules in the service?"

Doc sat up, putting his feet on the deck. He said, very seriously, "Mike, how long have you been out thus far?"

The other scowled. "Somewhat over six months."

"How many cases of space cafard, so far?"

The answer was a growled "None."

"Without books, without games, without any entertainment, for all practical purposes, without a rest through half of this cruise without one case of mental collapse, and that in spite of the fact that the crew had less than two weeks rest after the last trip."

Mike Gurloff leaned back against the bulkhead and scowled at him. "You mean you're preventing cafard by -"

Doc Thorndon leveled a finger at his skipper. "I'm preventing the complete collapse of the crew by every method I can devise. I can tell you right now, if we ever get back to Terra, the crew as a unit, will probably never be fit to take a ship out again. It was you, Mike, who said we had to make the cruise; you said that if you could make it you'd be in a position to upset that corrupt bunch of bureaucrats that are running the space service now."

"All right, Mike Gurloff, I believe in you. I'm trying to get this ship back before it turns into an asylum of howling, raving maniacs. It's taking every dirty deal, every little trick, every bit of double dealing I can think of to keep monotony and boredom, the breeding ground of cafard, from setting in."

"Including using that girl, Kathy, to keep the men in a continual dither?"

"Definitely! She's my best weapon."

Mike Gurloff thrust his hands into his tunic pockets and stared, unseeingly, at the medicine chest. He muttered, "There's one other thing, Doc, that I hadn't thought of before."

"Yes?"

"It's true that the New Taos has become the most popular craft in the fleet. Why?"

Doc Thorndon said indignantly, "For good reason! In the past two or three years it's made at least four cruises with outstanding success against the Kradens. Every time the New Taos returns from a cruise, it has a victory to report. Why -"

"Every time but this time, Doc," Gurloff said wearily. "And how long does a hero remain in the public eye when he slacks off on his heroism?"

Thorndon frowned.

Gurloff said, "Doc, this time they've sent us off on a year's cruise into empty space. There's nothing in this direction. No enemy, no galaxy that we'll reach. No nothing. When we return

after a full year of being out of the news - we'll have nothing to report." He thought it over a minute. "I wouldn't be surprised if the powers that be so time it that just about when the Ne Taos berths, some other ship, with a skipper and crew more amenable to the present administration, hits the headlines with some outstanding deed. just you, watch."

He turned on his heel, mumbled a farewell, and left. Mike Gurloff was beginning to show both his, age and the accumulated bitterness of years of having his career thwarted.

Doc Thorndon gazed after him, and rubbed the end of his nose with a thoughtful forefinger. "I hadn't thought of that angle," he said out loud.

IT WAS the traditional toast of the officers of a space ship after a successful cruise, held in the ship's wardroom only moments after landing and immediately before opening the hatch.

Commander Mike Gurloff had brought the bottle of stone age brandy from his quarters and was filling the glasses. He said, spiritlessly, "Where's Doc Thorndon? If anybody is to be given credit for bringing us through this time, it's him."

"Saw him just a few minutes before landing. He was talking with Kathy," Johnny Norsen said.

"Well, let's get about it, gentlemen," Gurloff growled. He took up his glass and eyed the other one by one. "My last cruise, gentlemen," he said, his mouth a straight line.

They stood there, holding their glasses, their eyes widening.

He said tightly, "Surprised, gentlemen? What could you expect? It's either that or they'd have sent this craft out into space in another week or so. - And this time, we wouldn't come back."

They said nothing. There was nothing to say. Each took down the drink, stiff wisted. Then they set their glasses down on the small table.

Dick Roland flushed noticeably and said, "As a matter of fact, sir, the same goes for me. All eyes went to the second officer.

"Don't be ridiculous," Mike Gurloff rapped. "Your career has just started."

Dick Roland squared his shoulders and said, "Kathy and I are going to be married and -"

"What!" Johnny Norsen blurted, angrily. "Are you trying to make a fool of -"

"Marry you?" Mart Bakr yelled. "Kathy and I are engaged. I'm the one that's quitting the space service and -"

Johnny Norsen spun on him, then back to Roland. "Is this supposed to be some stupid joke?" he bit out. "Kathy and I are -"

Gurloff was looking from one to the other of them in utter astonishment.

"Boys, boys," a voice from behind them said softly. They turned, each still sputtering his indignation. It was Doc Thorndon.

"In the first place," he said mildly, "polyandry is still illegal on Terra and the latest statistics show that Jackie - that is, Kathy - is engaged to forty-three of this ship's complement of forty-five officers and men."

There were four different ejaculations, but he went on. "And, in the second place, in spite of his capable disguise over the past year, Jackie Black is a very masculine character, and I doubt if he'd be interested in marriage - not to anybody of the male sex."

They were dumb. It was just too much to assimilate.

Doc Thorndon handed an envelope to Commander Gurloff. "Jackie Black thinks you'll be able to use these documents in your next speech, Mike. You didn't bring home your usual victory, perhaps, but you'll draw your usual attention!" He rubbed the end of his nose with his forefinger and grinned, cheerfully. "When he saw what a hornet's nest he'd awakened when he swiped them, he could figure only one way of avoiding the regiments of police on his trail - he stowed away on a craft scheduled to be off in space for a year's time. His disguise as a woman went still further in preventing his identity from being guessed."

Gurloff was thumbing through a sheaf of papers in the envelope.

"You mean, that all along he planned to hand these over to someone who would expose him?"

Doc shrugged. "I don't know Mike. Maybe not. But I think that little story about Robin Hood rather appealed to him. Besides, was rather persuasive, just before he left the ship."

The Doctor turned to go.

"Just a minute," Gurloff snapped, his face dark. "How long have you known the identity of this - this criminal, Jackie Black? Just because these papers are now in our possession doesn't mean we can brush away his existence on my ship for a year. We have a duty to perform. Where is he?"

The doctor allowed himself only the faintest of grins. "As to how long I've known . . . well, I've suspected for some time, really, that our Kathy wasn't quite as feminine as she'd like to have us all think. I -"

Dick Roland, still in a semistate of shock, blurted, "But . . . but . . . Kathy . . . I thought she was so womanly. So . . ." he reddened again.

The Doctor cleared his throat. "As a matter of fact, my first clue was based on that very factor. In one of my old books I ran into the slang word, falsies and -"

"The kerk with all that," Gurloff blurted, "Where is this criminal? Our duty is still to apprehend him."

The Doc said, "I'm afraid that 'Kathy' was the first man off the ship, Mike. Must have been ten minutes ago. Seems to me I saw him leave. by way of the torpedo hatch."

Gurloff was weakening, but he grumbled, "Just because he turned these papers over to you doesn't give him the right to escape the punishment that -"

Doc said patiently, "Good grief, Mike, how sadistic are you? After what that poor man's been through the last twelve months with this ship full of Romeos, you want to punish him further."

For an instant there was silence; then Mart Bakr grinned ruefully. "I guess you got a point there, Doc."

[end]