

THE OTHER DEAD MAN

Gene Wolfe

Reis surveyed the hull without hope and without despair, having worn out both. They had been hit hard. Some port-side plates of Section Three lay peeled back like the black skin of a graphite-fiber banana; Three, Four, and Five were holed in a dozen places. Reis marked the first on the comp slate so that Centcomp would know, rotated the ship's image and ran the rat around the port side of Section Three to show that.

REPORT ALL DAMAGE, Centcomp instructed him.

He wrote quickly with the rattail: *Rog*.

REPORT ALL DAMAGE, flashed again and vanished. Reis shrugged philosophically, rotated the image back, and charted another hole.

The third hole was larger than either of the first two. He jetted around to look at it more closely.

Back in the airlock, he took off his helmet and skinned out of his suit. By the time Jan opened the inner hatch, he had the suit folded around his arm.

"Bad, huh?" Jan said.

Reis shook his head. "Not so bad. How's Hap?"

Jan turned away.

"How's Dawson doing with the med pod?"

"I don't know," Jan said, "He hasn't told us anything."

He followed her along the spiracle. Paula was bent over Hap, and Dawson was bent over Paula, a hand on her shoulder. Both looked up when he and Jan came in. Dawson asked, "Anybody left downship?"

Reis shook his head.

"I didn't think so, but you never know."

"They'd have had to be in suits," Reis said. "Nobody was."

"It wouldn't be a bad idea for us to stay suited up."

Reis said nothing, studying Hap. Hap's face was a pale, greenish-yellow, beaded with sweat; it reminded Reis of an unripe banana, just washed under the tap. So this is banana day, he thought.

"Not all of the time," Dawson said. "But most of the time."

"Sure," Reis told him. "Go ahead."

"All of us."

Hap's breathing was so shallow that he seemed not to breathe at all.

"You won't order it?"

“No,” Reis told Dawson, “I won’t order it.” After a moment he added, “And I won’t do it myself, unless I feel like it. You can do what you want.”

Paula wiped Hap’s face with a damp washcloth. It occurred to Reis that the droplets he had taken for perspiration might be no more than water from the cloth, that Hap might not really be breathing. Awkwardly, he felt for Hap’s pulse.

Paula said, “You’re the senior officer now, Reis.”

He shook his head. “As long as Hap’s alive, he’s senior officer. How’d you do with the med pod, Mr. Dawson?”

“You want a detailed report? Oxygen’s—”

“No, if I wanted details, I could get them from Centcomp. Overall.”

Dawson rolled his eyes. “Most of the physical stuff he’ll need is there; I had to fix a couple things, and they’re fixed. The med subroutines look okay, but I don’t know. Centcomp lost a lot of core.”

Paula asked, “Can’t you run tests, Sid?”

“I’ve run them. As I said, they look all right. But it’s simple stuff.” Dawson turned back to Reis. “Do we put him in the pod? You *are* the senior officer fit for duty.”

“And don’t you forget it,” Reis said. “Yes, we put him in, Mr. Dawson; it’s his only chance.”

Jan was looking at him with something indefinable in her eyes. “If we’re going to die anyway—”

“We’re not, Mr. van Joure. We should be able to patch up at least two engines, maybe three, borrowing parts from the rest. The hit took a lot of momentum off us, and in a week or so we should be able to shake most of what’s left. As soon as Ecomp sees that we’re still alive and kicking, it’ll authorize rescue.” Reis hoped he had made that part sound a great deal more certain than he felt. “So our best chance is to head back in toward the Sun and meet it part way—that should be obvious. Now let’s get Hap into that pod before he dies. Snap to it, everybody!”

Dawson found an opportunity to take Reis aside. “You were right—if we’re going to get her going again, we can’t spare anybody for nursing, no matter what happens. Want me to work on the long-wave?” Reis shook his head. Engines first, long-wave afterward, if at all. There would be plenty of time to send messages when the ship lived again. And until it did, he doubted whether any message would do much good.

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Lying in his sleep pod, Reis listened to the slow wheeze of air through the vent. The ship breathed again, they’d done that much. Could it have been admiration, that look of Jan’s? He pushed the thought aside, telling himself he had been imagining things. But still?

His mind teetered on the lip of sleep, unable to tumble over.

The ship breathed; it was only one feeble engine running at half force with a doubtful tube, and yet it was something; they could use power tools again—the welder—and the ship breathed.

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His foot slipped on an oil spill, and he woke with a start. That had happened years back while they were

refitting at Ocean West. He had fallen and cracked his head. He had believed it forgotten...

The ship breathed.

She's our mother, Reis thought. She's our mother; we live inside her, in her womb; and if she dies, we die. But she died, and we're bringing her to life again.

Someone knocked on the pod lid. Reis pushed the RETRACT lever and sat up.

Paula said, "Sir, I'm sorry but—"

"What is it? Is Jan—"

"She's fine, sir. I relieved her an hour ago. It's my watch."

"Oh," Reis said. "I didn't realize I'd been asleep." He sounded stupid even to himself.

"My orders were to call you, sir, if—"

He nodded. "What's happened?"

"Hap's dead." Paula's voice was flat, its only emotion this very lack of emotion betrayed.

Reis looked at her eyes. There were no tears there, and he decided it was probably a bad sign. "I'm truly sorry," he said. And then, "Perhaps Centcomp—"

Wordlessly, Paula pointed to the screen. The glowing green letters read: RESUSCITATION UNDERWAY.

Reis went over to look at it. "How long has this been up?"

"Five minutes, Captain. Perhaps ten. I hoped—"

"That you wouldn't have to wake me.

Paula nodded gratefully. "Yes, sir."

He wrote: *Resp?*

RESPIRATION 0.00. RESUSCITATION UNDERWAY.

The ship breathed, but Hap did not. That, of course, was why Paula had called him "Captain" a moment ago. She must have tried pulse, tried everything, before knocking on his pod. He wrote: *Cortex?*

ALPHA 0.00. BETA 0.00. GAMMA 0.00, Centcomp replied. RESUSCITATION UNDERWAY.

Reis wrote: *Discon.*

There was a noticeable pause before the alpha, beta, and gamma-wave reports vanished. RESUSCITATION UNDERWAY, remained stubbornly on screen.

Paula said, "Centcomp won't give up. Centcomp has faith. Funny, isn't it?"

Reis shook his head. "It means we can't rely on Centcomp the way we've been used to. Paula, I'm not very good at telling people how I feel. Hap was my best friend."

“You were his, Captain.”

Desperately Reis continued, “Then we’re both sorry, and we both know that.”

“Sir, may I tell you something?”

He nodded. “Something private? Of course.”

“We were married. You know how they still do it in some churches? We went to one. He told them we didn’t belong, but we wanted to have the ceremony and we’d pay for it. I thought sure they’d say no, but they did it, and he cried—Hap cried.”

Reis nodded again, “You meant a lot to him.”

“That’s all, sir. I just wanted somebody else to know. Thanks for listening.”

Reis went to his locker and got out his suit. It shone a dull silver under the cabins lights, and he recalled a time when he had envied people who had suits like that.

“Aren’t you going back to sleep, sir?”

“No. I’ll be relieving you in less than an hour, so I’m going hullside to have another look around. When I come back, you can turn in.”

Paula gnawed her lower lip. He was giving her something to think about besides Hap, Reis decided; that was all to the good. “Sir, the captain doesn’t stand watch.”

“He does when there are only four of us, dog tired. Check me through the airlock, please, Mr. Phillips.”

“Of course, sir.” As the inner hatch swung shut Paula said softly, “Oh, God, I’d give anything to have him back.”

Neptune was overhead now; they were spinning, even if the spin was too slow to be visible. With only a single engine in service it was probably impossible to stop the spin, and there was no real reason to. The gravitational effect was so slight he had not noticed it.

He found Jupiter and then the Sun, slightly less brilliant than Jupiter or Neptune but brighter than any other star. The Sun! How many thousands—no, how many millions of his ancestors must have knelt and sung and sacrificed to it. It had been Ra, Apollo, Helios, Heimdall, and a hundred more, this medium-sized yellow star in a remote arm of the Galaxy, this old gas-burner, this space heater laboring to warm infinite space.

If you’re a god, Reis thought, why aren’t you helping us?

Quite suddenly he realized that the Sun *was* helping, was drawing them toward the circling inner planets as powerfully as it could. He shook his head and turned his attention back to the ship.

A faint violet spark shone, died, and rekindled somewhere on Section Six, indicating that Centcomp had at least one of its mobile units back in working order. Centcomp was self-repairing, supposedly, though Reis had never put much faith in that; human beings were supposed to be self-repairing too, but all too often were not.

And deep space was supposed to make you feel alone, but he had never really felt that way; sometimes, when he was not quite so tired, he was more alive here, more vibrant, than he ever was in the polluted atmosphere of Earth. Now Hap was dead, and Reis knew himself to be alone utterly. As he jetted over

to check on the mobile unit, he wished that he could weep for Hap as he had wept for his father, though he had known his father so much less well than Hap, known him only as a large, sweet-smelling grownup who appeared at rare intervals bringing presents.

Or if he could not cry, that Paula could.

The mobile unit looked like a tiny spider. It clung to the side of Section Three with six legs while two more welded up one of the smaller holes. Centcomp, obviously, had decided to close the smallest holes first, and for a moment Reis wondered whether that made sense. It did, he decided, if Centcomp was in actual fact fixing itself; there would be more units as well as more power available later. He swerved down toward the mobile unit until he could see it for what it was, a great jointed machine forty meters across. Three clicks of his teeth brought ghostly numerals—hours, minutes, and seconds—to his faceplate, which had darkened automatically against the raw ultraviolet from the mobile unit's welding arc. Still twenty-four minutes before he had to relieve Paula.

For a minute or two he watched the fusing of the filament patch. The patch fibers had been engineered to form a quick, strong bond; but a bit of dwell was needed just the same. The mobile unit seemed to be allowing enough, working slowly and methodically. In the hard vacuum of space there was no danger of fire, and its helium valves were at OFF just as they should have been.

Reis glanced at the time again. Twenty minutes and eleven seconds, time enough yet for a quick look inside Section Three. He circled the hull and jetted through the great, gaping tear, landing easily in a familiar cabin that was now as airless as the skin of the ship. The hermetic hatch that sealed Section Two from this one was tightly dogged still. He had inspected it earlier, just after the hit, and inspected it again when he had come with Dawson, Jan, and Paula to work on the least damaged engine. He threw his weight against each of the latches once again; you could not be too careful.

Nell Upson's drifting corpse watched him with indifferent eyes until he pushed her away, sending her deeper into the dark recesses of Section Three to join her fellows. In time, space would dry Nell utterly, mummifying her; radiation would blacken her livid skin. None of that had yet taken place, and without air, Nell's blood could not even coagulate—she had left a thin, crimson tail of it floating in the void behind her.

Twelve minutes. That was still plenty of time, but it was time to go. When he left the side of Section Three, the mobile unit was at work on a second hole.

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RESUSCITATION UNDERWAY, was still on the screen half an hour into Reis's watch. He read it for the hundredth time with some irritation. Was it supposed to refer to Centcomp's self-repair functions? Reis picked up the rat and wrote, *Who's in muse?*

CAPT. HUMAN W. HAPPLE. RESUSCITATION UNDERWAY.

So that was that. *Discon.*

RESUSCITATION UNDERWAY.

Clear screen, Reis scribbled.

RESUSCITATION UNDERWAY.

Reis cursed and wrote, *What authority?*

CAPT. HUMAN W. HAPPLE.

That was interesting, Reis decided, not sensible or useful, but interesting. Centcomp did not know that Hap was dead. Reis wrote, *Capt. Happle K. Lt. Wm. R. Reis commanding*.

The screen went blank, and Reis decided to try a general instrument display. GID

The three letters faded slowly, replaced by nothing.

Enter-GID

That, too, faded to an empty screen. Reis scratched his nose and looked speculatively at the transducer headband. He had ordered the others not to use it—the hard instrumentation was amply sufficient as long as nothing too delicate was being attempted; but it had been sixteen hours since the hit, and Centcomp was still limping at best.

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Multiplication became coitus, division reproduction; to add was to eat, to subtract to excrete. Glowing, Centcomp's central processor loomed before him, a dazzling coral palace with twice ten thousand spires where subroutines worked or slept. Tiny and blue alongside it, the lone mobile unit sang a Bach fugue as it labored. Smoldering leaves perfumed the breeze, washed away by a fountain of exponential functions that appeared to Reis to be calculating natural logarithms for purposes both infinite and obscure, pungently returning with each fresh gust of algorithmic air. Interactive matrices sprouted around his feet—the lilies, buttercups, and pale or burning roses that allowed his conscious mind to move here as it did, their blossoms petaled with shining elementary rows and columns.

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Hap was sitting astride a tree that sprouted from the coral wall. The smile that divided his dark face when he saw Reis seemed automatic and distracted. Reis saluted, called, "Good evening, Skipper," and leaped across the laughing rill that had overflowed the fountain's rim.

Hap touched his forehead in return. "Hi ya, Bill."

Reis said, "It's damned good to see you here. We thought you were dead."

"Not me, Bill." Hap stared off into the twilight. "You can't die on duty, know that? Got to finish your tick, know what I mean, Bill boy? You want up here on the bridge?" He patted the tree trunk.

"That's okay—I'm fine where I am. Hap...?"

His eyes still upon something Reis could not see, Hap said, "Speak your piece."

"Hap, I checked your cortical activity. There wasn't any. You were brain-dead."

"Go on."

"That's why it was quite a surprise to run into you here, and I'm not sure it's really you. Are you Hap, or are you just a kind of surrogate, Centcomp's concept of Hap?"

"I'm Hap. Next question?"

"Why won't Centcomp terminate resuscitation?"

“Because I told it not to, as soon as we left Earth.” Hap sounded as though he were talking to himself. “Not just on me, on all of us. We’re all too necessary, all of us vital. Resusc is to continue as long as—in Centcomp’s judgment—there’s the slightest possibility of returning a crewman to his or her duty. No overrides at all, no mutinies. Know what a mutiny is, Bill? Grasp the concept?”

Reis nodded.

“Some snotty kid’ying to take over my ship, Billy boy, trying to push me out through a hatch. That’s mutiny. It’s a certain Lieutenant William R. Reis. He’s not going to get away with it.”

“Hap...”

Hap was gone. Briefly, the tree where he had sat remained where it was, vacant; then it too vanished, wiped from working memory.

Something was wrong: the brilliant garden seemed haunted by sinister shadows, flitting and swift; the chaotic twilight from which Reis had emerged pressed closer to the coral palace. His head ached, there was a chill in his side, and his fingers felt oddly warm. He tried to remove the headband, willing himself to use his real arms, not the proxies that here appeared to be his arms. A hurrying subroutine shouldered him out of the way; by accident he stepped into the laughing rill, which bit his foot like acid...

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A smudged white cabin wall stood in place of the wall of the coral palace. Dawson was bending over him, his face taut with concern. “Reis! What happened?”

His mouth was full of blood; he spat it out. “I’m hurt, Sid.”

“I know. *Christ!*” Dawson released him; but he did not fall, floating derelict in the cabin air. Dawson banged on Jan’s pod.

Reis moved his right arm to look at the fingers; the warmth there was his own blood, and there was more blood hanging in the cabin, floating spheres of bright scarlet blood—arterial blood. “I’m bleeding, Sid. I think he nicked a lung. Better patch me up.”

Twilight closed upon the cabin. Reis remembered how they had celebrated Christmas when he was three—something he had not known he knew, with colored paper and a thousand other wonderful things. Surely he was peeping through one of the plastic tubes the paper had come on; the few things he could see seemed small, toylike, and very bright. Everything in all the universe was a Christmas present, a fact he had forgotten long, long ago. He wondered who had brought them all, and why.

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YOU HAVE BEEN ASLEEP IN THE MEDICAL POD. THERE IS LITTLE CAUSE FOR CONCERN.

Reis searched the pod for a rat, but there was none. No backtalk to Centcomp from in here.

ARE YOU ANXIOUS? FEARFUL? CONFIDE YOUR FEARS TO ME. I ASSURE YOU THAT ANY INFORMATION THAT I PROVIDE CONCERNING YOUR CONDITION WILL BE BOTH COMPLETE AND CORRECT. NO MATTER HOW BAD, REALITY IS NEVER QUITE SO BAD AS OUR FEARS CONCERNING REALITY.

Reis said, “Spare me the philosophy,” though he knew that Centcomp could not hear him.

AND YOUR CONDITION IS NOT EVEN CRITICAL. YOU SUFFERED A DANGEROUS LESION BETWEEN THE FIFTH AND SIXTH RIBS OF YOUR RIGHT SIDE, BUT YOU ARE NEARLY WELL.

Reis was already exploring the place with his fingers.

PLEASE REPLY.

“Would if I could.” Reis muttered.

YOU WILL FIND A RAPID ACCESS TRACE BESIDE YOUR RIGHT HAND. PLEASE REPLY.

“There’s no God-damned rapid access trace.”

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A latch clicked. Servos hummed. The pod in which Reis lay rolled forward with stately grandeur, and the pod opened. This time it was Jan who was looking down at him. “Reis, can you sit up?”

“Sure.” He proved it.

Low and quick: “I want you to get into your sleeping pod with me, please. Don’t ask questions—just do it, fast.”

His pod was closed, but not latched from inside. He threw it open and he and Jan climbed in; she lay facing him, on her side, her back to the pod wall. He got in beside her, closed the pod, and threw the latching lever. Jan’s breasts flattened against his chest; Jan’s pelvis pressed his. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I hadn’t realized it would be this crowded.”

“It’s all right.”

“Even if I had, I’d have had to ask you anyway. This is the only place I could think of where we could talk privately.”

“I like it,” Reis said, “so you can forget about that part. Talk about what?”

“Hap.”

He nodded, though she could not have seen him in the dark. “I thought so.”

“Hap was the one who stabbed you.”

“Sure,” Reis said. “I know that. With the rat from the med pod.”

“That’s right.” Jan hesitated; Reis could feel her sweet breath wash across his face. At last she said. “Perhaps you’d better tell me how you knew. It might be important.”

“I doubt it, but there’s no reason not to. Hap thinks I’m a mutineer because I took charge when he was hurt—I was talking to him in Centcomp’s conscious space. Hap had been in the med pod, and when

I woke up in there the rat that should have been there was gone. A rat’s stylus is long and sharp, and the whole rat’s made of some sort of metal-titanium, I suppose. So a rat ought to make a pretty decent weapon.”

Hair brushed his cheek as Jan nodded. “Sid found you. He woke up and realized he should have been on

watch.”

“Sure.”

“He yelled for me, and we put you in the med pod when we saw that it was empty. There’s another pod in Section Three, remember?”

“Of course,” Reis said.

He waited for her to pursue that line of thought, but she seemed to veer off from it instead. “Hap’s resumed command.” She swallowed. “It was all right at first—he’s the captain, after all. None of us even thought about resisting him, then.”

Reis said slowly, “I wouldn’t have resisted him either; I would have obeyed his orders, if I’d known he was alive to give them.”

Jan said, “He’s very suspicious now.” There was a queer flatness in her voice.

“I see.”

“And Reis, he’s going to continue the mission.”

For a moment he could not speak. He shook his head.

“It’s crazy, isn’t it? With the ship ripped up like it was.”

“Not crazy,” he told her. “Impossible.”

Jan took a deep breath—he could feel and hear it, her long gasp in the dark. “And Reis, Hap’s dead.”

Reluctantly Reis said, “If he really wanted to proceed with the mission, maybe it’s for the best. You didn’t kill him, did you? You and Sid?”

“No. You don’t understand. I didn’t mean... Oh, it’s so hard to say what I do mean.”

Reis told her, “I think you’d better try.” His right hand had been creeping, almost absently, toward her left breast. He forced it to stop where it was.

“Hap’s still running the ship. He tells us what to do, and we do it because we know we’d better. But our real captain, our friend, is dead. Try to understand. The real Hap died in the med pod, and Centcomp’s substituted something else—something of its own—for his soul or spirit or whatever you want to call it. When you’ve seen him, after you’ve been around him for a while, you’ll understand.”

“Then I ought to be outside, where I can see him,” Reis said practically, “not in here. But first—”

Jan screamed, a high-pitched wail of sheer terror that was deafening in the enclosed space of the sleep pod. Reis clapped his hand over her mouth and said, “Jesus! All right, if you don’t want to, we won’t. Promise you won’t do that again if I let you talk?”

Jan nodded, and he returned his hand to his side.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “It isn’t that I don’t like you, or that I’d never want to. I’ve been under such a terrible strain. You missed it. You were in the med pod, and you can’t know what it’s been like for us.”

“I understand,” Reis told her. “Oh, Hell, you know what I mean.”

“If Hap isn’t looking for us already, he will be soon. Or looking for me, anyway. He thinks you’re still in the med pod, unless Centcomp’s told him I took you out. Reis, you’ve got to believe me. He’s going to courtmartial and execute you; that’s what he said when Sid and I told him we’d put you in the pod.”

“You’re serious?”

“Reis, you don’t know what he’s like now. It doesn’t make any difference, we’re all going to die anyway, Sid and Paula and me. And Hap’s already dead.” Her voice threatened to slip from tears to hysteria.

“No, we’re not,” he told her. “Hap’s been having you fix the ship? He must have, if he’s talking about carrying out the mission.”

“Yes! We’ve got three engines running now, and the hull’s air-tight. We don’t know—Sid and I don’t know—whether we can count on Paula. If she sided with Hap it would be two against two, a man and a woman on each side, and...”

“Go on,” Reis said.

“But if you were with us, that would be two men and a woman on our side. We’d save the ship and we’d save our lives. Nobody would have to know—we’d tell them the truth, that Hap died in the hit.”

“You’re not telling *me* the truth,” Reis said. “If we’re going to handle this together, you’ve got to open up.”

“I am, Reis, I swear. Don’t you think I know this isn’t the time to lie?”

“Okay,” he said. “Then tell me who’s in the medical pod in Section Three. Is it Sid? Somebody’s in there, or you wouldn’t have brought it up.”

He waited, but Jan said nothing.

“Maybe Hap sleeps in there,” Reis hazarded. “Maybe he’s getting himself some additional treatment. You want me to pull the plug on him, but why can’t you do that yourself?”

“No. I don’t think he sleeps at all. Or...”

“Or what?”

“He’s got Nell with him—Sergeant Upson. Nell was in the pod, but she’s out now, and she stays with him all the time. I didn’t want to tell you, but there it is. Something else is in Three’s med pod. I don’t know who it was, but when it gets out we won’t have a chance.”

“Nell’s dead.” He recalled her floating body, its hideous stare.

“That’s right.”

“I see,” Reis said, and jerked back the lever that opened the sleep pod.

“Reis, you have to tell me. Are you with us or against us?”

He said, “You’re wrong, Jan. I don’t have to tell you one God-damned thing. Where’s Hap?”

“In Section Five, probably. He wants to get another engine on line.”

Reis launched himself toward the airlock, braked on the dog handles, and released them.

Section Three seemed normal but oddly vacant. He crossed to Centcomp's screen and wrote, *Present occ this med pod for vis check.*

ID flashed on the screen.

Lt. Wm. R. Reis.

REFUSED. RESUSCITATION UNDERWAY.

Behind him Jan said, "I tried that. Centcomp won't identify it either."

Reis shrugged and pushed off toward the emergency locker. Opening it, he tossed out breathing apparatus, the aid kit, a body bag, and a folding stretcher with tie-downs. Behind them was a steel emergency toolbox. He selected a crowbar and the largest screwdriver and jetted to the med pod.

TAMPERING WITH MEDICAL EQUIPMENT IS STRICTLY FORBIDDEN. RESUSCITATION UNDERWAY.

Reis jammed the blade of the screwdriver into the scarcely visible joint between the bulkhead and the pod, and struck the screwdriver's handle sharply enough with the crowbar to make his own weightless bodymass jump.

He let the crowbar float free, grasped the pod latch, and jerked the screwdriver down. That widened the crack enough for him to work one end of the crowbar into it.

Centcomp's screen caught his eye. It read, TAMPERING IS STRICTLY BILL STOP.

Reis said, "Jan, tell it to open the God-damned pod if it doesn't want me to mess with it."

Jan found the rat; but before she could write, the screen read, BILL, I CANNOT.

Jan gasped, "Oh, holy God," and it struck Reis that he had never heard her swear before. He said, "I thought you couldn't hear us, Centcomp. Wasn't that the story?"

I TRULY CANNOT, BILL, AND THAT IS NO STORY. BUT I MONITOR CONDITIONS EVERYWHERE IN THE SHIP. THAT IS MY JOB, AND AT TIMES I CAN READ YOUR LIPS. PARTICULARLY YOURS, BILL. YOU HAVE VERY GOOD, CLEAR LIP MOTION.

Reis heaved at the crowbar; tortured metal shrieked.

Jan said, "Centcomp will have told Hap. He and Nell are probably on their way up here right now.

I HAVE NOT, LIEUTENANT VAN JURE.

Reis turned to face the screen. "Is that the truth?"

YOU KNOW I AM INCAPABLE OF ANY DECEPTION, BILL. CAPTAIN HAPPLE IS ENGAGED IN A DELICATE REPAIR. I PREFER TO TAKE CARE OF THIS MATTER MYSELF IN ORDER THAT HE CAN PROCEED WITHOUT ANY INTERRUPTION.

"Watch the dogs—the moment they start going around, tell me."

"All right," Jan said. She had already pulled a wrench from the toolbox.

BILL, I DID NOT WANT TO TELL YOU THIS, YET I SEE I MUST.

Reis moved the crowbar to the left and pried again. “What is it?”

YOU SAID... ?

“I said what is it, God damn it! Stop screwing around and stalling. It’s not going to do you any good.”

BILL, IT REALLY WOULD BE BETTER IF YOU DID NOT OPEN THAT.

Reis made no reply. Pale blue light was leaking from the med pod through the crack; it looked as though there might be a lot of ultraviolet in it, and he turned his eyes away.

BILL, FOR YOUR OWN GOOD, DO NOT DO THAT.

Reis heaved again on the crowbar, and the latch broke. The pod rolled out, and as it did a nearly faceless thing inside sat up and caught his neck in skeletal hands. Section Three filled with the sickening sweetish smells of death and gangrene. Reis flailed at the half-dead thing with the crowbar; and its crooked end laid open a cheek, scattering stinking blood that was nearly black and exposing two rows of yellow teeth.

Evening was closing on Section Three. Night’s darkness pressed upon Reis; his hands were numb, the crowbar gone. Jan’s wrench struck the dead thing’s skull hard enough to throw her beyond the range of Reis’s narrowing vision. The bony fingers relaxed a trifle. Reis forced his own arms between the dead arms and tore the hands away.

Then Jan was back, her wrench rising and falling again and again. His crowbar was gone; but the tool box itself was within reach, with a D-shaped handle at one end. Reis grabbed it and hurled the box at the dead thing. It was heavy enough to send him spinning diagonally across the section, and it struck the head and chest of the dead thing and the end of the pod as well. For a split second Reis seemed to hear a wailing cry; the pod shot back until its bent and battered end was almost flush with the bulkhead.

Jan screamed as the airlock swung open; there was a rush of air and scorching blue flash. Something brushed Reis’s cheek. He could scarcely see, but he snatched at it and his still-numb fingers told him he held an emergency mask. He pushed it against his face, shut his eyes, and sucked in oxygen, feeling he drank it like wine. There was another searing burst of heat.

Long training and good luck put the manual control into his hands; he tore away the safety strap and spun the wheel. Driven by a fifty thousand p.s.i. hydraulic accumulator, the airlock door slammed shut, its crash echoing even in the depleted atmosphere of Section Three. Emergency air that Centcomp could not control hissed through the vents, and Reis opened his eyes.

Jan writhed near the airlock door, her uniform smoldering, one hand and cheek seared. The arm and welding gun of a mobile unit, sheared off at the second joint, floated not far from Jan. Reis sprayed her uniform with a CO2 extinguisher and smeared her face and hand with blue antibacterial cream.

“My eyes...” she gasped.

“You’ve been flashed,” Reis told her. He tried to keep his voice low and soothing. “Zapped by an electric arc. Open them, just for a minute, and tell me if you can see anything.”

“A little.”

“Good,” he told her. “Now shut them and keep them closed. After a while your vision should come back a bit more, and when we get home they can give you a retinal—”

His own dimmed sight had failed to note the spinning dogs. The hatch to Section Four swung back, and Hap floated in. His sunken cheeks and dull eyes carried the hideous stamp of death, and his movements were the swift, jerky gestures of a puppet; but he grinned at Reis and touched his forehead with the steel rod he carried. "Hi there, Bill boy."

Nell Upson followed Hap. Her lips seemed too short now to conceal her teeth; it was not until she raised her pistol that Reis felt certain she was not wholly dead. Sid Dawson and Paula lingered at the hatch until Nell waved them forward. Both were terrified and exhausted, Reis decided. There could not be much fight left in either—perhaps none.

"You're supposed to salute your captain, Bill. You didn't even return mine. If I were running a tight ship, I'd have my marine arrest you."

Reis saluted.

"That's better. A lot of things have changed while you've been out of circulation, Bill. We've got three engines going. We'll have a fourth up in another forty-eight hours, and we only needed six to break away from the inner planets. Out where we are now, four should be plenty. And that's not all—we've got more air and food per crewman now than we had when we left Earth."

Reis said, "Then there's no reason we can't continue the mission."

"Way to go, Bill! Know what's happened to this old ship of ours?"

Reis shrugged. "I think so, a little. But tell me."

"We've been seized, Bill boy. Taken over, possessed. It isn't Centcomp—did you think it was Centcomp? And it sure as Hell ain't me. It's something else, a demon or what they call an elemental; and it's in me; and in Centcomp; and in you, too. Whatever you want to call it, it's the thing that created the *Flying Dutchman* and so on, centuries ago. We're the first ghost ship of space. You're not buying this, are you, Bill boy?"

"No," Reis told him.

"But it's the truth. There's a ship headed for us, it's coming from Earth right now—I bet you didn't know that. I wonder just how long they'll be able to see us."

Reis spat. The little gray-brown globe of phlegm drifted toward Hap, who appeared not to notice it. "Bullshit," Reis said.

Nell leveled her pistol. The synthetic ruby lens at the end of the barrel caught the light for a moment, winking like a baleful eye.

"Can I tell you what's really happened?" Reis asked.

"Sure. Be my guest."

"Centcomp's brought back you and Nell at any and all cost, because that's what you programmed it to do. You were both too far gone, but Centcomp did it anyway. You've suffered a lot of brain damage, I think—you move like it—and I don't think you can keep going much longer. If you hit a dead man's arm with a couple of electrodes, his muscles will jump, but not forever."

Hap grinned again, mirthlessly. "Go on, Bill boy."

“Every time you look at yourself, you see what you are—what you’ve become—and you can’t face it. So you’ve made up this crazy story about the ghost ship. A ghost ship explains a dead captain and a dead crew, and a ghost ship never really dies; it goes on sailing forever.” Reis paused. As he had hoped, the minute reaction created by the act of spitting was causing him to float, ever so slowly, away from Hap and Nell.

Soon he would be caught in the draft from the main vent. It would move him to the left, toward the Section Two hatch; and if neither changed position, Nell would be almost in back of Hap.

“Now are you still going to court-martial me?” he asked. As he spoke, fresh cool air from the vent touched his cheek.

Hap said, “Hell, no. Not if-”

Nell’s boot was reaching for the edge of the Section Four hatch; in a moment more she would kick off from it.

It was now or never. Reis’s hand closed hard on the tube of antibacterial cream. A thick thread of bright blue cream shot into the space before Hap and Nell and writhed there like a living thing—a spectral monster or a tangle of blue maggots.

Nell fired.

The cream popped and splattered like grease in an overheated skillet, wrapping itself in dense black smoke. Alarms sounded. Through billowing smoke, Reis saw Dawson dart toward the airlock control.

Reis’s feet touched the bulkhead; he kicked backward, going for Hap in a long, fast leap. Hap’s steel bar caught his right forearm. He heard the snap of breaking bone as he went spinning through the rapidly closing Section Four hatch. A rush of air nearly carried him back into Three.

Then silence, except for the whisper from the vents. The alarms had stopped ringing. The hatch was closed; it had closed automatically, of course, when Centcomp’s detectors had picked up the smoke from the burning cream, closed just slowly enough to permit a crewman to get clear.

His right arm was broken, although the pain seemed remote and dull. He went to Section Four’s emergency locker and found a sling for it. It would not be safe to get in a med pod, he decided, even if Hap was gone; not until somebody reprogrammed Centcomp.

The hatchdogs spun. Reis looked around for something that could be used as a weapon, though he knew that his position was probably hopeless if either Hap or Nell had survived. There was a toolbox in this locker too, but his arm slowed him down. He was still wrestling with the stretcher when the hatch opened and Dawson came through.

Reis smiled. “You made it.”

Dawson nodded slowly without speaking. Jan entered; her eyes were closed, and Paula guided her with one hand.

Reis sighed. “You were able to catch hold of something. That’s good, I was worried about you. Paula too.”

Jan said, “Sid saved me. He reached out and snagged me as I flew past, otherwise I’d be out there in space. Paula saved herself but Hap and Nell couldn’t. It was just like you said: they didn’t have enough coordination left. You were counting on that, weren’t you? That Nell couldn’t hit you, couldn’t shoot

very well any more.”

“Yes,” Reis admitted. “Yes, I was; and I didn’t think Hap could swat me with that steel bar; but I was wrong.”

Jan said, “It doesn’t matter now.” She was keeping her eyes shut, but tears leaked from beneath their lids.

“No, it doesn’t. Hap and Nell are finally dead-truly dead and at rest. Sid, I never thought a hell of a lot of you, and I guess I let it show sometimes; but you saved Jan and you saved the ship. Hell, you saved us all. All of us owe you our lives.”

Dawson shook his head and looked away. “Show him, Paula.”

She had taken something shining, something about the size of a small notepad, from one of her pockets. Wordlessly, she held it up.

And Reis, looking at it, staring into it for a second or more before he turned away, looked into horror and despair.

It was a mirror.