

Allen Steele

*With the publication of his novel *Orbital Decay*-about the engineering and political problems that zero-g "beamjacks" overcome to build satellites in outer space-and its sequel *Lunar Descent*, Allen Steele earned comparisons to Robert Heinlein and established his credentials as a promising new writer of hard science fiction. Since then, Steele has set his novels aboard space stations (*Clarke County, Space*; *A King of Infinite Space*), in undersea research facilities (*Oceanspace*), and in an earthquake-devastated near-future *St. Louis* (*The Jericho Iteration*). *The Tranquillity Alternative* is set at a civilian-manned moon base in an alternate world where manned space flight occurred in 1984 and lunar colonization took place shortly thereafter. A prodigious writer of short fiction, some of which has been collected in *All-American Alien Boy* and *Rude Astronauts*, Steele is the author of the Hugo Award-winning stories "The Good Rat," "The Death of Captain Future," and "Where Angels Fear to Tread."*

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THE DEATH OF CAPTAIN FUTURE

Allen Steele

The name of Captain Future, the supreme foe of all evil and evildoers, was known to every inhabitant of the Solar System.

That tall, cheerful, red-haired young adventurer of ready laugh and flying fists was the implacable Nemesis of all oppressors and exploiters of the System's human and planetary races. Combining a gay audacity with an unswervable purposefulness and an unparalleled mastery of science, he had blazed a brilliant trail across the nine worlds in defense of the right.

-EDMONDHAMILTON,

Captain Future and the Space Emperor(1940)

THIS IS THE TRUE STORY of how Captain Future died.

We were crossing the inner belt, coasting toward our scheduled rendezvous with Ceres, when the message was received by the ship's comlink.

"Rohr . . . ? Rohr, wake up, please."

The voice coming from the ceiling was tall, dark, and handsome, sampled from one of the old Hercules vids in the captain's collection. It penetrated the darkness of my quarters on the mid-deck where I lay asleep after standing an eight-hour watch on the bridge.

I turned my head to squint at the computer terminal next to my bunk. Lines of alphanumeric code scrolled down the screen, displaying the routine systems-checks and updates that, as second officer, I was supposed to be monitoring at all times, even when I was off-duty and dead to the world. No red-bordered

emergency messages, though; at first glance, everything looked copacetic.

Except the time. It was 0335 Zulu, the middle of the goddamn night.

“Rohr?” The voice was a little louder now. “*Mister Furland? Please wake up. . . .*”

I groaned and rolled over. “Okay, okay, I’m awake. What’ dya want, Brain?”

The Brain. It was bad enough that the ship’s AI sounded like Steve Reeves; it also had to have a stupid name like The Brain. On every vessel on which I had served, crewmembers had given their AIs human names-Rudy, Beth, Kim, George, Stan, Lisa, dubbed after friends or family members or deceased shipmates-or nicknames, either clever or overused: Boswell, Isaac, Slim, Flash, Ramrod, plus the usual Hals and Datas from the nostalgia buffs. I once held down a gig on a lunar tug where the AI was called Fughead-as in *Hey, Fughead, gimme the traffic grid for Tycho Station* -but no one but a bonehead would give their AI a silly-ass moniker like The Brain.

No one but Captain Future, that is . . . and I still hadn’t decided whether or not my current boss was a bonehead, or just insane.

“*The captain asked me to awaken you,*” The Brain said. “*He wants you on the bridge at once. He says that it’s urgent.*”

I checked the screen again. “I don’t see anything urgent.”

“*Captain’s orders, Mr. Furland.*” The ceiling fluorescents began to slowly brighten behind their cracked and dusty panes, causing me to squint and clap my hand over my eyes. “*If you don’t report to the bridge in ten minutes, you’ll be docked one hour time-lost and a mark will be entered on your union card.*”

Threats like that usually don’t faze me-everyone loses a few hours or gains a few marks during a long voyage-but I couldn’t afford a bad service report now. In two more days the TBSA *Comet* would reach Ceres, where I was scheduled to join up with the *Jove Commerce*, outbound for Callisto. I had been lucky to get this far, and I didn’t want my next CO to ground me just because of a bad report from my previous captain.

“Okay,” I muttered. “Tell ’em I’m on my way.”

I swung my legs over the side and felt around for where I had dropped my clothes on the deck. I could have used a rinse, a shave, and a nice long meditation in the head, not to mention a mug of coffee and a muffin from the galley, but it was obvious that I wasn’t going to get that.

Music began to float from the walls, an orchestral overture that gradually rose in volume. I paused, my calves halfway into the trouser legs, as the strings soared upward, gathering heroic strength. German opera. Wagner. *The Flight of the Valkyries*, for God’s sake. . . .

“Cut it out, Brain,” I said.

The music stopped in mid-chord. “*The captain thought it would help rouse you.*”

“I’m roused.” I stood up and pulled my trousers the rest of the way on. In the dim light, I glimpsed a small motion near the corner of my compartment beside the locker; one moment it was there, then it was gone. “There’s a cockroach in here,” I said. “Wanna do something about it?”

“*I’m sorry, Rohr. I have tried to disinfect the vessel, but so far I have been unable to locate all the nests. If you’ll leave your cabin door unlocked while you’re gone, I’ll send a drone inside to . . .*”

“Never mind.” I zipped up my pants, pulled on a sweatshirt and looked around for my stikshoes. They were kicked under my bunk; I knelt down on the threadbare carpet and pulled them out. “I’ll take care of it myself.”

The Brain meant nothing by that comment; it was only trying to get rid of another pest which had found its way aboard the *Comet* before the freighter had departed from Lagrange Four. Cockroaches, fleas, ants, even the occasional mouse; they managed to get into any vessel that regularly rendezvoused with near-Earth spaceports, but I had never been on any ship so infested as the *Comet*. Yet I wasn’t about to leave my cabin door unlocked. One of a few inviolable union rules I still enjoyed aboard this ship was the ability to seal my cabin, and I didn’t want to give the captain a chance to go poking through my stuff. He was convinced that I was carrying contraband with me to Ceres Station, and even though he was right—two fifths of lunar mash whiskey, a traditional coming-aboard present for my next commanding officer—I didn’t want him pouring good liquor down the sink because of Association regulations no one else bothered to observe.

I pulled on my shoes, fastened a utility belt around my waist and left the cabin, carefully locking the door behind me with my thumbprint. A short, upward-curving corridor took me past the closed doors of two other crew cabins, marked CAPTAIN and FIRST OFFICER. The captain was already on the bridge, and I assumed that Jeri was with him.

A manhole led to the central access shaft and the carousel. Before I went up to the bridge, though, I stopped by the wardroom to fill a squeezebulb with coffee from the pot. The wardroom was a disaster: a dinner tray had been left on the table, discarded food wrappers lay on the floor, and a small spider-like robot waded in the galley’s sink, waging solitary battle against the crusty cookware that had been abandoned there. The captain had been here recently; I was surprised that he hadn’t summoned me to clean up after him. At least there was some hot coffee left in the carafe, although judging from its odor and viscosity it was probably at least ten hours old; I toned it down with sugar and half-sour milk from the fridge before I poured it into a squeezebulb.

As always, the pictures on the wardroom walls caught my eye: framed reproductions of covers from ancient pulp magazines well over a hundred years old. The magazines themselves, crumbling and priceless, were bagged and hermetically sealed within a locker in the Captain’s quarters. Lurid paintings of fishbowl-helmeted spacemen fighting improbable alien monsters and mad scientists that, in turn, menaced buxom young women in see-thru outfits. The adolescent fantasies of the last century—“Planets In Peril,” “Quest Beyond the Stars,” “Star Trail to Glory”—and above them all, printed in a bold swath across the top of each cover, a title . . .

CAPTAIN FUTURE

MAN OF TOMORROW

At that moment, my reverie was broken by a harsh voice coming from the ceiling:

“Furland! Where are you?”

“In the wardroom, Captain.” I pinched off the lip of the squeezebulb and sealed it with a catheter, then clipped it to my belt. “Just grabbing some coffee. I’ll be up there in a minute.”

“You got sixty seconds to find your duty station or I’ll dock your pay for your last shift! Now hustle your lazy butt up here!”

“Coming right now. . . .” I walked out of the wardroom, heading up the corridor toward the shaft. “Toad,” I whispered under my breath when I was through the hatch and out of earshot from the ship’s com-net.

Who's calling who lazy?

Captain Future, Man of Tomorrow. God help us if that were true.

Ten minutes later a small ship shaped like an elongated teardrop rose from an underground hangar on the lunar surface. It was the Comet, the superswift craft of the Futuremen, known far and wide through the System as the swiftest ship in space.

-HAMILTON, Calling Captain Future(1940)

My name's Rohr Furland. For better or worse, I'm a spacer, just like my father and his mother before him.

Call it family tradition. Grandma was one of the original beamjacks who helped build the first powersat in Earth orbit before she immigrated to the Moon, where she conceived my dad as the result of a one-night stand with some nameless moondog who was killed in a blowout only two days later. Dad grew up as an unwanted child in Descartes Station; he ran away at eighteen and stowed away aboard a Skycorp freighter to Earth, where he lived like a stray dog in Memphis before he got homesick and signed up with a Russian company looking for native-born selenians. Dad got home in time to see Grandma through her last years, fight in the Moon War on the side of the Pax Astra and, not incidentally, meet my mother, who was a geologist at Tycho Station.

I was born in the luxury of a two-room apartment beneath Tycho on the first anniversary of the Pax's independence. I'm told that my dad celebrated my arrival by getting drunk on cheap luna wine and balling the midwife who had delivered me. It's remarkable that my parents stayed together long enough for me to graduate from suit camp. Mom went back to Earth while Dad and I stayed on the Moon to receive the benefits of full citizenship in the Pax: Class A oxygen cards, good for air even if we were unemployed and dead broke. Which was quite often, in Dad's case.

All of which makes me a mutt, a true son of a bastard, suckled on air bottles and moonwalking before I was out of my diapers. On my sixteenth birthday, I was given my union card and told to get a job; two weeks before my eighteenth birthday, the LEO shuttle that had just hired me as a cargo handler touched down on a landing strip in Galveston, and with the aid of an exoskeleton I walked for the first time on Earth. I spent one week there, long enough for me to break my right arm by falling on a Dallas sidewalk, lose my virginity to an El Paso whore, and get one hell of a case of agoraphobia from all that wide-open Texas landscape. Fuck the cradle of humanity and the horse it rode in on; I caught the next boat back to the Moon and turned eighteen with a birthday cake that had no candles.

Twelve years later, I had handled almost every union job someone with my qualifications could hold-dock slob, cargo grunt, navigator, life support chief, even a couple of second-mate assignments-on more vessels than I could count, ranging from orbital tugs and lunar freighters to passenger shuttles and Apollo-class ore haulers. None of these gigs had ever lasted much longer than a year; in order to guarantee equal opportunity for all its members, the union shifted people from ship to ship, allowing only captains and first-mates to remain with their vessels for longer than eighteen months. It was a hell of a system; by the time you became accustomed to one ship and its captain, you were transferred to another ship and had to learn all over again. Or, worse, you went without work for several months at a time, which meant hanging around some spacer bar at Tycho Station or Descartes City, waiting for the local union rep to throw some other guy out of his present assignment and give you his job.

It was a life, but it wasn't much of a living. I was thirty years old and still possessed all my fingers and toes, but had precious little money in the bank. After fifteen years of hard work, the nearest thing I had to a permanent address was the storage locker in Tycho where I kept my few belongings. Between jobs, I lived in union hostels on the Moon or the elfives, usually occupying a bunk barely large enough to swing either a cat or a call-girl. Even the whores lived better than I did; sometimes I'd pay them just to let me

sleep in a decent bed for a change, and never mind the sex.

To make matters worse, I was bored out of my wits. Except for one cy-cleship run out to Mars when I was twenty-five, I had spent my entire career-hell, my entire life-running between LEO and the Moon. It's not a bad existence, but it's not a great one either. There's no shortage of sad old farts hanging around the union halls, telling big lies to anyone who'll listen about their glory days as beamjacks or moondogs while drinking away their pensions. I was damned if I would end up like them, but I knew that if I didn't get off the Moon real soon, I would be schlepping LOX tanks for the rest of my life.

Meanwhile, a new frontier was being opened in the outer system. Deep-space freighters hauled helium-3 from Jupiter to feed the fusion tokamaks on Earth, and although Queen Macedonia had placed Titan off-limits because of the Plague, the Iapetus colony was still operational. There was good money to be made from landing a gig on one of the big ships that cruised between the gas giants and the belt, and union members who found work on the Jupiter and Saturn runs had guaranteed three-year contracts. It wasn't the same thing as making another trip between Moon and LEO every few days. The risks were greater, but so was the payoff.

Competition for jobs on the outer-system ships was tight, but that didn't stop me from applying anyway. My fifteen-year service record, with few complaints from previous captains and one Mars run to my name, helped me put a leg up over most of the other applicants. I held down a job as a cargo grunt for another year while I waited, but the union eventually rotated me out and left me hanging in Sloppy Joe's Bar in Tycho. Six weeks later, just as I was considering signing up as a tractor operator on the Clavius Dome construction project, the word came: the *Jove Commerce* needed a new executive officer, and my name had been drawn from the hat.

There was only one hitch. Since the *Commerce* didn't come further in-system than Ceres, and because the union didn't guarantee passage to the belt as part of the deal, I would have to either travel aboard a clipper-out of the question, since I didn't have money-or find a temporary job on an outbound asteroid freighter.

Okay, I was willing to do that, but now there was another complication: few freighters had available gigs for selenians. Most vessels which operated in the main belt were owned by the Transient Body Shipping Association, and TBSA captains preferred to hire crewmembers from other ships owned by the co-op rather than from my union. Nor did they want to sign up some dude who would only be making a one-way trip, because they'd lose him on Ceres before the trip was half-over.

The predicament was explained to me by my union rep when I met with him in his office in Tycho. Schumacher was an old buddy; he and I had worked together aboard a LEO tugboat before the union had hired him as its Tycho Station representative, so he knew my face and was willing to cut me some slack.

"Look, Rohr," he said, propping his moccasins up on his desk, "here's the scoop. I've checked around for a boat that'll take you on, and I found what you were looking for. An Ares-class ore freighter, outbound for Ceres . . . in fact, she's already docked at Lagrange Four and is ready to launch as soon as her captain finds a new second."

As he spoke, Schumacher punched up a holo of the ship, and it revolved in the tank above his desk. It was a standard rock hauler: eighty-two meters in length, with a gas-core nuclear engine at one end and a drum-shaped crew module at the other, joined at the center by the long narrow spine and open cargo bays. An uprated tugboat, really; nothing about it was either unfamiliar or daunting. I took a slug off the whisky flask he had pulled out of his desk drawer. "Great. What's her name?"

He hesitated. "The TBSA *Comet*," he said reluctantly. "Her captain is Bo McKinnon."

I shrugged and passed the flask back to him. “So what’s the catch?”

Schumacher blinked. Instead of taking a hit off the whisky, he recapped the flask and shoved it back in the drawer. “Let me repeat that,” he said. “The *Comet*. Bo McKinnon.” He peered at me as if I had come down with Titan Plague. “You’re telling me you’ve never heard of him?”

I didn’t keep up with the TBSA freighters or their captains; they returned to the Moon only once every few months to drop off their cargo and change crews, so few selenians happened to see them unless they were getting drunk in some bar. “Not a clue,” I said.

Schumacher closed his eyes. “Terrific,” he murmured. “The one guy who’s never heard of Captain Future and it’s gotta be you.”

“Captain who?”

He looked back at me. “Look, just forget the whole thing, okay? Pretend I never mentioned it. There’s another rock hauler heading out to Ceres in about six or seven weeks. I’ll talk to the Association, try to get you a gig on that one instead. . . .”

I shook my head. “I can’t wait another six or seven weeks. If I’m not on Ceres in three months, I’ll lose the *Jove Commerce* job. What’s wrong with this gig?”

Schumacher sighed as he reached back into the drawer for the flask. “What’s wrong,” he said, “is the nut who’s in command. McKinnon is the worst captain in the Association. No one who’s shipped out with him has ever stayed aboard, except maybe the google he’s got for a first mate.”

I had to bite my tongue when he said that. We were pals, but racism isn’t an endearing trait. Sure, Superiors can be weird—their eyes, for starters, which was why some people called them by that name—but if you also use words like nigger, slant, kike or spic to describe people, then you’re no friend of mine.

On the other hand, when you’re hungry for work, you’ll put up with just about anything.

Schumacher read the expression on my face. “It’s not just that,” he said hastily. “I understand the first officer is okay.” *For a google, that is*, although he didn’t say it aloud. “It’s McKinnon himself. People have jumped ship, faked illness, torn up their union cards . . . anything to get off the *Comet* .”

“That bad?”

“That bad.” He took a long hit off the flask, gasped, and passed it back across the desk to me. “Oh, the pay’s okay . . . minimum wage, but by Association standards that’s better than union scale . . . and the *Comet* passes all the safety requirements, or at least so at inspection time. But McKinnon’s running a tank short of a full load, if y’know what I mean.”

I didn’t drink from the flask. “Naw, man, I don’t know what you mean. What’s with this . . . what did you call him?”

“Captain Future. That’s what he calls himself, Christ knows why.” He grinned. “Not only that, but he also calls his AI ‘The Brain’ . . .”

I laughed out loud. “The Brain? Like, what? He’s got a brain floating in a jar? I don’t get it. . . .”

“I dunno. It’s a fetish of some kind.” He shook his head. “Anyway, everyone who’s worked for him says that he thinks he’s some kinda space hero, and he expects everyone to go along with the idea. And he’s supposed to be real tough on people . . . you might think he was a perfectionist, if he wasn’t such a slob

himself.”

I had worked for both kinds before, along with a few weirdos. They didn't bother me, so long as the money was right and they minded their own business. “Ever met him?”

Schumacher held out his hand; I passed the flask back to him and he took another swig. Must be the life, sitting on your ass all day, getting drunk and deciding people's futures. I envied him so much, I hoped someone would kindly cut my throat if I was ever in his position.

“Nope,” he said. “Not once. He spends all his time on the *Comet*, even when he's back here. Hardly ever leaves the ship, from what I've been told . . . and that's another thing. Guys who've worked for him say that he expects his crew to do everything but wipe his butt after he visits the head. Nobody gets a break on his ship, except maybe his first officer.”

“What about him?”

“Her. Nice girl, name of . . .” He thought hard for a moment, then snapped his fingers. “Jeri. Jeri Lee-Bose, that's it.” He smiled. “I met her once, not long before she went to work on the *Comet*. She's sweet, for a google.”

He winked and dropped his voice a bit. “I hear she's got a thing for us apes,” he murmured. “In fact, I've been told she's bunking with her captain. If half of what I've heard about McKinnon is true, that must make him twice as sick as I've heard.”

I didn't reply. Schumacher dropped his feet and leaned across the desk, lacing his fingers together as he looked straight at me. “Look, Rohr,” he said, as deadly serious as if he were discussing my wanting to marry his sister, “I know you're working under a time limit and how much the *Jove Commerce* job means to you. But I gotta tell you, the only reason why Captain Future would even consider taking aboard a short-timer is because nobody else will work for him. He's just as desperate as you are, but I don't give a shit about him. If you wanna turn it down, I won't add it to your card and I'll save your place in line. It'll just be between you and me. Okay?”

“And if I turn it down?”

He waved his hand back and forth. “Like I said, I can try to find you another gig. The *Nickel Queen*'s due home in another six weeks or so. I've got some pull with her captain, so maybe I can get you a job there . . . but honest to Jesus, I can't promise anything. The *Queen*'s a good ship and everyone I know wants to work for her, just as much as nobody wants to get within a klick of the *Comet*.”

“So what do you suggest I do?”

Schumacher just smiled and said nothing. As my union rep, he was legally forbidden against making any decisions for me; as a pal, he had done his best to warn me about the risks. From both points of view, though, he knew I didn't have any real choice. I could spend three months aboard a ship run by a borderline psycho, or the rest of my life jacking off on the Moon.

I thought about it for a few moments, then I asked for the contract.

The three Futuremen who were Curt Newton's faithful, lifelong comrades made a striking contrast to their tall, red-haired young leader.

-HAMILTON, *The Comet Kings* (1942)

One-sixth gravity disappeared as I crawled through the carousel hatch and entered the bridge.

The *Comet*'s command center was located in the non-rotating forward deck of the crew module. The bridge was the largest single compartment in the ship, but even in freefall it was cramped: chairs, consoles, screens, emergency suit lockers, the central navigation table with its holo tank and, at the center of the low ceiling, the hemispherical bulge of the observation blister.

The ceiling lamps were turned down low when I came in-The Brain was mimicking Earth-time night-but I could see Jeri seated at her duty station on the far end of the circular deck. She looked around when she heard the hatch open.

"Morning," she said, smiling at me. "Hey, is that coffee?"

"Something like it," I muttered. She gazed enviously at the squeezebulb in my hand. "Sorry I didn't bring you any," I added, "but the Captain . . ."

"Right. I heard Bo yell at you." She feigned a pout which didn't last very long. "That's okay. I can get some later after we make the burn."

Jeri Lee-Bose: six-foot-two, which is short for a Superior, with the oversized dark blue eyes that give bioengineered spacers their unsavory nickname. Thin and flat-chested to the point of emaciation, the fingers of her ambidextrous hands were long and slender, her thumbs almost extending to the tips of her index fingers. Her ash-blond hair was shaved nearly to the skull, except for the long braid that extended from the nape of her neck nearly down to the base of her narrow spine, where her double-jointed legs began.

The pale skin of her face was marked with finely etched tattoos around her eyes, nose, and mouth, forming the wings of a monarch butterfly. She had been given these when she had turned five, and since Superiors customarily add another tattoo on their birthdays and Jeri Lee was twenty-five, pictograms covered most of her arms and her shoulders, constellations and dragons which weaved their way under and around the tank-top she wore. I had no idea of what else lay beneath her clothes, but I imagined that she was well on her way to becoming a living painting.

Jeri was strange, even for a Superior. For one thing, her kind usually segregate themselves from Primaries, as they politely call us baseline humans (or apes, when we're not around). They tend to remain within their family-based clans, operating independent satrapies that deal with the TBSA and the major space companies only out of economic necessity, so it's rare to find a lone Superior working on a vessel owned by a Primary.

For another thing, although I've been around Superiors most of my life and they don't give me the creeps like they do most groundhogs and even many spacers, I've never appreciated the aloof condescension the majority of them display around unenhanced humans. Give one of them a few minutes, and they'll bend your ear about the Superior philosophy of extropic evolution and all that jive. Yet Jeri was the refreshing, and even oddball, exception to the rule. She had a sweet disposition, and from the moment I had come aboard the *Comet*, she had accepted me both as an equal and as a new-found friend. No stuffiness, no harangues about celibacy or the unspirituality of eating meat or using profanity; she was a fellow crewmate, and that was that.

No. That wasn't quite all there was to it.

When one got past the fact that she was a scarecrow with feet that functioned as a second pair of hands and eyes the size of fuel valves, she was sensual as hell. She was a pretty woman, and I had become infatuated with her. Schumacher would have twitched at the thought of sleeping with a goole, but in three weeks since The Brain had revived us from the zombie tanks, there had been more than a few times when my desire to see the rest of her body exceeded simple curiosity about her tattoos.

Yet I knew very little about her. As much as I loved looking at her, that was surpassed by my admiration for her innate talent as a spacer. In terms of professional skill, Jeri Lee-Bose was one of the best First Officers I had ever met. Any Royal Navy, TBSA, or free-trader captain would have killed to sign her aboard.

So what the hell was she doing aboard a scow like the *Comet*, serving under a bozo like Bo McKinnon?

I tucked in my knees and did a half-gainer that landed the soles of my stikshoes against the carpet. Feet now firmly planted on the floor, I walked across the circular compartment to the nav table, sucking on the squeezebulb in my left hand. "Where's the captain?" I asked.

"Topside, taking a sextant reading." She nodded toward the observation blister above us. "He'll be down in a minute."

Typical. Part of the reason why Superiors have enhanced eyes is for optical work like sextant sightings. This should be Jeri's job, but McKinnon seemed to regard the blister as his personal throne. I sighed as I settled down in my chair and buckled in. "Should have known," I muttered. "Wakes you up in the middle of the goddamn night, then disappears when you want a straight answer."

Her mouth pursed into sympathetic frown. "Bo will tell you more when he comes down," she said, then she swiveled around in her chair as she returned her attention to her board.

Jeri was the only person aboard who was permitted to call Captain Future by his real name. I didn't have that privilege, and The Brain hadn't been programmed to do otherwise. The fondness I had developed for Jeri over the last three weeks was tempered by the fact that, in almost any disagreement, she usually sided with the captain.

Obviously, there was something else she knew but wasn't telling me, preferring to defer the issue to McKinnon. I had become used to such behavior over the last few months, but it was still irritating. Most first officers act as intermediaries between captain and crew, and in that sense Jeri performed well, yet at times like this I felt as if I had more in common with The Brain than with her.

So be it. I swiveled my chair to face the nav table. "Hey, Brain," I called out. "Gimme a holo of our current position and trajectory, please."

The space within the holo tank coruscated briefly, then an arch-shaped slice of the main belt appeared above the table. Tiny spots of orange light depicting major asteroids slowly moved along blue sidereal tracks, each designated by their catalog numbers. The *Comet* was pinpointed by a small silver replica of the vessel, leading the end of a broken red line which bisected the asteroid orbits.

The *Comet* was near the edge of the third Kirkwood gap, one of the "empty spaces" in the belt where Martian and Jovian gravitational forces caused the number of identified asteroids to diminish per fraction of an astronomical unit. We were now in the $1/3$ gap, about two and a half A.U.'s from the Sun. In another couple of days we would enter the main belt and be closing in on Ceres. Once we arrived, the *Comet* would unload the cargo it had carried from the Moon and, in return, take on the raw ore TBSA prospectors had mined from the belt and shipped to Ceres Station. It was also there that I was scheduled to depart the *Comet* and await the arrival of the *Jove Commerce*.

At least, that was the itinerary. Now, as I studied the holo, I noticed a not-so-subtle change. The red line depicting the freighter's trajectory had been altered since the end of my last watch about four hours earlier.

It no longer intercepted Ceres. In fact, it didn't even come close to the asteroid's orbit.

The *Comet* had changed course while I slept.

Without saying anything to Jeri, I unbuckled my harness and pushed over to the table, where I silently stared at the holo for a couple of minutes, using the keypad to manually focus and enlarge the image. Our new bearing took us almost a quarter of a million kilometers from Ceres, on just the other side of the ¹/₃Kirkwood gap.

“Brain,” I said, “what’s our destination?”

“*The asteroid 2046-Barr*,” it replied. It displayed a new orange spot in the tank, directly in front of the *Comet*’s red line.

The last of my drowsiness dissipated into a pulse of white-hot rage. I could feel Jeri’s eyes on my back.

“Rohr . . .” she began.

I didn’t care. I stabbed the intercom button on the table. “McKinnon!” I bellowed. “Get down here!”

Long silence. I knew he could hear me.

“Goddammit, get down here! Now!”

Motors whined in the ceiling above me, then the hatch below the observation blister irised open and a wingback chair began to descend into the bridge, carrying the commanding officer of the TBSA *Comet* . It wasn’t until the chair reached the deck that the figure seated in it spoke.

“You can call me . . . Captain Future.”

In the ancient pulp magazines he so adored, Captain Future was six-and-a-half feet in height, ruggedly handsome, bronze-skinned and red-haired. None of this applied to Bo McKinnon. Squat and obese, he filled the chair like a half-ton of lard. Black curly hair, turning gray at the temples and filthy with dandruff, receded from his forehead and fell around his shoulders, while an oily, unkempt beard dripped down the sides of his fat cheeks, themselves the color of mildewed wax. There were old food stains on the front of his worn-out sweatshirt and dark marks in the crotch of his trousers where he had failed to properly shake himself after the last time he had visited the head. And he smelled like a fart.

If my description seems uncharitable, let there be no mistake: Bo McKinnon was a butt-ugly, foul-looking son of a whore, and I have met plenty of slobs like him to judge by comparison. He had little respect for personal hygiene and fewer social graces, he had no business being anyone’s role model, and I was in no mood for his melodramatic bullshit just now.

“You changed course.” I pointed at the holo tank behind me, my voice quavering in anger. “We’re supposed to come out of the Kirkwood in another few hours, and while I was asleep you changed course.”

McKinnon calmly stared back at me. “Yes, Mister Furland, that I did. I changed the *Comet*’s trajectory while you were in your quarters.”

“We’re no longer heading for Ceres . . . Christ, we’re going to come nowhere near Ceres!”

He made no move to rise from his throne. “That’s correct,” he said, slowly nodding his head. “I ordered The Brain to alter our course so that we’d intercept 2046-Barr. We fired maneuvering thrusters at 0130 shiptime, and in two hours we’ll execute another course correction. That should put us within range of the asteroid in about . . .”

“Eight hours, Captain,” Jeri said.

“Thank you, Mister Bose,” he said, otherwise barely acknowledging her. “Eight hours. At this time the *Comet* will be secured for emergency action.”

He folded his hands across his vast stomach and gazed back at me querulously. “Any further questions, Mister Furland?”

Further questions?

My mouth hung agape for a few moments. I was unable to speak, unable to protest, unable to do anything except wonder at the unmitigated gall of this mutant amalgamation of human and frog genes.

“Just one,” I finally managed to say. “How do you expect me to make my rendezvous with the *Jove Commerce* if we detour to . . .”

“2046-Barr,” Jeri said softly.

McKinnon didn’t so much as blink. “We won’t,” he said. “In fact, I’ve already sent a message to Ceres Station, stating that the *Comet* will be delayed and that our new ETA is indefinite. With any luck, we’ll reach Ceres in about forty-eight hours. You should be able to . . .”

“No, I won’t.” I grasped the armrest of his chair with both hands and leaned forward until my face was only a few inches from his. “The *Jove* is due to leave Ceres in forty-two hours . . . and that’s at the latest, if it’s going to meet its launch window for Callisto. They’ll go, with or without me, and if they go without me, I’m stuck on Ceres.”

No. That wasn’t entirely true. Ceres Station wasn’t like the Moon; it was too small an outpost to allow a shipwrecked spacer to simply hang around until the next outer-system vessel passed through. The TBSA rep on Ceres would demand that I find a new gig, even if it entailed signing aboard a prospector as grunt labor. This was little better than indentured servitude, since my union card didn’t mean shit out here in terms of room, board, and guaranteed oxygen supplies; my paychecks would be swallowed up by all the above. Even then, there was no guarantee that I’d swing another job aboard the next Jupiter or Saturn tanker; I was lucky enough to get the *Jove Commerce* job.

That, or I could tuck tail and go back the way I came—and that meant remaining aboard the *Comet* for its return flight to the Moon.

In the latter case, I’d sooner try to walk home.

Try to understand. For the past three weeks, beginning with the moment I had crawled out of the zombie tank, I had been forced to endure almost every indignity possible while serving under Bo McKinnon. His first order, in fact, had been in the hibernation deck, when he had told me to take the catheter off his prick and hold a bag for him to pee in.

That had been only the beginning. Standing double-watches on the bridge because he was too lazy to get out of bed. Repairing decrepit equipment that should have been replaced years ago, only to have it break down again within a few more days after he had abused it past its tolerance levels. Being issued spurious orders on a whim, only to have those same orders countermanded before the task was half-complete because McKinnon had more scut-work he wanted me to do—then being berated because the first assignment had been left unfinished. Meals skipped because the captain decided that now was the time for me to go EVA and inspect the davits in the payload bay. Rest periods interrupted because he wanted a snack fetched from the galley and was too “busy” to get it himself. . . .

But most of all, the sibilant, high-pitched whine of his voice, like that of a spoiled brat who had been given too many toys by an overindulgent parent. Which was, indeed, exactly what he was.

Bo McKinnon hadn't earned his TBSA commission. It had been purchased for him by his stepfather, a wealthy lunar businessman who was one of the Association's principal stockholders. The *Comet* had been an obsolete ore freighter on the verge of being condemned and scuttled when the old man had bought it for the kid as a means of getting his unwanted stepson out of his hair. Before that, McKinnon had been a customs inspector at Descartes, a minor bureaucrat with delusions of grandeur fostered by the cheap space operas in his collection of moldering twentieth century magazines, for which he apparently spent every spare credit he had in the bank. No doubt his stepfather had been as sick of McKinnon as I was. At least this way the pompous geek spent most of his time out in the belt, hauling rock and bellowing orders at whoever was unlucky enough to have been talked into signing aboard the *Comet*.

This much I had learned after I had been aboard for three weeks. By the time I had sent a message to Schumacher, demanding to know what else he hadn't told me about Bo McKinnon, I was almost ready to steal the *Comet*'s skiff and attempt flying it to Mars. When Schumacher sent me his reply, he gave a lame apology for not telling me everything about McKinnon's background; after all, it was his job to muster crewmembers for deep-space craft, and he couldn't play favorites, so sorry, et cetera. . . .

By then I had figured out the rest. Bo McKinnon was a rich kid playing at being a spacecraft commander. He wanted the role, but he didn't want to pay the dues, the hard-won experience that any true commander has to accomplish. Instead, he managed to shanghai washed-up cases like me to do his dirty work for him. No telling what arrangement he had worked out with Jeri; for my part, I was the latest in a long line of flunkies.

I didn't hijack the skiff, if only because doing so would have ruined my career and Mars colonists are notoriously unkind to uninvited guests. Besides, I figured that this was a temporary thing: three weeks of Captain Future, and I'd have a story to tell my shipmates aboard the *Jove Commerce* as we sipped whisky around the wardroom table. You think this captain's a hardass? Hey, let me tell you about my last one. . . .

Now, as much as I still wanted to get the hell off the *Comet*, I did not wish to be marooned on Ceres, where I would be at the tender mercies of the station chief.

Time to try a different tack with Captain Future.

I released the armrests and backed off, taking a deep breath as I forced myself to calm down. "Look, Captain," I said, "what's so important about this asteroid? I mean, if you've located a possible lode, you can always stake a claim with the Association and come back for it later. What's the rush?"

McKinnon raised an imperious eyebrow. "Mr. Furland, I am not a prospector," he huffed. "If I were, I wouldn't be commanding the *Comet*, would I?"

No, I silently responded, you wouldn't. No self-respecting rock-hounds would have you aboard their ship. "Then what's so important?"

Without a word, McKinnon unbuckled his seat harness and pushed out his chair. Microgravity is the great equalizer for overweight men; he floated across the narrow compartment with the grace of a lunar trapeze artist, somersaulting in mid-air and catching a ceiling rung above the navigation table, where he swung upside-down and typed a command into the keyboard.

The holo expanded until 2046-Barr filled the tank. Now I could see that it was a potato-shaped rock, about three clicks in length and seven hundred meters in diameter. An octopus-like machine clung to one end of the asteroid, with a narrow, elongated pistol thrust out into space.

I recognized it immediately. A General Astronautics Class-B Mass Driver, the type used by the Association to push large carbonaceous-chondrite asteroids into the inner belt. In effect, a mobile mining rig. Long bores sunk into the asteroid extracted raw material from its core, which in turn were fed into the machine's barrel-shaped refinery, where heavy metals and volatiles were separated from the ancient stone. The remaining till was then shot through an electromagnetic railgun as reaction mass that propelled both asteroid and mass driver in whatever direction was desired.

By the time the asteroid reached lunar orbit, the rig would have refined enough nickel, copper, titanium, carbon, and hydrogen to make the effort worthwhile. The hollowed out remains of the asteroid could then be sold to one of the companies, who would then begin the process of transforming it into another LaGrange colony.

"That's the TBSA *Fool's Gold*," McKinnon said, pointing at the computer-generated image. "It's supposed to reach lunar orbit in four months. Twelve persons are aboard, including its captain, first officer, executive officer, physician, two metallurgists, three engineers . . ."

"Yeah, okay. Twelve guys who are going to get rich when the shares are divvied up." I couldn't keep the envy out of my voice. Only one or two main-belt asteroids made their way in-system every few years, mainly because prospectors didn't find enough such rocks to make them worth the time, money, and attention. The smaller ones were usually broken up by nukes, and anything much larger was claimed and mined by prospectors. On the other hand, if just the right asteroid was located and claimed, the bonanza was enough to make its finders wealthy enough to retire. "So what?"

McKinnon stared at me for a moment, then he cartwheeled until he was no longer upside-down and dug into a pocket. He handed me a wadded-up slip of printout. "Read," he said.

I read:

MESS. 1473 0118 GMT 7/26/73 CODE A1/0947

TRANSMISSION FROM CERES STATION TO ALL SPACECRAFT

PRIORITY REPEATER

MESSAGE BEGINS

MAYDAY RECEIVED 1240 GMT 7/25/46 FROM TBSA MASS DRIVER "FOOL'S GOLD" BREAK VESSEL EXPERIENCING UNKNOWN- REPEAT UNKNOWN-PROBLEMS BREAK CASUALTIES AND POSSIBLE FATALITIES REPORTED DUE TO UNDETERMINED CAUSES BREAK SHIP STATUS UNKNOWN BREAK NO FURTHER COMMUNICATION FOLLOWING MAYDAY BREAK VESSEL FAILS TO RESPOND TO QUERIES BREAK REQUEST URGENT ASSISTANCE

FROM NEAREST VESSEL OF ANY REGISTRY BREAK PLEASE RESPOND ASAP

MESSAGE ENDS

(TRANSMISSION REPEATS)

0119 GMT 7/26/73 CODE A1/0947

I turned to Jeri. "Are we the nearest vessel?"

She gravely nodded her head. "I checked. The only other ship within range is a prospector near Gaspara, and it's thirty-four hours from Barr. Everything else is closer to Ceres than we are."

Damn.

According to common law, the closest vessel to a spacecraft transmitting a Mayday was obligated to respond, regardless of any other mission or prior obligation in all but the most extreme emergency . . . and my job aboard the *Jove Commerce* didn't qualify as such, as much as I might have liked to think otherwise.

McKinnon held out his hand. I handed the paper back to him. "I guess you've already informed Ceres that we're on our way."

The captain silently reached to another panel and pushed a set of buttons. A flatscreen lit, displaying a playback of the transmission he had sent to Ceres Station. A simulacrum of the fictional Curt Newton appeared on the screen.

"This is Captain Future, calling from the TBSA Comet, registry Mexico Alpha Foxtrot one-six-seven-five." The voice belonged to McKinnon even if the handsome face did not. The Brain had lip-synched them together, and the effect was sadly absurd. I've received your transmission, and I'm on our way to investigate the situation aboard the Fool's Gold. The Futuremen and I will keep you informed. Captain Future, over and out."

I groaned as I watched this. The idiot couldn't keep his fantasy life out of anything, even a distress signal. Captain Future and the-yech!-Futuremen to the rescue.

"You have something to say, Mister Furland?"

McKinnon's hairy chin was thrust out at me with what he probably thought was obstinate resolve, but which actually resembled the petulance of an insecure child daring someone to step into his corner of the sandbox. Not for the first time, I realized that his only way of dealing with people was to boss them around with what little authority he could muster-and since this was his ship, no one could either object or walk out on him. Least of all me.

"Nothing, Captain." I pushed off from the nav table and floated back to my duty station. Like it or not, we were committed; he had both law and his commission on his side, and I wasn't about to commit mutiny because I had refused my commander's orders to respond to a distress signal.

"Very good." McKinnon shoved himself in the direction of the carousel hatch. "The sextant confirms we're on course for Barr. I'll be in my cabin if you need me."

He stopped, then looked over his shoulder. "You'll need to arm the weapons pod. There may be . . . trouble."

Then he was gone, undoubtedly to claim the sleep I had lost.

"Trouble, my ass," I murmured under my breath.

I glanced over at Jeri. If I expected a sly wink or an understanding smile, I received nothing of the kind. Her face was stoical behind the butterfly mask she wore; she touched her jaw, speaking into the microphone implanted beneath her skin at childhood. "TBSA *Fool's Gold*, this is TBSA *Comet*, Mexico Alpha Foxtrot one-six-seven-five. Do you copy? Over."

I was trapped aboard a ship commanded by a lunatic.

Or so I thought. The real insanity was yet to come.

Space pirates were no new thing, to the System. There were always some corsairs infesting the outlaw asteroids or the wilder moons of the outer planets.

-HAMILTON, *Outlaw World*(1945)

One good thing could be said about standing a second consecutive watch on the bridge: I finally learned a little more about Jeri Lee-Bose.

Does it seem surprising that I could have spent three weeks of active duty aboard a spacecraft without hearing a shipmate's entire life story? If so, understand that there's a certain code of conduct among spacers; since many of us have unsavory pasts that we'd rather not discuss, it's not considered proper etiquette to bug someone about private matters unless they themselves bring it up first. Of course, some shipmates will bore you to death, blabbing about everything they've ever said or done until you want to push them into the nearest airlock. On the other hand I've known several people for many years without ever learning where they were born or who their parents were.

Jeri fell into the latter category. After we were revived from biostasis, I had learned many little things about her, but not very many big things. It wasn't as if she was consciously hiding her past; it was simply that the subject had never really come up, during the few times that we had been alone together without Captain Future's presence looming over us. Indeed, she might have completed the voyage as a near-stranger, had I not made an offhand comment.

"I bet the selfish son-of-a-bitch has never thought of anyone else in his life," I said.

I had just returned from the galley, where I had fetched two fresh squeezebulbs of coffee for us. I was still fuming from the argument I had lost, and since McKinnon wasn't in earshot I gave Jeri an earful.

She passively sipped her coffee as I pissed and moaned about my misfortunes, listening patiently as I paced back and forth in my stikshoes, ranting about the commanding officer's dubious mental balance, his unflattering physiognomy, his questionable taste in literature, his body odor and anything else that came to mind, and when I paused for breath she finally put in her quarter-credit.

"He saved my life," she said.

That caught me literally off-balance. My shoes came unstuck from the carpet, and I had to grab hold of a ceiling handrail.

"Say what?" I asked.

Not looking up at me, Jeri Lee absently played with the squeezebulb in her left hand, her right foot holding open the pages of her personal logbook. "You said that he's never thought of anyone else in his life," she replied. "Whatever else you might say about him, you're wrong there, because he saved my life."

I shifted hands so I could sip my coffee. "Anything you want to talk about?"

She shrugged. "Nothing that probably hasn't occurred to you already. I mean, you've probably wondered why a google is serving as first officer aboard this ship, haven't you?" When my mouth gaped open, she smiled a little. "Don't look so surprised. We're not telepathic, rumors to the contrary . . . it's just that I've heard the same thing over the last several years we've been together."

Jeri gazed pensively through the forward windows. Although we were out of the Kirkwood gap, no asteroids could be seen. The belt is much less dense than many people think, so all we saw was limitless starscape, with Mars a distant ruddy orb off to the port side.

“You know how Superiors mate, don’t you?” she asked at last, still not looking at me.

I felt my face grow warm. Actually, I didn’t know, although I had frequently fantasized about Jeri helping me find out. Then I realized that she was speaking literally. “Prearranged marriages, right?”

She nodded. “All very carefully planned, in order to avoid inbreeding while expanding the gene pool as far as possible. It allows for some selection, of course . . . no one tells us exactly *whom* we should marry, just as long as it’s outside of our own clans and it’s not to Primaries.”

She paused to finish her coffee, then she crumpled the squeezebulb and batted it aside with her right foot. It floated in midair, finding its own miniature orbit within the compartment. “Well, sometimes it doesn’t work out that way. When I was twenty, I fell in love with a boy at Descartes Station . . . a Primary, as luck would have it. At least I thought I was in love. . . .”

She grimaced, brushing her long braid away from her delicate shoulders. “In hindsight, I guess we were just good in bed. In the long run it didn’t matter, because as soon as he discovered that he had knocked me up, he got the union to ship him off to Mars. They were only too glad to do so, in order to avoid . . .”

“A messy situation. I see.” I took a deep breath. “Leaving you stuck with his child.”

She shook her head. “No. No child. I tried to keep it, but the miscarriage . . . anyway, the less said about that, the better.”

“I’m sorry.” What else could I have said? She should have known better, since there had never been a successful crossbreeding between Superiors and Primaries? She had been young and stupid; both are forgivable sins, especially when they usually occur in tandem.

Jeri heaved a sigh. “It didn’t matter. By then, my family had disowned me, mainly because I had violated the partnership that had already been made for me with another clan. Both clans were scandalized, and as a result neither one wanted me.” She looked askance at me. “Bigotry works both ways, you know. You call us googles, we call you apes, and I had slept with an ape. An insult against the extropic ideal.”

She closed the logbook, tossed it from her left foot to her right hand, and tucked it into a web beneath the console. “So I was grounded at Descartes. A small pension, just enough to pay the rent, but nothing really to live for. I suppose they expected me to become a prostitute . . . which I did, for a short time . . . or commit ritual suicide and save everyone the sweat.”

“That’s cold.” But not unheard of. There were a few grounded Superiors to be found in the inner system, poor sad cases working at menial tasks in Lagranges or on the Moon. I remembered an alcoholic google who hung out at Sloppy Joe’s; he had eagle wings tattooed across his back, and he cadged drinks off tourists in return for performing cartwheels across the bar. An eagle with clipped tailfeathers. Every so often, one would hear of a Superior who checked out by walking into an airlock and pushing the void button. No one knew why, but now I had an answer. It was the Superior way.

“That’s extropy for you.” She laughed bitterly, then was quiet for a moment. “I was considering taking the long walk,” she said at last, “but Bo found me first, when I . . . well, propositioned him. He bought me a couple of drinks and listened to my story, and when I was done crying he told me he needed a new first officer. No one else would work for him, so he offered me the job, for as long as I cared to keep it.”

“And you’ve kept it.”

“And I’ve kept it,” she finished. “For the record, Mr. Furland, he has always treated me with the greatest of respect, despite what anyone else might have told you. I’ve never slept with him, nor has he ever demanded that I do so . . .”

“I didn’t . . . !”

“No, of course you haven’t, but you’ve probably wondered, haven’t you?” When I turned red, she laughed again. “Everyone who has worked the *Comet* has, and sometimes they like to tell stories about the google and the fat slob, fucking in his cabin between shifts.”

She smiled, slowly shaking her head. “It isn’t so . . . but, to tell the truth, if he ever asked, I’d do so without a second thought. I owe him that little.”

I didn’t say anything for a couple of minutes. It isn’t often when a shipmate unburdens his or her soul, and Jeri had given me much to consider. Not the least of which was the slow realization that, now more than before, I was becoming quite fond of her.

Before he had gone below, McKinnon had told me to activate the external missile pod, so I pushed myself over to his station and used that minor task to cover for my embarrassment.

Strapping on EMP to an Ares-class freighter was another example of McKinnon’s overheated imagination. When I had once asked why, he’d told me that he’d purchased it as war surplus from the Pax Astra Royal Navy back in ’71, after the hijacking of the TBSA *Olympia*. No one had ever discovered who had taken the *Olympia* -indeed, the hijack wasn’t discovered until five months later, when the uncrewed solar-sail vessel arrived at Ceres Station with its cargo holds empty-but it was widely believed to be the work of indie prospectors desperate for food and various supplies.

I had to cover my smile when McKinnon told me that he was worried about “pirates” trying to waylay the *Comet*. Having four 10k nukes tucked behind the *Comet*’s cargo section was like arming a gig with heatseekers. Not that McKinnon wouldn’t have loved it if someone *did* try to steal his ship-Captain Future meets the Asteroid Pirates and all that-but I was worried that he might open fire on some off-course prospector ship that was unlucky enough to cross his path.

Another thought occurred to me. “When he picked you . . . um, when you signed on as First Officer . . . were you aware that he doesn’t have a firm grip on reality?”

Jeri didn’t answer immediately. I was about to repeat myself when I felt a gentle nudge against my arm. Looking down, I saw her left foot slide past me, its thumb-sized toes toggling the MISSILE STANDBY switch I had neglected to throw.

“Sure,” she said. “In fact, he used to call me Joan . . . as in Joan Ran-dall, Curt Newton’s girlfriend . . . until I got him to cut it out.”

“Really?”

“Um-hmm.” She rested her right leg against the back of my chair. “Consider yourself lucky he doesn’t call you Otho or Grag. He used to do that to other crewmen until I told him that no one got the joke.” She grinned. “You ought to try reading some of those stories sometime. He’s loaded them into The Brain’s library annex. Not great literature, to be sure . . . in fact, they’re rather silly . . . but for early twentieth century science fiction, they’re . . .”

“Science what?”

“Science fiction. What they used to call fantasy back . . . well, never mind.” She pulled her leg back and

folded it beneath her bottom as she gazed again out the window. “Look, I know Bo can be weird most of the time, but you have to realize that he’s a romantic stuck in an age where most people don’t even know what the word means anymore. He wants derring-do, swashbuckling, great adventure . . . he wants to be a hero.”

“Uh-huh. Bo McKinnon, space hero.” I tried to transpose him on the magazine covers he had framed in the galley: wielding a ray gun in each hand, defending Jeri from ravaging monsters. It didn’t work, except to make me stifle a chuckle.

“That isn’t too much to ask for, is it?” There was sadness in her eyes when she glanced my way. Before I could get the grin off my face, she returned her gaze to the windows. “Perhaps so. This isn’t an age of heroes. We move rock back and forth across the system, put money in the bank, and congratulate ourselves for our ingenuity. A hundred years ago, what we’re doing now was the stuff of dreams, and the people who did it were larger than life. That’s what he finds so attractive in those stories. But now . . .”

She let out her breath. “Who can blame Bo for wanting something he can’t have? He’s stuck on a second-hand freighter with an ex-whore for a first officer and a second officer who openly despises him, and he’s the butt of every joke from Earth to Iapetus. No wonder he drops everything to answer a Mayday. This may be the only chance he gets.”

I was about to retort that my only chance to get a job on a decent ship was slipping through my fingers when her console double-beeped. A moment later, The Brain’s voice came through the ceiling speaker.

“Pardon me, but we’re scheduled for course correction maneuvers. Do you wish for me to execute?”

Jeri swiveled her chair around. “That’s okay, Brain. We’ll handle it by manual control. Give me the coordinates.”

The AI responded by displaying a three-dimensional grid on her flatscreens. “Want me to do anything?” I asked, although it was obvious that she had matters well in hand.

“I’ve got everything covered,” she said, her long fingers typing in the coordinates. “Get some sleep, if you want.” She cast a quick grin over her shoulder. “Don’t worry. I won’t tell Bo you dozed off in his chair.”

End of conversation. Besides, she had a good idea. I cranked back the chair, buckled the seat belt and tucked my hands in my pockets so they wouldn’t drift around in freefall. It might be a while before I got another chance; once we reached 2046-Barr, Captain Future would be back on deck, bellowing orders and otherwise making my life painful.

She had told me a lot about Bo McKinnon, but nothing I had heard gave me much affection for the man. So far as I was concerned, he was still the biggest dork I had ever met . . . and if there was anyone aboard the TBSA *Comet* who deserved my sympathy, it was Jeri Lee-Bose, who was meant for better things than this.

As I shut my eyes, it occurred to me that the captain’s chair fitted me a lot better than it did McKinnon. One day, perhaps I’d have enough money in the bank to buy him out. It would be interesting to see if he took orders as well as he gave them.

It was a warm and comforting thought, and I snuggled against it like a pillow as I fell asleep.

“Look, Arraj-it is a meteor!” cried the younger Martian excitedly. “And there’s a ship guiding it!”

The two stared for a moment at the incredible spectacle. The expanding black spot was

clearly a giant meteor, rushing now at tremendous speed toward Mars. And close beside the booming meteor rushed a dark spaceship, playing rays upon the great mass. The ship was propelling the meteor toward Mars.

-HAMILTON, Captain Future's Challenge(1940)

Several hours later, the *Comet* rendezvoused with 2046-Barr.

The asteroid looked much the same as the holo tank had depicted it-an enormous rock the color of charcoal-but the *Fool's Gold* itself was the largest spacecraft I had ever seen short of a Lagrange colony. It dwarfed the *Comet* like a yacht parked alongside an ocean liner, a humongous machine attached to one end of the asteroid's mass.

A humongous machine, and apparently lifeless. We approached the mass-driver with great caution, being careful to avoid its stern lest we get nailed by the stream of debris being constantly ejected by its railgun. That was the only apparent sign of activity; although light gleamed from the portals of the rotating command sphere, we could detect no motion within the windows, and the radio remained as silent as it had been for the last eighteen hours.

"Look yonder." I pointed through the window at the hangar bay, a wide berth within the barrel-shaped main hull just forward of the railgun. Its doors were open, and as the *Comet* slowly cruised past we could see the gig and service pods parked in their cradles. "Everything's there. Even the lifeboats are still in place."

Jeri angled the camera on the outrigger telemetry boom until it peered into the bay. Her wide eyes narrowed as she studied a close-up view on a flatscreen. "That's weird," she murmured. "Why would they depressurize the bay and open the doors if they didn't . . . ?"

"Knock it off, you two!"

McKinnon was strapped in his chair, on the other side of Jeri Lee's duty station from mine. "It doesn't matter why they did it. Just keep your eyes peeled for pirates . . . they could be lurking somewhere nearby."

I chose to remain silent as I piloted the *Comet* past the mass-driver's massive anchor-arms and over the top of the asteroid. Ever since McKinnon had returned to the bridge an hour ago-following the shower and leisurely breakfast I myself had been denied-he had been riding his favorite hobby horse: asteroid pirates had seized control of the *Fool's Gold* and taken its crew hostage.

This despite the fact that we had not spotted any other spacecraft during our long journey and that none could now be seen in the vicinity of the asteroid. It could also be logically argued that the four-person crew of a prospector ship would have a hard time overcoming the twelve-person crew of a mass-driver, but logic meant little to Captain Future. His left hand rested on the console near the EMP controls, itching to launch a nuke at the pirate ship he was certain to find lurking in the asteroid's shadow.

Yet, when we completed a fly-by of 2046-Barr, none were to be found. In fact, nothing moved at all, save for the asteroid itself. . . .

A thought occurred to me. "Hey, Brain," I said aloud, "have you got a fix on the mass-driver's position and bearing?"

"Affirmative, Mr. Furland. It is X-ray one-seven-six, Yankee two . . ."

"Mr. Furland!" McKinnon snapped. "I didn't give orders for you to . . ."

I ignored him. "Skip the numbers, Brain. Just tell me if it's still on course for cislunar rendezvous."

A momentary pause, then: "*Negative, Mr. Furland. The Fool's Gold has altered its trajectory. According to my calculations, there is a seventy-two-point-one probability that it is now on collision course with the planet Mars.*"

Jeri went pale as she sucked in her breath, and even McKinnon managed to shut up. "Show it to me on the tank," I said as I turned my chair around to face the nav table.

The tank lit, displaying a holographic diagram of the *Fool's Gold*'s present position in relationship with the Martian sidereal-hour. Mars still lay half an A.U. away, but as The Brain traced a shallow-curving orange line through the belt, we saw that it neatly intercepted the red planet as it advanced on its orbit around the Sun.

The Brain translated the math it had displayed in a box next to the three-dimensional grid. "*Assuming that its present delta-vee remains unchecked, in two hundred and thirty-six hours, twelve minutes, and twenty-four seconds, 2046-Barr will collide with Mars.*"

I did some arithmetic in my head. "That's about ten days from now."

"*Nine-point-eight-three Earth standard days, to be exact.*" The Brain expanded the image of Mars until it filled the tank; a bull's-eye appeared at a point just above the equator. "*Estimated point of impact will be approximately twelve degrees North by sixty-three degrees West, near the edge of the Lunae Planum.*"

"Just north of Valles Marineris," Jeri said. "Oh God, Rohr, that's near . . ."

"I know." I didn't need a refresher course in planetary geography. The impact point was in the low plains above Mariner Valley, only a few hundred clicks northeast of Arsia Station, not to mention closer to the smaller settlements scattered around the vast canyon system. For all I knew, there could now be a small mining town on the Lunae Planum itself; Mars was being colonized so quickly these days, it was hard to keep track of where a bunch of its one and a half million inhabitants decided to pitch claims and call themselves New Chattanooga or whatever.

"Sabotage!" McKinnon yelled. He unbuckled his harness and pushed himself closer to the nav table, where he stared at the holo. "Someone has sabotaged the mass-driver so that it'll collide with Mars! Do you realize . . . ?"

"Shut up, Captain." I didn't need his histrionics to tell me what would occur if . . . *when* . . . 2046-Barr came down in the middle of the Lunae Planum.

The Martian ecosystem wasn't as fragile as Earth's. Indeed, it was much more volatile, as the attempt in the '50s to terraform the planet and make the climate more stable had ultimately proved. However, the Mars colonists who still remained after the boondoggle had come to depend upon its seasonal patterns in order to grow crops, maintain solar farms, continue mining operations and other activities which insured their basic survival.

It was a very tenuous sort of existence that relied upon conservative prediction of climatic changes. The impact of a three-kilometer asteroid in the equatorial region would throw all that straight into the compost toilet. Localized quakes and duststorms would only be the beginning; two or three hundred people might be killed outright, but the worst would be yet to come. The amount of dust that would be raised into the atmosphere by the collision would blot out the sky for months on end, causing global temperatures to drop from Olympus Mons to the Hellas Plantia. As a result, everything from agriculture to power supplies would be affected, to put it mildly, with starvation in the cold and dark awaiting most of the survivors.

It wasn't quite doomsday. A few isolated settlements might get by with the aid of emergency relief efforts from Earth. But as the major colony world of humankind, Mars would cease to exist.

McKinnon was still transfixed upon the holo tank, jabbing his finger at Mars while raving about saboteurs and space pirates and God knows what else, when I turned back to Jeri. She had taken the helm in my absence, and as the *Comet* came up on the *Fool's Gold* again, I closely studied the mass-driver on the flatscreens.

"Okay," I said quietly. "The hangar bay is out . . . we can't send the skiff in there while it's depressurized and the cradles are full. Maybe if we . . ."

She was way ahead of me. "There's an auxiliary docking collar here," she said, pointing to a port on the spar leading to the command sphere. "It'll be tight, but I think we can squeeze us in there."

I looked at the screen. Tight indeed. Despite the fact that the *Comet* had a universal docking adapter, the freighter wasn't designed for mating with a craft as large as *Fool's Gold*. "That's cutting it close," I said. "If we can collapse the telemetry boom, though, we might be able to make it."

She nodded. "We can do that, no problem . . . except it means losing contact with Ceres."

"But if we don't hard-dock," I replied, "then someone's got to go EVA and try entering a service airlock."

Knowing that this someone would probably be me, I didn't much relish the idea. An untethered spacewalk between two vessels under acceleration is an iffy business at best. On the other hand, cutting off our radio link with Ceres under these circumstances was probably not a good idea. If we fucked up in some major way, then no one at Ceres Station would be informed of the situation, and early warning from Ceres to Arsia Station might save a few lives, if evacuation of settlements near Lunae Planum was started soon enough.

I made up my mind. "We'll hard-dock," I said, turning in my seat toward the communications console, "but first we send a squib to Ceres, let them know what's . . ."

"Hey! What are you two doing?"

Captain Future had finally decided to see what the Futuremen were doing behind his back. He kicked off the nav table and pushed over to us, grabbing the backs of our chairs with one hand each to hover over us. "I haven't issued any orders, and nothing is done on my ship without my . . ."

"Bo, have you been listening to what we've been saying?" Jeri's expression was carefully neutral as she stared up at him. "Have you heard a word either Rohr or I have said?"

"Of course I . . .!"

"Then you know that this is the only recourse," she said, still speaking calmly. "If we don't hard-dock with the *Gold*, then we won't have a chance of shutting down the railgun or averting its course."

"But the pirates. They might . . .!"

I sighed. "Look, get it through your head. There's no . . ."

"Rohr," she interrupted, casting me a stern look that shut me up. When I dummied up once more, she transfixed McKinnon again with her wide blue eyes. "If there are pirates aboard the *Gold*," she said patiently, "we'll find them. But right now, this isn't something we can solve by firing missiles. Rohr's right. First, we send a squib to Ceres, let them know what's going on. Then . . ."

“I know that!”

“Then, we have to dock with . . .”

“I know that! I know that!” His greasy hair scattered in all directions as he shook his head in frustration. “But I didn’t . . . I didn’t give the orders and . . .”

He stopped, sullenly glaring at me with inchoate rage, and I suddenly realized the true reason for his anger. McKinnon’s subordinate second officer, whom he had harassed and chastised constantly for three weeks, had become uppity by reaching a solution that had evaded him. Worse yet, the second officer had done it with the cooperation of the Captain’s first officer, who had tacitly agreed with him on all previous occasions.

Yet this wasn’t a trifling matter such as checking the primary fuel pump or cleaning the galley. Countless lives were at stake, time was running out, and while he was spewing obvious nonsense about space pirates, Mister Furland was trying to take command of his ship.

Had I a taser conveniently tucked in my belt, I would have settled the argument by giving him a few volts and strapping his dead ass in his precious chair, thereby allowing Jeri Lee and me to continue our work unfettered. But since outright mutiny runs against my grain, compromise was my only weapon now.

“Begging your pardon, Captain,” I said. “You’re quite right. You haven’t issued orders, and I apologize.”

Then I turned around in my chair, folded my hands in my lap, and waited.

McKinnon sucked in his breath. He stared through the windows at the *Fool’s Gold*, looked over his shoulder once more at the holo tank, weighing the few options available against the mass of his ego. After too many wasted seconds, he finally reached a decision.

“Very well,” he said. He let go of our chairs and shoved himself back to his accustomed seat. “Ms. Bose, prepare to dock with the *Fool’s Gold*. Mr. Furland, ready the main airlock hatch and prepare to go EVA.”

“Aye, sir,” Jeri said.

“Um, yeah . . . aye, sir.”

“Meanwhile, I’ll send a message to Ceres Station and inform them of the situation before we lose contact.” Satisfied that he had reached a proper decision, he laid his hands on the armrest. “Good work, Futuremen,” he added. “You’ve done well.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Jeri said.

“Aye, sir. Thank you.” I unbuckled my seat harness and pushed off toward the bridge hatch, trying hard not to smile.

A little victory. Insignificant as it then seemed, I didn’t have any idea how much my life depended upon it.

He took the pilot chair and headed the Comet across the zone toward the computed position of the invisible asteroid.

“They’ll surely see us approaching!” Ezra warned. “The Magician of Mars will be taking no chances, Cap’n Future!”

“We’re going to use a stratagem to get onto that asteroid without him suspecting,” Curt informed. “Watch.”

-HAMILTON, *The Magician of Mars*(1941)

I'm a creature of habit, at least when it comes to established safety procedures, and so it was out of habit that I donned an EVA suit before I cycled through the *Comet*'s airlock and entered the *Fool's Gold*.

On one hand, wearing the bulky spacesuit within a pressurized spacecraft is stupidly redundant, and the panel within the airlock told me that there was positive pressure on the other side of the hatch. Yet it could be argued the airlock sensors might be out of whack and there was nothing but hard vacuum within the spar; this has been known to happen before, albeit rarely, and people have died as a result. In any case, the *Astronaut's General Handbook* says that an EVA suit should be worn when boarding another craft under uncertain conditions, and so I followed the book.

Doing so saved my life.

I went alone, leaving Jeri and McKinnon behind inside the freighter. The hatch led past the *Gold*'s airlock into the spar's access tunnel, all of which was vacant. Switching on the helmet's external mike, I heard nothing but the customary background hum of the ventilation system, further evidence that the vessel crew compartments were still pressurized.

At that point, I could well have removed my helmet and hung it from a strap on my utility belt. In fact, the only reason I didn't was that I didn't want it banging around as I went through the carousel, which lay at the end of the tunnel to my right. Besides, the stillness of the tunnel gave me the chills. Surely someone would have noticed the unscheduled docking of an Ares-class freighter, let alone one so far from Ceres. Why wasn't there an officer waiting at the airlock to chew me out for risking collision with his precious ship?

The answer came after I rotated through the carousel and entered the rotating command sphere. That's when I found the first corpse.

A naked man hung upside down through an open manhole, his limp arms dangling above the wide pool of blood on the deck. It was difficult to see his face, because the blood that had dyed it crimson came from a scimitar-shaped gash in his neck. Looking up through the manhole, I saw that his feet had been neatly lashed together with a bungee cord, which in turn was tied to a conduit in the ceiling of the corridor directly above.

Since there were no bloodstains below his shoulders, it was obvious that his throat had been slit after he had been hung from the conduit. The blood was dry-most of it, anyway-and the body was stiff. He had been here for quite some time.

I reported what I found to Jeri and McKinnon, and then I gingerly pushed the body out of the way and continued down the corridor.

Please understand if everything I tell you sounds coldly methodical, even callous. First, if you've worked in space as long as I have-that is, all my life-then death, no matter how horrible it may be, is no stranger. The first time I saw a man die was when I was nine years old, when a one-in-a-million micrometeorite punched through the helmet faceplate of one of my school teachers while he was leading us on a field trip to the Apollo 17 landing site at Taurus Lithrow. Since then, I've seen the grisly results of explosive decompression, fatal radiation overexposure, freak mining accidents, careless suit-up procedures, hull fires and electrocutions, even someone who choked on his own vomit after consuming too much bathtub vodka during a birthday party. Death comes to us all, eventually; if you're careful and wise, all you can do is make sure that it isn't too painful and no one is stuck with a mess to clean up.

Second: if I attempted now to describe each and every body I discovered as I made my way through

the *Fool's Gold*, not only would the result be gratuitous pandering to those who wallow in such details, but I would never be able to complete this testimony.

To put it succinctly, the command sphere of the *Fool's Gold* was a slaughterhouse.

I found ten more bodies, each more gruesome than the last. They were in crew cabins and passageways, in the galley and in the head, in the rec room and the quartermaster's office.

Most were alone, but two of them were together, each apparently dead from wounds they had inflicted upon one another: a man and a woman, who had tried to carve each other up with knives they had taken from the nearby galley.

A couple of the bodies were nude, like the first, but most were fully or partially clothed. For the most part, they had died of stabbing or bludgeon wounds, by means of anything that could be used as a weapon, whether it be a ballpoint pen, a screwdriver, or a pipefitter's wrench.

One woman was lucky. She had committed suicide by hanging herself by a coiled bedsheet she had cast over the top of a door. I hope that she had successfully strangled herself before whoever found her body seared off her right arm with the cutting torch cast nearby.

As I climbed up ladders, poked my helmet through hatches, and stepped over stiffening corpses, I kept up a running monologue, informing the *Comet* of where I exactly was within the vessel and what I had just found. I made no speculation as to why this massacre had taken place, only to note that the bodies seemed reasonably fresh and that most of the bloodstains were dry.

And blood lay everywhere. It was splattered across walls and soaked into carpets and dripping from wall fixtures, until it no longer resembled blood and just looked like spilled red paint. I was glad I had my helmet on, because the visor helped distance me from the carnage, and the rank odor would have made me even more sickened than I was now.

Although I heard an occasional gasp or exclamation from Jeri through my headset, after a while I couldn't detect McKinnon's voice any longer. I assumed that he had gone someplace private to vomit. This was understandable; the violence around me was mind shattering.

There were four decks in the command sphere, one above the other. By the time I reached the top deck, I had counted eleven corpses. Remembering that McKinnon had told me earlier that the crew complement of the *Fool's Gold* was twelve, I had begun to wonder where the last body lay.

The hatch leading to the bridge was sealed shut; I used the laser welding torch from my belt to cut the lock. When I grasped the lockwheel and prized it open, it made a faint grinding noise, and it was at that moment that I heard a methodical, almost rhythmic thumping, as if something were being beaten against a bulkhead.

I first thought it was another background noise from the vessel itself, but when I pushed the hatch farther open, the noise it made interrupted the rhythm.

I stopped, holding the hatch ajar as I listened intently. I heard a faint giggle, then the thumping sound recommenced.

Someone was alive within the bridge.

The command center was dimly lit, the fluorescents switched off; the only light came from computer displays, flatscreens, and multicolored switches. The deck was in ruins, as if there had been a blowout, although the external pressure gauge told me it was still pressurized: upended chairs, ripped logbooks and

manuals strewn across the floor, the remains of a bloody shirt.

The thumping continued. Seeking its unseen source, I switched on the helmet lamp and walked within its beam, my eyes darting back and forth as I searched for the sole survivor of the *Fool's Gold*. I was halfway across the bridge when my eye caught something scrawled across a bulkhead. Two words, fingerpainted in blood across the gray surface:

PLAGUE

TITAN

It was then that I knew that wearing an EVA suit had saved my life.

Trembling within its insulated layers, I crossed the deserted bridge, looking for the last remaining crewmember of the *Fool's Gold*.

I found him in the emergency airlock, huddled in a corner next to the hatch, his knees drawn up to his chin. The jumpsuit he wore was streaked with gore, but I could still make out the captain's stars on its epaulets. His wary eyes winced from the glare of my lamp, and he giggled like a small child who had been caught exploring his mother's dresser drawers.

And then he continued to beat at the deck with the severed human arm he grasped in his left hand.

I don't know how long I stared at him. A few seconds, several minutes, perhaps longer. Jeri was saying something I couldn't understand; I paid no attention, nor could I respond. It wasn't until I heard another noise—from behind me, the faint sound of the hatch being shoved open—that I tore my eyes away from the mad captain of the *Fool's Gold*.

Bo McKinnon.

He had followed me from the *Comet*.

And, like the idiot he was, he wasn't wearing an EVA suit.

The little teardrop ship, the Comet, blasted at top speed toward the Earth and its summoning call. Captain Future thought somberly of the many times he had answered that call. Each time, he and the Futuermen had found themselves called on to battle deadly perils. Was it to be the same this time?

"We can't always win," he thought grimly. "We've been lucky, but the law of averages eventually has to turn against us."

-HAMILTON, *The Triumph of Captain Future* (1940)

Despite the name, no one knows the exact origin of the Titan Plague. It was first contracted by members of the *Herschel Explorer* expedition of 2069, during the Pax's ill-fated attempt to establish a research outpost on Titan. Although it was later theorized that the virus was indigenous to Titan itself, the fact that it thrived in an oxygen-nitrogen environment led many people to speculate that the Plague had originated somewhere other than Titan's nitrogen-methane atmosphere. There was even hearsay that the expedition had encountered an extrasolar race on Titan and that the Plague had been passed from Them . . . but, of course, that was just rumor.

Regardless, the indisputable facts are these: by the time the *PARNHerschel Explorer* returned to the inner system, the majority of its crew had been driven insane by an airborne virus. The only reason why the

three surviving expedition members, including the ship's commander, were not infected was that they had managed to seal themselves within the command center, where they survived on emergency oxygen supplies and carefully rationed food and water. Most of the unquarantined members butchered each other during the long voyage home; those who did not died in agony when the disease rotted their brains in its terminal stages.

Once the *Herschel Explorer* reached the asteroid belt, the survivors parked it in orbit around Vesta, then used a lifeboat to escape. Three months later, the *Herschel Explorer* was scuttled by the PARN *Intrepid*. By then, Queen Macedonia had decreed that no further expeditions would be sent to Titan and that any vessels attempting to land there would be destroyed by Her Majesty's navy.

Despite the precautions, though, there had been a few isolated outbreaks of Titan Plague, albeit rare and confined to colonies in the outer system. No one knew exactly how the disease spread from the *Herschel Explorer*, although it was believed that it had been carried by the survivors themselves despite rigorous decontamination. Even though the first symptoms resembled little more than the once-common cold, the homicidal dementia that quickly followed was unmistakable. When someone came down with the Plague, there was no other option than to isolate them, remove anything that could be used as a weapon, and wait until they died.

No cure had ever been found.

Somehow, in some way we would never know, the Plague had found its way aboard the *Fool's Gold*. In the close confines of the mass-driver, it had swept through the entire vessel, driving its crew insane before they realized what had hit them. Perhaps the captain had figured it out, yet despite his precautions he himself was infected.

I was safe because I had worn a spacesuit while exploring the ship.

But Bo McKinnon . . .

Captain Future, Man of Tomorrow, dauntless hero of the spaceways. In his search for adventure, McKinnon had recklessly entered the vessel without bothering to don a suit.

"Did you shut the airlock?" I snapped.

"What? Huh?" Pale, visibly shaken by the horrors he had seen, McKinnon was staring at the maniac crouched in the airlock behind us. "Airlock? What . . . which . . .?"

I grabbed his shoulders and shook him so hard his headset fell down around his neck. "The *Comet* airlock! Did you shut it behind you, or did you leave it open?"

Unable to hear me now, he stammered until he realized that his headset was ajar. He fumbled with it until the earphones were back in place. "The airlock? I think so, I . . ."

"I think so? You moron, did you . . .?"

"Furland, oh my God . . ." He gaped at the wreckage around him. "What happened to these people? Did they . . . watch out!"

I turned around just in time to catch a glimpse of the madman as he lurched to his feet. Howling at the top of his lungs, he charged toward us, flailing the severed arm like a cricket bat.

I threw McKinnon aside. As he sprawled across the deck, I grabbed the airlock hatch and shoved it closed. An instant later the creature hit the opposite side of the hatch. He almost banged it open, but I put my

shoulder against it. The hatch held, and a twist of lockwheel sealed it airtight; nonetheless, I could feel dull vibrations as the madman hammered against it with his hideous trophy.

I couldn't keep him locked in there forever. Sooner or later, he would find the lockwheel and remember how it worked. Perhaps then I could overcome him-if I was lucky, considering his berserk rage-but even then, I didn't dare bring him aboard the *Comet*.

There was only one solution. I found the airlock's outer control panel and flipped open its cover. "I'm sorry, sir," I whispered to the lunatic. "May God have mercy on us both."

Then I pushed the switch that jettisoned the outer hatch.

The alarm bells that rang throughout the bridge were the poor man's funeral dirge. There was long silence after I shut off the alarms, finally broken by McKinnon's voice.

"Mr. Furland, you just murdered that man."

I turned back around. McKinnon had managed to struggle to his feet; he clutched the back of a chair for support, and he glared at me with outraged eyes.

Before I could respond, Jeri's voice came to me over the comlink: "*Rohr, he shut the airlock on the way out. The Comet hasn't been infected.*"

I let out my breath. For once, Bo had managed to do something right on his own. "Good deal, kiddo. Keep it shut until I come back aboard."

I stepped away from the airlock, heading for the helm station on the other side of the bridge. McKinnon planted himself in my path. "Did you hear me, Mr. Furland?" he demanded, his adam's apple bobbing beneath his beard. "You just killed a man . . . I saw you do it! You . . ."

"Don't remind me. Now get out of my way." I pushed him aside and marched toward the helm.

One of its flatscreens depicted a schematic chart of the asteroid's position and estimated course. As I suspected, someone aboard the mass-driver had deliberately laid in the new course during a fit of insanity. Probably the captain himself, considering the fact that he had locked himself in here.

"I'm placing you under arrest!" McKinnon yelled. "Under my jurisdiction as an agent of the Planet Police, I . . ."

"There's no such thing." I bent over the keypad and went to work accessing the main computer, my fingers thick and clumsy within the suit gloves. "No Planet Police, no asteroid pirates. Just a ship whose air ducts are crawling with the Plague. You're . . ."

"I'm Captain Future!"

The virus must have already affected him. I could have checked to see if he was displaying any of the flu-like symptoms that were supposed to be the Plague's first signs, but he was the least of my worries just now.

No matter what I did, I couldn't access the program for the central navigation system. Lack of a password that had probably died along with one of the damned souls aboard this ship, and none of the standard overrides or interfaces worked either. I was completely locked out, unable to alter the vessel's velocity or trajectory that had it propelling 2046- Barr straight toward Mars.

“And what are you talking about, not letting anyone aboard the *Comet* until you give the word?”

McKinnon was no longer hovering over me; he had found the late captain’s chair and had taken it as his own, as if assuming command of a vessel far larger than his measly freighter. “I’m the boss of this ship, not you, and I’m staying in charge until . . .”

Okay. The helm wouldn’t obey any new instructions. Maybe it was still possible to scuttle the *Fool’s Gold*. I accessed the engineering subsystem and began searching for a way to shut down the primary coolant loop of the gas-core reactor and its redundant safety systems. If I timed it right, perhaps the *Comet* would make a clean getaway before the reactor overloaded . . . and if we were goddamned lucky, the explosion might knock the asteroid sufficiently off-course.

“*Rohr?*” Jeri again. “*What’s going on up there?*” I didn’t want to tell her, not with McKinnon eavesdropping on our comlink.

At the sound of her voice, he surged to his feet. “Joan! He’s working for Ul Quorn, the Magician of Mars! He’s going to . . . !”

I heard him coming long before he reached me. I stood up and, pulling back my arm, landed a right hook square against his hairy jaw.

It stopped him, but it wouldn’t keep him stopped. McKinnon was a big guy. He staggered back, his eyes unfocused as he groped at the chair for support. “Traitor,” he mumbled, feeling at his mouth with his left hand. “You traitor, you . . .”

I didn’t have time for this shit, so I punched him again, this time square in the nose. Second shot did the trick; he reeled backward, sagged against the chair, and flopped flat on his back.

“*What are you doing?*” she demanded.

Even within the thick padding of my gloves, my knuckles hurt like hell. “Something that should have been done a long time ago,” I murmured.

Cute line. I used up the last of my luck that way. I scrambled at the helm console for several more minutes before I submitted to the inevitable. Like the navigation controls, the engineering subsystem wouldn’t obey my commands without the proper passwords. It was possible that they were written down somewhere, but I didn’t have the time or inclination to go searching through the operations manuals, especially since most of them were strewn across the bridge like so much garbage.

We weren’t out of options yet. There was still a final alternative, one which McKinnon himself had given us.

It was then that I knew that Captain Future had to die.

“Captain Future is dead!”

The rumbling voice of the big green Jovian space-sailor rose above the laughter and chatter and clink of goblets, in this crowded Venusopolis spacemen’s cafe. He eyed his little knot of companions at the bar, as though challenging them to dispute him.

One of the hard-bitten spacemen, a swarthy little Mercurian, shook his head thoughtfully.

“I’m not so sure. It’s true that the Futuremen have been missing for months. But they’d be a hard bunch to kill.”

-HAMILTON, Outlaws of the Moon(1942)

As I write, I'm back on the Moon, occupying a corner table in Sloppy Joe's. It's almost closing time; the crowds have thinned out and the bartender has rung the bell for last call. He'll let me stay after he shuts the doors, though. Heroes never get booted out with the riffraff, and there's been no shortage of free drinks ever since I returned from Ceres.

After all, I'm the last person to see Captain Future alive.

The news media helped us maintain our alibi. It was a story that had everything. Adventure, romance, blood and guts, countless lives at stake. Best of all, a noble act of self-sacrifice. It'll make a great vid. I sold the rights yesterday.

Because it's been so widely told, you already know how the story ends. Realizing that he had been fatally infected with Titan Plague, Bo McKinnon-excuse me, Captain Future-issued his final instructions as commanding officer of the TBSA*Comet*.

He told me to return to the ship, and once I was safely aboard, he ordered Jeri to cast off and get the*Comet* as far away as possible.

Realizing what he intended to do, we tried to talk him out of it. Oh, and how we argued and pleaded with him, telling him that we could place him in biostasis until we returned to Earth, where doctors could attempt to save his life.

In the end, though, McKinnon simply cut off his comlink so that he could meet his end with dignity and grace.

Once the*Comet* was gone and safely out of range, Captain Future managed to instruct the mass-driver's main computer to overload the vessel reactors. While he sat alone in the abandoned bridge, waiting for the countdown, there was just enough time for him to transmit one final message of courage. . . .

Don't make me repeat it, please. It's bad enough that the Queen read it aloud during the memorial service, but now I understand that it's going to be inscribed upon the base of the twice-life-size statue of McKinnon that's going to be erected at Arsia Station. Jeri did her best when she wrote it, but between you and me, I still think it's a complete crock.

Anyway, the thermonuclear blast not only obliterated the*Fool's Gold*, but it also sufficiently altered the trajectory of 2046. The asteroid came within five thousand kilometers of Mars; its close passage was recorded by the observatory on Phobos, and the settlements in the Central Meridian reported the largest meteor shower in the history of the colonies.

And now Bo McKinnon is remembered as Captain Future, one of the greatest heroes in the history of humankind.

It was the least Jeri could have done for him.

Considering what a jerk Bo had been all the way to the end, I could have tried to claim the credit, but her strong will persevered. I suppose she's right; it would look bad if it was known that McKinnon had gone out as a raving lunatic who had to be coldcocked by his second officer.

Likewise, no one has to know that four missiles launched from the*Comet* destroyed the mass-driver's main reactor, thus causing the explosion that averted 2046-Barr from its doomsday course. The empty weapon pod was jettisoned before the*Comet* reached Ceres, and the small bribe paid to a minor Pax bureaucrat insured that all records of it ever having been installed on the freighter were completely erased.

It hardly matters. In the end, everyone got what they wanted.

As first officer of the *Comet*, Jeri became its new commander. She offered me her old job, and since the *Jove Commerce* deal was down the tubes, I gratefully accepted. It wasn't long after that before she also offered to show me the rest of her tattoos, an invitation that I also accepted. Her clan still won't speak to her, especially since she now plans to marry a Primary, but at least her fellow Superiors have been forced to claim her as one of their own.

For now, life is good. There's money in the bank, we've shucked our black sheep status, and there's no shortage of companies who want to hire the legendary Futuremen of the TBSA *Comet*. Who knows? Once we get tired of working the belt, maybe we'll settle down and take a shot at beating the odds on this whole cross-breeding thing.

And Bo got what he wanted, even though he didn't live long enough to enjoy it. In doing so, perhaps humankind got what it needed.

There's only one thing that still bothers me.

When McKinnon went nuts aboard the *Fool's Gold* and tried to attack me, I assumed that he had come down with the Plague. This was a correct assumption; he had been infected the moment he had come through the airlock.

However, I later learned that it takes at least six hours for Titan Plague to fully incubate within a human being, and neither of us had been aboard the *Fool's Gold* for nearly half that long.

If McKinnon was crazy at the end, it wasn't because of the Plague. To this day, I have no idea what made him snap . . . unless he believed that I was trying to run off with his ship, his girl, and his goddamn glory.

Hell, maybe I was.

Last night, some nervous kid-a cargo grunt off some LEO freighter, his union card probably still uncreased-sidled up to me at the bar and asked for my autograph. While I was signing the inside cover of his logbook, he told me a strange rumor he had recently heard: Captain Future managed to escape from the *Fool's Gold* just before it blew. According to him, prospectors in the inner belt report spotting a gig on their screens, one whose pilot answers their calls as Curt Newton before transmissions are lost.

I bought the youngster a drink and told him the truth. Naturally, he refused to believe me, nor can I blame him.

Heroes are hard to find. We need to welcome them whenever they appear in our midst. You've just got to be careful to pick the right guy, because it's easy for someone to pretend to be what they're not.

Captain Future is dead.

Long live Captain Future.