

The girl clawed at Brecken's face as he raised the metal bar...

THIS WORLD MUST DIE!

Feature Novelet of Dread Necessity

"You have been chosen for this mission of murder because you are the only people in our culture who are capable of this type of violence. You have broken our laws, and this is your punishment!"

By H. B. Fyfe

LOU PHILLIPS sat on the cold metal deck of the control room, seething with a growing dislike for the old man.

"What you are here for," the other had told him when the guards had brought Phillips in, "is a simple crime of violence. You'll do, I'm sure."

The old man paced the deck impatiently, while a pair of armed guards maintained a watchful silence by the door. Two more men in plain gray shirts and trousers sat beside Phillips, leaning back sullenly against the bulkhead. He guessed that they were waiting for a fourth, remembering that three other figures had been hustled aboard with him at the Lunar spaceport.

The door slid open, allowing another youth in gray uniform to stumble inside. One of the guards in the corridor beyond shoved the newcomer forward, and Phillips' eyebrows

twitched as he had a closer look. This last prisoner was a girl.

He thought she might have been pretty, with a touch of lipstick and a kinder arrangement of her short, ash-blond hair; but he lowered his eyes as her hard, wary stare flickered past him. She walked over to the bulkhead and took a seat at the other end of the little group.

The old man turned, scanning their faces critically. "I am in charge of a peculiar project," he announced abruptly. "The director of the Lunar Detention Colony claims that you four are the best he has—for our purposes!"

Long habit kept the seated ones guardedly silent. Seeing, apparently, that they would not relax, he continued.

"You were chosen because each of you has received a sentence of detention for life because of tendencies toward violence in one form or another.

Social living requires the elimination, or at very best, the modification of many elements necessary to survival in "nature". And when an emergency arises, very often it is the person who would be considered a "criminal", in other situations, who alone is able to cope with the necessities. If we manage to eliminate "violence" from human affairs, what will we find when a need for "violence" arises—a need outside of man's artificial control of his environment?

In our twenty-second century civilization such homicidal inclinations are quite rare, due to the law-abiding habits of generations under the Interplanetary Council."

He had been pacing the cramped space left free by the equipment, the guards, and the four seated prisoners. Now he paused, as if mildly astonished at what he was about to say.

"In fact, now that we are faced by a situation demanding illegal violence, it appears that no *normal* citizen is capable of committing such an act. Using you may eliminate costly screening processes... *and save time*. Incidentally, I am Anthony Varret, Undersecretary for Security in the Council."

None of the four showed any overt sign of being impressed. Phillips knew that the others, like himself, were scrutinizing the old man with cold, secretive stares. They had learned through harsh experience to keep their own counsels. Varret shrugged. "Well, then," he said dryly, "I might as well call the roll. I have been supplied with accurate records."

• **H**E DREW A NOTEBOOK from his pocket, consulted it briefly, then nodded at the man next to the girl. "Robert Brecken," he recited, "age thirty-one, six feet, one hundred eighty-five pounds, hair reddish brown, eyes green, complexion ruddy. Convicted of unjustified homicide by personal assault while resisting arrest for embezzlement. Detention record unsatisfactory. Implicated in two minor mutinies."

He glanced next at the youth beside Phillips. "Raymond Truesdale, age twenty-two, five-feet-five, one-thirty. Hair black, eyes dark brown, complexion pale. Convicted of two suicide attempts following failures in various artistic fields. Detention record fair, psychological report poor."

His frosty eyes met Phillips'. "Louis Phillips, age twenty-six, fifteen, one-eighty. Hair brown, eyes brown, complexion darkly tanned—

that was before Luna, wasn't it, Phillips? Convicted of unjustified homicide, having assaulted a jet mechanic so as to cause death. Detention record satisfactory."

The blonde girl was last in Varret's review. "Donna Bailey, age twenty-three, five-five, one-fifteen. Hair blonde, eyes blue, complexion fair. Convicted of manslaughter by negligence, while piloting an atmosphere sport rocket in an intoxicated condition. Detention record satisfactory."

Varret fell silent, regarding them with cynical disgust. His lips twisted slightly with distaste. "There we have it," he said. "A violent-tempered thief from the business world; an over-expensive purchase by a rich playboy who became his widow by her own negligence; a mentally-unstable fool who thought he was artistically gifted, and a rocket engineer who was too brutally careless with his own strength when irritated by a space-fatigued helper. I wonder if you'll do...?"

Phillips felt impelled at last to speak. "Just what plans do you have for us?" he demanded harshly.

"Nothing complicated," replied Varret, matching the tone. "We need you to perform a mass murder!"

Phillips blinked, despite his prison-learned reserve. He heard the girl suck in her breath sharply, and felt the youth beside him begin to tremble.

"I have shocked you, I see," sneered Varret. "Well, I assure you, it shocks me also, probably a good deal more since I have lived a normal life. However—this is the background:

"About three months ago, we had reports of the outbreak of a deadly plague in one of the asteroid groups. As near as can be determined, it was spread by the crew of an exploratory rocket after the discovery of a new asteroid. It began to sweep through the mining colonies out there with the velocity of an expanding nova!"

"Where was your Health Depart-

ment?" asked the man named Brecken in a sneering tone.

Varret frowned at him. "Several members gave their lives trying to learn the nature of the disease. We have no information to date, except a theory that it attacks the nervous and circulatory systems, because the reports indicate that the reason of the victim is markedly affected as the disease progresses. Not a single survivor is known—they all die in raving insanity. We do not even know with certainty how it is communicated."

"What are you doing?" asked Phillips.

"Isolation. It is all we can do, until our medical men can make some progress. We evacuated an asteroid colony and began to ship into it any person showing any of the symptoms, using a cruiser piloted by remote control. That was where we slipped."

"How?"

"On the last trip—unless we have not really collected all the sufferers—we lost control. Someone being transported knew his spaceships. Shortly thereafter, a gibbering lunatic got on the screen and threatened the escorting rocket. He announced the cruiser would head for Mars, where the passengers would demand their freedom. They are past reasoning with."

"Can't say I really blame them," Phillips remarked.

"Blame them? Of course not! Neither do I. What has that to do with it? What has the Council so worried is that this thing will get loose on Mars, that it may even be carried to Earth and Venus. There are over a hundred persons in that ship, no longer responsible for their actions but capable of causing deaths by the billions. We want to help them, but we simply must hold the line on this quarantine until we solve the medical problem."

• **THEY STARED AT HIM IN** silence, and Phillips noticed that the old man's forehead was moist with tiny beads of perspiration.

"Don't you see? They are as good as dead. No knowledge or help of man can save them—as of this moment. If we are ever to be of any help, we must prevent a worse catastrophe."

"Yes, the survival ship is a world in itself, but this world must die!"

For a minute or two, it seemed to Phillips that he could hear each person in the control room breathing. Finally, there was a small sound of cloth rubbing on metal as Brecken stirred. "Why pick on us?" he rasped from his seat on the deck. "I'm no volunteer!"

"I know what you are," replied Varret sharply. "I know what you all are. You have been chosen for this mission of murder, because you are the only people in our culture who are capable of this kind of violence. You have broken our laws, and this is your punishment."

"It would take us too long to find others like you who had merely never faced the same circumstances that sent you four to Luna. We have made attempts to attack this vessel. Manned by normal men, our ships could accomplish nothing."

"Why not?" asked Phillips.

"The crews found they could not kill!"

"What?"

"It amounts to that. One pilot blacked out at the start of an offensive approach. He lost contact before recovering—you realize how quickly that happens at interplanetary speeds. On several other ships, there were passive mutinies. One was destroyed; how, we do not know."

"Why don't you get some men in your Department of Security?" sneered Brecken.

Varret sighed. "It was far from simple cowardice. The crews had fine records. We have been civilized too long, so long that the idea of deliberate killing unnerved them. As to the one ship that did make some motion to attack, it may have been destroyed by the cruiser's defenses, or even by sabotage. Somebody may quite possi-

"They still aboard?" he called to Truesdale, who remained at the door although Brecken had disappeared.

The youth glanced over his shoulder but did not trouble to reply. Phillips' jaw set, and he took a quick step toward the other. Before he reached the doorway, however, Brecken returned from the corridor. Shouldering Truesdale aside, he strode into the control room. "Well," he announced, "the old fool hopped off like he said. Got a viewer in here?"

"I have it on now," called Donna from the instrument desk. "There he goes."

They gathered around the screen to watch. Near one edge was the image of another ship, with several spacesuited figures clustered around its entrance port. The girl made an adjustment, and the view crept over to the center of the screen just as the last of the figures vanished into the opening. Almost immediately, the other rocket slanted away on a new course.

Donna followed it on the screen until the brief flashes of its jets were dimmed by a new radiance—the ruddy disk of Mars. "We are where he said," she admitted. "Now what?"

She looked at Phillips, who merely shrugged. "What do you make of it?" she insisted.

"Pretty much as he said, probably," answered the engineer. "He's heading for Deimos, I suppose. I hear they're landscaping the whole moon—it's only about five miles in diameter—and building a new space station for a radio beacon and relay."

"Does that log say anything about the plague ship?" asked Truesdale nervously.

Donna scanned the observation record, then adjusted the viewer. The red radiance of Mars fled, to be replaced by a dimmer scene of distant stars.

"In there someplace," she said. "Out of range of this screen, but we could probably locate it with detector instruments."

"Why all the jabber?" demanded Brecken. "Let's get going!"

Phillips stared at him. "What's the rush? Did he sell you that easily?"

"Huh? Oh, hell, no! I mean let's make a dive for Mars. They were dumb to set us loose with a fast ship. We're dumber if we don't use it!"

"That's right," agreed Truesdale eagerly. "We don't owe them anything. They owe us; for the years they took out of our lives!"

● **T**RUESDALE HAD A POINT there, Phillips felt. This could grow into quite a discussion, and he was not sure which side he wanted to take. He had no great urge to become a hero, but on the other hand there was something about Brecken that aroused a certain obstinacy in him.

"Wait a minute!" Donna protested; "what do you think you're going to do?"

"Slip into a curve for Mars," said Brecken. "Slow down enough to take to chutes an' let this can smack up in the deserts somewhere. They'll never know if we got out, an' we'll be on our own."

The girl turned to Phillips. "How about you?" she asked. "Don't you think we should at least consider what Varret told us? If this plague is as dangerous as he says, this is no time to—"

"Do you *have* to be so bloodthirsty?" complained Truesdale.

"I don't want to kill anybody," declared the girl; "maybe we could just disable the cruiser."

"Aw, kill your jets!" Brecken broke in. "I've been waiting for a chance like this for years. Don't get any ideas!"

"But listen!" pleaded Donna. "It's a terrible thing, but if we don't do it, we won't be safe on Mars ourselves; they'll land and set an epidemic loose."

"I'll take my chances with it," said Brecken. "You're supposed to know something about piloting. Now get

us on a curve for Mars, an' be snappy about it!"

Donna turned desperately to Phillips.

"Why not look over the ship," the engineer suggested, "before we blast off on half our jets? We can make up our minds when we see what we have for fuel and weapons."

Brecken opened his mouth to object, but was smitten by an unpleasant thought. "Suppose they didn't leave us enough fuel to make Mars!"

"We can find out soon enough," said Phillips, leading the way to the door.

They trooped down the corridor on his heels, past the few closet-like compartments set aside for living quarters. It was a single-deck ship, with storage compartments above and below for fuel, oxygen, and other necessities. The corridor was liberally supplied with handrails, apparently in case of failure of the artificial gravity system.

About halfway to the end, another passage crossed the fore-and-aft one, and a few steps farther was a ladder. This extended up and down a vertical well, which in space amounted to a second cross corridor. Phillips was right when he guessed that the door beyond opened into the rocket room.

The others were bored by the power plant of the ship. The engineer, however, could not repress a thrill at once more standing surrounded by the gauges, valves, and pumps with which he had formerly lived. He strode about, examining and comprehending such appliances as seemed new since his last service in space.

"How about it?" demanded Brecken. "Can you handle it?"

"Sure," answered Phillips confidently. "Mostly automatic anyway."

"Then we can get movin' whenever we want?"

"I suppose so. The tanks are nearly full; let's find those space torpedoes the old man mentioned."

"Maybe it won't hurt, at that," grumbled Brecken.

HE LED THE WAY OUT, BUT paused indecisively. Phillips stepped past him and considered the cross passages near the midpoint of the corridor. Those in the plane of the control room deck probably led to port and starboard airlocks, he reasoned, so the others might lead to the torpedo turrets.

He went to the vertical well and started up the ladder, hearing the others follow. At the top, he was confronted by a hatch with a red danger sign. Glancing about, he located the gauges that reported the air pressure beyond. Normal.

"Make a little room," he said, looking down to Brecken.

The big, ruddy face retreated a few rungs. Phillips could hear the others scrambling further down. He got his head out of the way before pulling the switch that opened the hatch. With a subdued humming of electric motors, the massively constructed door swung down. One after another, they pulled themselves up into the compartment.

"This must be where they set controls for launching," guessed Phillips, leaning back against a rack of emergency spacesuits. "That intercom screen on the bulkhead is probably plugged in to the control room. Looks as if the torpedoes themselves are stored under that hatch at the after end."

"How do they kick them off?" asked Brecken.

"Those conveyor belts run them into tubes in the forward bulkhead. A charge of compressed air blows them out, and then the rockets are started and controlled by radio."

"You mean we have to point at a target to fire?"

"Oh, no. Once the rockets are going, the torpedo can be maneuvered and aimed anywhere by remote control."

"I've seen enough," announced Truesdale. "I'm hungry."

At that, they all decided to return

to the main deck. Phillips carefully closed the airtight hatch as they left, then followed the others in search of the galley.

Later, after a very unsatisfactory meal of packaged concentrates, they loitered sullenly in the control room once more while Donna studied the controls. Phillips had finally decided that he could wear the third spacesuit on the rack if he had to. He was idly examining the tools supplied with it when his thoughts were interrupted.

Young Truesdale had been monkeying with a range indicator for some time, but now his sharp outcry drew all eyes to him.

The others immediately gathered to peer over his shoulder. A needle flickered wildly from one side of the dial to the other.

"Here! Get it balanced," said Phillips, thrusting a powerful arm between the crowded bodies. As his deft adjustment steadied the needle, he stepped back and leaned against the bulkhead to study their faces. Truesdale's was pale.

"It's them!" he panted.

"Well," asked Donna, "what will it be?"

"Whaddya mean?" demanded Brecken, red-faced. "It'll be get dam' well outa here, that's what it'll be!"

"Let's see you go," invited the girl coolly. "How well do you pilot a rocket?"

Brecken's jaw dropped. "Wh-wh-what? You crazy? Did you swallow all that stuff the old man told you?" he sputtered.

"Why not?" asked Donna. "They didn't bring us all the way out here for nothing. Varret was scared. If it's that dangerous, somebody just has to do it—and we're here!"

"Not for long," said Brecken in an ugly tone. "Get hot on those controls. You, Phillips! Run back to that rocket room and see that things work!"

"You try it," suggested the engineer quietly.

He would have preferred to avoid shoulder first, and they both brought

the trouble the girl had been stirring up, but he did not relish Brecken's tone. A few days off Luna, he reflected, and already he was getting independent.

"Listen," said Donna, encouraged in her defiance, "when I touch those controls, we'll go right up and touch noses with them. You'd better have a torpedo ready!"

She turned to the banks of buttons and switches. Muffled thunder from the stern jets trembled through the hull as the men staggered.



BRECKEN recovered his balance first. With a snarl, he grabbed the girl by the nape of the neck and shook her roughly. Glimpsing Phillips' cold sneer, he reached back and seized a heavy metal bar from the spacesuit rack.

"Now, dammit!" he grated. "You'll do like I tell you! And you get back there an' see that those tubes recharge okay!"

Phillips felt a hard anger swelling his throat. From the corner of his eye, he saw Truesdale shrinking back against the bulkhead. He glanced about desperately for something with which to parry Brecken's bar.

It was the girl who broke the tense silence. With a gasping intake of breath, she reached up to claw at Brecken's face. Cursing, the man twisted his head away to protect his eyes. He released his grip on the girl's neck and swung a clumsy, backhand blow at her head. Donna stumbled, and collapsed to the deck.

Now or never, Phillips told himself. Without waiting to think, he hurled himself forward.

Brecken saw him coming, and tried to shift around to meet the engineer's charge. Phillips crashed into him

up against the opposite bulkhead with a thud. He concentrated all his strength into wringing the other's forearm until he heard the bar clang to the deck.

Brecken clubbed him on the side of the head with a wild left swing, and Phillips found the big man's foot in the way when he tried to sidestep. He lost his balance, but kept his grasp on the other so that they went down together, thrashing about for some opening. Brecken was red-faced with a maniacal rage. Beads of saliva sprayed from his twisted lips as he sputtered curses.

The engineer let go suddenly and jolted the other under the chin with the heel of his left hand. The man arched backward, but Phillips caught a knee in the chest that sent him slithering across the deck. As he strove to twist to his hands and knees, he saw Brecken groping for the bar.

Never reach him, thought Phillips frantically.

Thrusting one foot against the leg of an anchored data desk, he raised himself half upright as he lunged desperately at Brecken. Strangely, it occurred to Phillips for a fleeting lapse of time that old Varret had been reasonably astute in his selections, if he desired violent-tempered throwbacks. Then the breath was knocked out of him as he smashed into Brecken with a force that sent them both hurtling into the bulkhead.

The other's grunt of pain was almost lost beneath the sharp smack of bone against metal. Phillips scrambled up hastily, but his opponent lay still.

Over by the data desk, Donna was beginning to squirm quietly and make groping motions with her outstretched hands. Truesdale had retreated to the forward end of the control room, his features blanched by apprehension.

I'll bet, thought Phillips, *that old Varret slipped up in your case, my lad. Your reaction to violence must be what they call normal.*

He beckoned brusquely. "Give me a hand with him," he ordered.

Brecken still showed no sign of consciousness. Truesdale approached warily, and with his aid Phillips lifted the unconscious man. With their burdened limp in their hands, they staggered down the corridor to one of the sleeping compartments. There, they slung him into a bunk.

"He needs attention," said Truesdale.

"He won't get it from me," snapped Phillips. "Lumps on the head were his idea; there's no time to fool with him."

He pulled the sliding door shut, noticing that it had no lock. Since Brecken would probably be some time recovering, however, he put that out of his mind.

HAVING RETURNED TO THE control room, they discovered Donna sitting up. At the sight of them, she pulled herself somewhat shakily to a standing position, and brushed back her blonde hair.

"What happened?" she asked.

"He bumped his head on the bulkhead," said Phillips shortly.

This was accepted without comment. They turned to the instruments and examined the dial of the range indicator.

"They aren't very far away," said Donna quietly. "Where do you stand now, Phillips?"

"I suppose we'd better do it," he admitted. "Pretty vicious, aren't you?"

"No!" she snapped. "I don't like it either; I've never caused the death of any human being."

"Oh, sure. That's why you were on Luna!"

She looked at him levelly in the eye, but her shoulders drooped a trifle with the resignation of one who has often been disbelieved.

"My husband was a nice guy," she murmured, "but he never did know when he had a drink too many for piloting his jet. He passed out trying to give me a wild ride, and I got to

the controls just in time to crash-land the rocket; that's where they found me before I came to."

"Oh," said Phillips.

"I'm not half as hard as I'm trying to pretend," Donna went on, "even after a year on Luna. But I was a nurse before I was married. I'm thinking about what it will be like if this plague hits the planets before they find something to fight it with. The children... imagine that, will you?"

Phillips stared at the range indicator. It seemed there were times when an ugly thing had to be done for the common good. He wondered how the old-time executioners had felt, in the days when there had been judicial homicide. There were still jailers, for that matter, and men who butchered cattle.

"Call it a mercy killing," murmured Donna between pale lips. "Maybe you think *that* isn't still done once in a while, in spite of modern society."

"Ummh," Phillips grunted. "Well, if you can watch at this end, Truesdale and I can go set up a couple of torpedoes. I hope those rocket blasts didn't give us away."

"According to Varret," said Truesdale, "there can't be many of them still able to think straight enough to stand on watch. I wonder what it's like..."

Phillips glanced askance at him, but led the way into the corridor. First of all, he stopped at the rocket room to check the tube readings. The fired jets had been automatically recharged.

• **THEY LEFT THE ROCKET** room and climbed the ladder to the turret. Once inside, Phillips spent the first few minutes inspecting the equipment and thumbing through the manuals left there by Varret. Finally, the bored Truesdale broke in upon his study.

"That old goat must be crazy to think he could toss us out here and have us act like a trained crew. How

can we even hope to do anything right, without blowing ourselves up?"

"We can try," said Phillips coldly. "It shouldn't be impossible to get one started, at least."

He found the twin control panels in the bulkhead, and pulled a pair of switches. There was a smooth humming and a slight click as two hatches in the deck slid open. Slanting metal chutes rose out of the dark apertures, just behind the conveyor belts.

"Look at those babies!" breathed Phillips.

The snouts of two miniature spaceships protruded from the storage hold. Phillips touched other switches, and the sleek missiles were prodded onto the belts and moved forward until the full, twenty-foot lengths were in view.

"Phillips, you better be careful with those things!" quavered Truesdale as the engineer unscrewed a small hatch on one.

"Afraid I'll blow it up?" asked Phillips, peering inside.

"Why not? You never touched one before."

"You go ahead and believe that," retorted the engineer. "Now, I'll just turn on the radio controls, check the batteries, and feed the bad news into the launching tubes. Watch!"

Replacing the hatch and securing it, he thought out the procedure to use at the remote control panels. Turning on the screen, above one of them produced a cross-haired image of the bulkhead directly in front of the near torpedo. He tried various manipulations until he had focused the view and caused it to sweep all around the interior of the turret. After idly watching himself and Truesdale appear on the screen, he returned the view to dead ahead, switched it off, and turned to the other panel.

"I guess I can finish checking," he said.

Truesdale clambered hastily down the ladder. Phillips shook his head. "Don't know what use he'll be," he

muttered. "Too bad Brecken wouldn't listen. He at least... oh, well!"

He wondered whether he himself would stand up when the time came. What Varret had asked did not sound like much. Just a quick shot and watch them blow apart. What inhibitions made men black out rather than carry it through? It was not as if there were any hope for these people. Surely, it was obvious that to permit them, in their deranged state, to spread a catastrophic plague was inconceivable. But perhaps emotions were stronger than reason.

"I'll find out pretty soon," he reflected.

There was little more to do in the turret, except to run the torpedoes into the launching tubes and bring up a new pair in reserve. With that much done, he closed the hatch and climbed down the ladder.

● IN THE CONTROL ROOM, HE found Donna and Truesdale peering into the screen. He crowded close to look over their shoulders. A small blob of light floated near the center of the view. "That it?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Donna. "Just enough Mars-light to show it."

"How near are we?" asked Phillips.

"About a hundred and fifty miles. I have quite a large magnification, but they may spot us if they're alert. Are you ready to... do something?"

"Reasonably," said Phillips. "Where's Brecken?"

"You probably *killed* him!" Truesdale broke in accusingly.

"I found a first-aid kit and gave him a shot," said Donna. "He has a nasty lump on the head, but he might sleep it off."

Phillips was watching Truesdale. The youth was visibly nervous. Was it the thought of Brecken, the engineer wondered, or fear of what they were planning to do? Perhaps it would be

best to clear the air now, before it was too late.

"I guess you can handle it here, Donna," he said. "Truesdale and I will go to the turret and stand by."

The youth shrank away. "No! I won't go up there again! You can't make me do this!"

"Do what?" demanded Phillips.

"It's *murder!* You both know it is! They won't even have any warning."

"I *hope* not," said Phillips drily. "They might get us!"

"You *would* put it that way," sneered Truesdale; "you're homicidal at heart anyway!" He turned on Donna, wiping perspiration from his forehead. "Are you going to let him do it?" he shrilled. "Are you going to help him commit such a crime?"

The girl stared at him with a worried look in her blue eyes but said nothing.

"Come on, Truesdale," said Phillips, making an effort at a peaceful, persuasive tone. "It will be either their lives or ours if they spot us—and millions more if they get by. They'll be too desperate to think of us. Do you want to die?"

The instant he spoke the last words, he remembered the other's record and wished he had kept quiet. He saw a strange, wild expression creep over Truesdale's features. It changed into a look of hateful cunning as the youth began to sidle toward the door.

"I'm not afraid to die!" he boasted in a low-pitched but tense voice. "But how about you, Phillips? How about the big, brutal space engineer who is proud of smashing men's skulls against steel walls, who would like nothing better than to blow up a shipload of innocent people. How do you really know they're dangerous? But you don't care, do you?"

"Truesdale!" snapped Phillips. "Calm down!"

"I'll calm you down with me!" shouted the other hysterically. "I'll *show* you who's afraid to die!"

He ducked through the door toward

which he had been backing. Phillips lunged after him, just barely missing a grip.

"On your toes!" he shouted over his shoulder to Donna, and turned on all jets.

But Truesdale, driven by his peculiar fury, not only stayed ahead as they raced along the corridor, but actually gained.

He was fifteen or twenty feet out in front as they reached the midway point. Phillips, expecting him to take refuge in the rocket room, was completely fooled when Truesdale leaped for the ladder in the vertical well. He stumbled, and grabbed a handrail to stop himself. The other was swarming upward. Phillips sprang to follow.

Hardly had he climbed half a dozen rungs, however, than he saw he was outdistanced. Truesdale's feet were already disappearing beyond the hatchway. Phillips waited for the airtight door to slam shut. It remained open. . .

Then a thrill of instinctive fear shot through him as he thought of what Truesdale might do—probably was doing at that very instant!



THROWING his feet clear of the rungs, he plunged back toward the deck, guided only by his hands brushing the sides of the ladder. As Phillips reached the junction of the passages, he kicked desperately

away from the ladder. He landed with a thump that would have hurt had he been in a calmer state.

Rolling over toward the control room, he came to his feet in time to glimpse Donna looking out the doorway before a jarring shock floored him again.

The deafening roar of an explosion resounded in the corridor as a brilliant light was luridly reflected from somewhere behind him. The bewildering force hurled him at the deck; he saw he could not prevent his head from striking—

Phillips found himself on hands and knees, staring stupidly at the deck a few inches past his nose. As in a nightmare, he seemed to spend an eternity pushing himself painfully to his feet. Clutching a handrail, he finally made it.

He saw Donna kneeling in the doorway, hand to head. As he watched, the girl looked at her hand, and dazedly pulled out a handkerchief to wipe off the blood.

Then Phillips became aware of a high breeze in his face. Behind him, the sound of rushing air rose to a moan, then to a shriek. That shocked him to his senses.

"*Button up!*" he screamed above the noise, bringing his hands together in an urgent gesture understood by all spacemen.

As the girl staggered to her feet, he whirled and leaped toward the junction of the cross corridors. He wasted no time in a vain glance upwards—he

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knew what Truesdale had done. Only setting off the torpedoes' rockets in the enclosed turret compartment would have caused an explosion just severe enough to rupture the ship's skin; if the warheads had gone off, he never would have known it.

Diving headlong through the opening in the deck, he experienced a dizzying shift of gravity as he passed through the plane of the main deck. When he had his bearings again, he scrambled "up" the ladder toward the belly turret. By the time he got the airtight hatch open, he was beginning to pant in the thinning air. He pulled himself through at last, and sealed the compartment.

Phillips sucked in a deep, luxurious breath while he glanced about. This turret, he saw, was a duplicate of the other. He immediately located the intercom screen and called the control room. Donna's worried face appeared. "Where are you?" was her relieved inquiry.

Phillips explained what had happened. "The only thing," he concluded, "is to try it from here."

"I think they must have spotted the flash," Donna told him. "The instruments show a shift in their course."

"Blast right at them!" said Phillips. "We might get away with it if we're quick."

He turned away, leaving the intercom on. A few quick steps took him to the control panels in the bulkhead. Guided by his lessons in the other turret, and by faded memories of space school on Earth, he brought up two of the torpedoes. He checked the radio controls and ran the missiles into their launching tubes. As he worked, with nervous sweat running down into his eyes, he was aware of the intermittent jar of rocket blasts.

"Run 'em down!" he muttered, trying to steady his hand on the controls.

He had a hand at each panel, with the torpedoes poised viciously in the tubes, when he heard Donna's shout,

shrill with excitement, over the intercom.

Instantly, he launched the missiles. He started the rockets by remote control, and scanned the screens for a sight of the other vessel.

For a moment, his view was confused by the expanding puff of air; then that froze, and drifted back to the hull, and he could see the stars.

•DONNA'S VOICE, STRAINED but coldly controlled, came over the intercom with readings from her instruments. He corrected his courses accordingly.

Then he saw the image of their target centered on one screen, so he concentrated on steering the other missile. He made the nose yaw, but was unable to locate anything on its screen.

"You're sending one of them too far above, I think," Donna reported.

"I have something wrong," he shouted. "I can't spot them at all for that one. The jets must be out of line and shooting it in a curve."

Nevertheless, he fired a corrective blast on the weight of the guess, before returning his attention to the first torpedo.

This one was right on the curve. He could see the massive hull of the cruiser plainly now. It was almost featureless until, as he watched, several sections seemed to slid aside.

The screen showed him a momentary glimpse of a swarm of small, flame-tailed objects spewing forth from one of the openings. Then the view went dark. "Interceptor rockets with proximity fuses," he muttered. "They'll be after us next, crazy-mean and frantic!"

Over the intercom, he heard Donna exclaim in dismay. He caught a fleeting sight of her face and realized that the situation must be torture for the girl, as for himself or any normal person of their civilization.

Cursing himself for an optimist, he raised two more of the missiles from

the magazine. Hopping about like a jet-checker five minutes before take-off time, he made them ready. It seemed like hours before he got them into the launching tubes and blew them out into the void.

Again, he watched the other vessel appear ahead of his torpedoes, this time on both screens. Before the gap narrowed, he had a better opportunity to see the defenses of the cruiser in action.

A whitish cloud of gas was expelled from his target's hull, bearing a myriad of small objects which promptly acquired a life of their own. Both screens were filled with flashing, diverging trails of flame. Then—nothing.

"They're heading at us!" called Donna. "Hang on!"

Phillips had already pulled the switches to bring up a new pair of torpedoes. Hearing the urgency in Donna's tone, he leaped toward a rack of spacesuits and grabbed.

● **T**HE NEXT INSTANT, HE was pinned forcibly against the rack by acceleration, as Donna made the ship dodge aside. From one side, he heard a screech of grating metal. The fresh missiles must have jammed halfway out of the storage compartment.

It gave him a weird feeling of unreality; as he hung there helplessly, to see one of the screens on the bulkhead pick up something moving, gleaming, metallic.

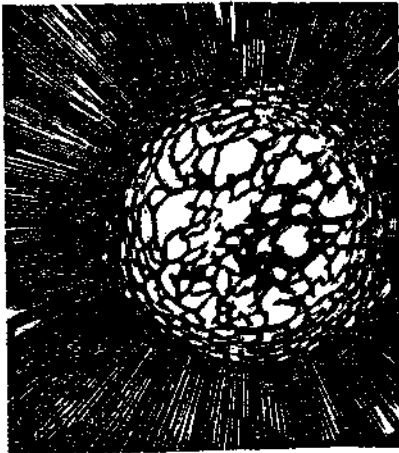
"Donna!" he shouted hoarsely. "Let up!"

"I don't dare," she gasped over the intercom. "I lost them, but they were starting after us!"

"Let up!" repeated Phillips. "They're dead ahead of that wild shot of ours. Let me get to the controls!"

He dropped abruptly to the deck as the acceleration vanished. One leap carried him to the radio controls.

The metallic gleam had swelled into a huge spaceship. The cruiser was



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angling slightly away from the point from which he seemed to be viewing it. How soon, he wondered, would they detect the presence of his torpedo? Or would they neglect this direction, being intent upon the destruction of those who were attempting to frustrate their mad dash for Mars?

Phillips stood before the screen, clenching his fists. There was, after all, nothing for him to do but watch. The gleaming hull expanded with a swelling rush. Details of construction, hitherto invisible, leaped out at him. A crack finally appeared as a section began to slide back.

This time, however, there was no blinding flare of small rockets. The blacking out of the screen coincided with Donna's scream. "*It hit!*"

In the silence that followed, he thought he heard a sob.

"Oh, Phillips," she said, recovering, "we did it. They're—"

"Hang on," said Phillips. "I'll climb into a spacesuit and come forward."

He switched off the intercom and dragged a suit from the rack. It took him a good fifteen minutes to get the helmet screwed on properly and to check everything else. He realized that he was very tired.

He opened the exit hatch, seized the top of the ladder in his gauntlets as the air exploded out of the turret, and climbed back to the main deck.

Clumping forward through the airless corridor, he stopped to look into the compartment where he had left Brecken. He quickly slid the door shut again.

He found that Donna had sealed off the corridor just short of the control room by closing a double emergency door that must have been designed to form an airlock in just such a situation. He hammered upon it, and she slid it open from the control desk.

It closed again behind him, and he entered the control room through the usual door. The girl helped him to remove the suit and motioned him toward the screen.

• **PHILLIPS REGARDED THE** scene without enthusiasm. The sight of the dead man had reminded him of what the compartments of that other vessel must look like by now. Its parts were beginning to scatter slowly.

He looked at Donna, and found her regarding him soberly. "What will they do with us now?" she asked.

She looked exhausted. He extended an arm, and she leaned against him. "You heard what Varret said," he told her.

"Yes, but will he keep his word? They might be... ashamed of us, now that it's done. Even if they're not, I can't bear the thought of going back to Earth and having them stare at me!"

Phillips nodded. He remembered the morbid curiosity during his own trial, the crowds who had watched him with a kind of shrinking horror—and he had actually been responsible for saving a spaceship and its crew, had they cared to look on that side of the affair.

But he had killed. That was no longer the action of a normal human being, according to popular thinking.

"I guess you and I are the only ones who will understand one another from now on," he shrugged.

Donna smiled faintly, just as the signal sounded on the communication screen.

It was Varret, looking pale and strained. He listened to Phillips' account, including the deaths of Truesdale and Brecken, and apologized for his appearance. He had, he informed them, been unpleasantly ill when he had seen the explosion. "It was a terrible thing," Varret continued sadly, "but necessary. They were beyond reasoning with, and a deadly menace."

He pulled himself together and tried to hide his agitation by reminding them of his promise. He suggested that they consider their requests while his ship attempted to tow them in to Deimos.

Phillips glanced speculatively at Donna. They would be two outcasts, however much their deed might be respected abstractly, however much official expressions of gratitude were employed to gloss over the fact. He might as well take one chance more. "We have already decided," he said boldly. "I hear you are building a new space station on Deimos."

The old man nodded, surprised.

"We will ask for a deed to that moon, and a contract to operate the beacon and radio relay station," Phillips stated flatly.

Varret blinked, then smiled slightly in a sort of understanding admiration.

"Reasonable and astute," he murmured after a moment's hesitation. "I think I appreciate the motive. Perhaps, if that ship can be repaired and remodeled, we can include it so that you may make short visits to Mars."

He warned them to watch for the emergency crew he would send to their aid, and switched off.

Phillips then dared finally to turn and look inquiringly at Donna. Her smile was relaxed for the first time since they had met. "Nice bargaining," she said, and Phillips felt like the king of something larger than a tiny Martian satellite.

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