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VOYAGE 13

RAY CUMMINGS

ASTOUNDING SCIENCE-FICTION

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"By the gods of the Starways, that's a sweet-looking girl," Green said. "Fling her a look, Jon."

I peered with interest. Wavvy Green, young Helioman of the *Wanderer*, and I were lounging under the dome near the bridge outside the Control Room, watching the embarking passengers. The *Wanderer* was racked in the big landing stage at Ambelah, Capital of the Venus Free State, ready now to start for Great New York. The big glassite ports were still rolled back from the deck dome, and Green and I had a vista down into the blue-lit stage.

*tells of the politics and death
that walked the corridors of
the spaceship WANDERER on*

"See her?" Green added.

I saw her presently as she came up the little incline—a small, pale-blond girl, with a young man beside her. Both wore the long cloak-drapes characteristic of the upper caste of the Venus Free State. The girl's drape was pale blue. As she boarded us, the incline tube-lights glared on her face. It was a face of delicate, exquisite beauty—lilylike—with the creamy complexion characteristic of the Venus nobility.

I was not unduly impressionable to feminine beauty; certainly in my capacity as Assistant Navigator of the *Wanderer* I had seen girls of scores of races and on many planets. But here was something that quickened my pulse—an ethereal beauty—a purity—and a sort of helplessness. At the top of the incline she stopped suddenly. Her young man companion had turned away momentarily. She spoke to him, and he quickly took her arm.

"She's blind," Green said.

"You know who she is?"

"Normah Velah II, no less," he explained. "The young fellow with her is her brother, Roberoh. And if you look closely you'll see at least fourteen men down there on the stage who have bodyguarded them here. And now that they're on board it's up to Mac."

Our little red-headed helioman always made a point of knowing everything. I had had no idea we were to have such distinguished passengers this voyage. As a matter of fact, their embarkation had not been announced; Wavvy got it from our Purser.

The girl and her tall, dark-haired brother had disappeared now on the side deck almost directly under us.

"Here's Mac now," Wavvy Green added.

Mack Mackenzie, a big, rawboned, six-foot Scotsman, was an Anglo-Alliance Shadow Man, detailed from Great-London for duty on the *Wanderer* to represent the Interplanetary Police. He always posed as a passenger. He came lounging toward us.

"I see we've got distinguished guests," I murmured.

"Ye'll be forgettin' it," he retorted softly. "Eavesdroppin' rays have keen ears."

"The girl knocked Jon dead," Green chuckled. "You could see it on his face. So now he's a star-crossed lover—moon-struck. I'm a motor-oiler if he isn't."

"You go wrap up an electric spark," I told him. I moved away from his gibes and went into the Control Room, to work

on the trajectory charts. And a few minutes later Voyage 13 was under way—a voyage ill-fated for us as the ancient superstition of the number would indicate.

I am Jon Halory. I was age twenty-five at that time—Assistant Navigator of the *Wanderer*. With the Earth and Venus well past conjunction, this was to be our last voyage of the Astronomical Season. By ship's routine, it was midafternoon when we departed. I went at my duties. But despite the necessity of tossing long and intricate equations to calculate the elements of our forthcoming course, I could not get that Venus girl, Normah Velah II, out of my mind. I had heard of her, of course. The *Wanderer*, this voyage, had been racked in the stage at Ambelah for nearly a week.

It had been a tumultuous week in the affairs of the Venus Free State. For nearly a year trouble had been brewing with the natives of the outlying, mountainous districts. The hill people were restless, eager for a governmental change that would benefit their benighted condition. It was largely the result of their own incapacity; the Liberal Government of the Free State was doing very well by them. But always under such circumstances, a leader will arise to capitalize discontent for his own lust for power.

Such a leader had arisen. He was known as Talone, not even a native of Venus. Vaguely it was understood that he had come from Mars—ousted from Ferrok-Shahn for similar activities.

But on Venus, among the ignorant, his bombastic talk gained him a huge following.

I was not familiar with the details. But this week, when the *Wanderer* lay racked in Ambelah, open revolt broke out in the city. There was an attack upon Government House, and President Velah was assassinated. The mob within a day was in control; and from the hills, Talone came marching, possessing himself of the Government, proclaiming Interregnum Law until a new election could be held.

My fellow officers and I were not allowed from the *Wanderer*. The city was in a turmoil. Vaguely, we were given to understand that Roberoh, and Normah—the President's young son and daughter—had escaped from Government House and taken refuge in the living quarters of the Officials of the Landing Stage. It was under the flag of the Interplanetary League—and not even the swaggering Talone and his roistering fellows dared attack it. And now Roberoh and Normah were embarking for Earth. All that afternoon and evening, I could not get the vision of that ethereal-faced little blind girl out of my mind.

It was well after the evening meal before the *Wanderer* rose through the dense fogs of the Venus atmosphere and emerged into the sunlight of Interplanetary Space. Captain Jaquero was never one to hurry his ascent; the comfort of the passengers, to him, was beyond a few hours of the voyage. Mrs. Reynolds, our Matron, had few cases of pressure sickness. The *Wanderer*, of all the Starway Fleet, had a reputation for comfort. Despite the trying Venus atmosphere—with its weird changes and its interminable moisture content—the *Wanderer* remained comfortable. We maintained on board a gravity of Earth .9; temperature 72 F.; interior air pressure 15.75 lbs. per square inch, with the Erentz pressure equalizers working perfectly.

It was nine p. m., ship's time—mid-evening—when I finished calculating the elements of our trajectory. Captain Jaquero and First Officer Peters approved them; we set the electronic gravity plates and slowly turned, with the sunlight bathing our stern and the bow a glory of starlight, prismatic in the black vault of Space.

With my job done, I went from the Control Room for a stroll on the star-gazer's deck, as they call it—a seventy-foot little deck under the glassite dome. A few of the larger passenger cabins were here, and in the stern was Green's little helio-radio cubby. We had few passengers this voyage—no more than six or eight, it seemed. One or two were standing gazing through the bulls-eyes of the dome.

Then to one side, I saw a little group—Dr. Blake, our Ship's Physician, seated with Roberoh and Normah Velah. I approached them with my heart accelerated and a queerly asinine regret within me that this blind girl could not see that I was a stalwart, fairly handsome fellow, sleek and efficient-looking in my white linen. Green would have giped at me, but there was no one to know how I felt as Dr. Blake introduced me and I sat quietly in the group, smoking and saying very little.

I recall we talked of nothing in particular. I saw this murdered President's son as a youth no older than his sister. They were twins in fact, I learned now. Roberoh was not yet of age—which is twenty-two for a male in the Venus Free State.

He could not have held office.

Dr. Blake—always a blundering fellow—said something like that to Roberoh. A flush came to the youth's patrician face.

"We do not speak of such things now," he said. "All Venus people are intuitive linguists;" Roberoh spoke English with the soft, curiously limpid quality characteristic of his race. "My sister and I—we are making a voyage to Earth—to forget what we have been through. Dr. Blake, perhaps, hardly understands. But you do, Mr. Halory?"

"Yes," I murmured.

Our bullet-headed doctor possibly was piqued at the rebuke. At all events he presently left us. Always, in the offing, the tall figure of Mac, our A. A. Shadow Man, was visible. I saw him now, clad in a Venus cloak that looked absurd on his burly figure as he stood alone by a bulls-eye with the starlight painting him. Apparently he was engrossed in the glittering dome of the Heavens; in reality I knew he was watching us.

Normah had said almost nothing. At ease, she sat back in her padded deck chair, her poor blank eyes, blue with the starlight, gazing idly—seeing nothing but her own thoughts. She was even more beautiful, here as I sat with her, than I had pictured. Small, slim as a child, yet rounded with full maturity, the lines of her figure obvious beneath her filmy blue-gray dress with its gold cords crossed over her bosom, wound around her slight waist and dangling with tassels almost to her sandaled feet.

Perhaps, normally, there would have been nothing unduly pathetic in her blindness. Certainly she did not seem to feel it morbidly. Roberoh spoke of things she had read; sculptured works of art she had seen with her fingertips. And she was a musician, skilled with the lutelike *vicahmah* of Venus.

"My brother paints me with very glorious colors," she said once. She laughed, musically as a lute itself. But at once, when her face went into repose, I could not miss that there was upon it a queer look of uneasiness. A sort of tense expectancy. As though her mind were not on what we were saying, but on something else. Something—terrifying perhaps.

Quite suddenly, as Roberoh and I were talking some triviality, she broke in upon us.

"Would you go to our cabin, Roberoh?" She had suddenly lowered her voice. She leaned toward me. "I know that we—we can trust you, Mr. Halory. Could there—could there be any eavesdropping ray upon us now?"

"Quiet, Normah," Roberoh murmured. "You want me to go——"

"Yes, please. Oh hurry—I just feel frightened——"

It was as though some extra-normal sense were warning her of danger, so that she sat with hands gripping the sides of her chair, her bosom rising and falling with her quickened breath, her delicate nostrils dilating.

Roberoh leaped to his feet with his cloak around him.

"I will go see. But it is nothing, Normah."

He moved forward along the starlit deck, and disappeared down a little half-flight inclined to a balconied recess where his cabin and Normah's were located side by side almost under the control turret.

Normah and I were left alone. Momentarily Mac had moved away.

"What is it?" I murmured tensely.

"That Dr. Blake who was here——" She was leaning with her hand upon my arm; her voice was barely a whisper.

"What about him?" I prompted.

"I—I'm afraid of him—I don't like him——".

Well, the burly, bullet-headed Blake had never been any great favorite of mine. But there had not seemed anything terrifying about him. He was, however, what they used to call a lady-killer.

"What did he do to annoy you?" I murmured.

"Nothing. I just feel—that he's an enemy. And others—the whole ship maybe——"

I tried to scoff, but she was so earnest, so obviously terrified that it made me tense. Why had she sent her brother so hastily to their cabins?

Her hand still gripped me. "We must not talk of it," she murmured, "but you, I know, we can trust. No more now, please ——"

I sat staring at her. And then she smiled.

"Shall we talk?" she murmured. "What do young men—like you—on Earth talk about when they sit with a young girl in the starlight?"

That wouldn't have been hard for me—under the circumstances she pictured. But it was hard now, so that I sat suddenly tongue-tied.

"Well——" I said.

"Of music? Of the stars? You have a beautiful Moon, some of the nights on Earth? I have read about it." She was smiling quizzically.

"Yes," I agreed. "The moonlight and a pretty girl—well you're supposed to talk about love. I guess it's the same on Venus——"

I checked myself. Her hand had come out; her fingers lightly brushed my face. She was still smiling.

"Excuse me," she said. "One likes to see to whom one is talking."

There was no pathos. Her smile was faintly quizzical, as she added, "Being blind is a little disadvantage in the moonlight."

"Not at all," I said. And then impulsively I quoted, "Flinging back a million starbeams, the vault of Space reminds me of thine eyes."

As her hands went to my shoulders, I stared into her eyes. The blankness seemed vanished, for they were, in truth, filled with starlight. For that moment our bantering was gone. Both of us were breathless. But a little vestige of sanity clung to me.

"A President's daughter," I murmured, "could never be interested in a ship's officer——"

"You think so? There is no difference—a ship's officer, or a King—'If you were a King'—there is on Earth a poem like that. You say it."

"'If I were King'", I murmured.

*"'Ah love, if I were King,
What tributary planets I would bring
To bow before your sceptre, and to swear
Allegiance to your lips and eyes and hair.
The stars would be your pearls upon a string,
Red Mars a ruby for your finger-ring,
And you could have the Sun and Moon to wear—
If I were King.'"*

It was our moment, so suddenly come as I held her there in the starlight. And then it was dashed. A step sounded on the deck near us. I could feel Normah stiffen in my arms. Then she drew away. A man was coming toward us—one of the passengers. I knew his name, Graeff III. He was an elderly fellow—a wealthy importer, I understood, in Ambelah. His dark cloak shrouded him—a tall, but bent figure, bare-headed, with the starlight gleaming on his mass of gray-white hair, long about his ears in the Venus fashion. His vacuum-cupped sandals squished on the metal-grid of the deck as he walked.

"That man Graeff——" Normah was murmuring.

"You've met him, Normah?"

"Yes—this afternoon. Dr. Black introduced him." A shuddering terror was upon her.

He came past us. I saw that Mac was lounging at a near-by bulls-eye port. Graeff, as he came abreast of us, turned and came smilingly forward.

"Ah—it is the beautiful little Normah," he said. His gray-white sagging face, with queerly heavy jowls, was wrinkled into a smile. His eyes, deep-set under shaggy white brows, swept me a glance. "One of our young officers?" he added.

"This is Jon Halory," Norman introduced.

I was on my feet, but I did not offer the chair. Graeff nodded, teetering on his sandals, unsteady as though with senility.

"The starlight," he said, "is very beautiful. We will have the Earthlight glow in a night or two." He nodded to me, and passed on; vanished down a near-by incline to the cabin quarters below.

Mac again had gone. I sat down beside Normah.

"He—of them all—terrifies me," she murmured. "There is evil in him. It radiates——"

Wordlessly, I could only stare. Was the *Wanderer*, this voyage, bristling with Talone's spies? Suddenly I felt our helplessness—a little world here, poised seemingly motionless in the great abyss of Space. Captain Jaquero was armed; the Control Turret was a little arsenal. But whom could we trust? Normah's words rang through my startled mind: "He, of them all, terrifies me." As though this little blind girl could feel the radiations of evil. And looking back on it now, I have no doubt that she did.

But why should Talone's spies be here? I knew that by Interplanetary Law, this girl and youth—both under legal age—could have no bearing upon the governmental status of the Venus Free State. They could not appear before the Interplanetary League of Great London in protest at Talone's usurpation. Why then would he pursue them?

Normah was clinging to me. "My brother," she murmured. "He has not come back from our cabin! Oh, please—take me there—hurry!"

What was there about her cabin that was so terrifying? She clung to me as we hurried forward on the starlit deck. At the little half-flight incline, Roberoh appeared from below.

"It is—all right?" Normah murmured.

"Yes," he said. He flung a glance at me as his arm went around his sister. He was smiling, but I could not mistake his agitated tenseness, the pallor of his handsome, boyish face, the look of terror in his eyes.

"It is all right, Normah," he added gently. "Do not be frightened."

I accompanied them to the mid-flight balcony catwalk-upon which their communicating cubbies opened. At Normah's door we paused. Roberoh gestured down the spiral to the main cabin corridor close under us.

"That fellow Graeff," he said softly, "was standing down there. When he saw me, he came and went on deck."

It brought a little cry from Normah. Roberoh drew me aside.

"I follow my sister," he said. "In English you call it intuition. She has it. She knows we can trust you——"

I nodded. "There is something you want to tell me?"

"No—or at least not now. I thought when we boarded your ship we would be safe." He was murmuring with swift vehemence; his gaze again swept down the shadowed tube-lit spiral to the blue corridor under us. "I know now that we are not safe, Halory. You, we can trust. And the Captain?"

"Of course," I murmured.

"And there is your Shadow Man Mackenzie——"

So they knew about Mackenzie.

"And your First Officer Peters—and your crew——"

That startled me. Of our crew of twelve, seven had been on shore leave when the trouble broke out in Ambelah. They had vanished. Captain Jaquero had engaged others—seven new men about whom we knew nothing.

"What do you want me to do?" I said.

"You are armed?"

"Not now. But in my cubby——"

"In the night—I want no prowlers here at our door——"

Normah's cubby was dim behind them. "Goodnight," she murmured. "Of everyone—it seems perhaps there is only you."

The door closed upon their tense, white faces.

The rhythmic hum of the Erentz pressure equalizers sounded dimly through my silent cubby. Outside my latticed bulls-eye, facing sternward, the gigantic silver crescent which was Venus still nearly filled the quadrant of the sky, with the Sun blocked behind it now.

"Of everyone—it seems there is only you." Normah's last words of terror pounded in my head. Only these two fugitives, and myself to protect them? But that was absurd, of course. There was old Captain Jaquero; and Mac——But who else? Wavvy Green, perhaps. I could name no one else. If, indeed, Talone's spies were here, I could easily fathom that Blake and Peters could be bribed. And Roberts, the purser? I knew nothing about him, save that he had always seemed a very decent fellow. We had no more than five passengers. Who were they, beyond Graeff, Normah and Roberoh? I did not know.

It was the trineight hour now—midway between midnight and dawn. I had prowled, Banning gun under my night cloak. But there was nothing. I had not seen Mac. Once I searched for him, with a sudden impulse to consult him. But with the skill of years, Mac was like a shadow himself—unseen when he was prowling.

The little Trineight buzz from the Control Turret sounded through the silent interior. I knew that the Captain would be at the controls now, with Collins, our Chief Navigator, beside him. The other officers, like myself, were off duty.

For another ten minutes I sat tense, pondering. Then again I started for Normah's cabin. The eerie blue-lit corridors were empty. There was no one, seemingly, on the star-gazer's little deck. The glassite dome over it glowed with starlight. Green's cubby was dark.

Silently, cloak around me, I moved forward, went down the half incline to the catwalk balcony. At Normah's door I listened. There was no sound from behind its metal panel.

I am no professional prowler. I was tense, jumpy. Was that a moving shadow in the corridor under me? I thought so. I started down, but if something had been there, it was gone.

Then, as again I paused at Normah's door, dimly from within I heard a murmuring voice.

"Normah——"

Then there was an answer in the Venus tongue. It was Normah's agitated voice, unmistakable. But whose was the other? Not Roberoh's! It was blurred, throaty—almost a groan.

"Normah—Normah——"

And then I heard Roberoh's voice. Three of them were in there!

For that instant I was shocked into confusion. But my wits came back, steadied as I realized the existence of a low hum—the tiny, microphonic, grinding hum of electronic interference.

An eavesdropping ray! You can hear them sometimes, when you are close to a metal obstruction through which they are passing. An eavesdropping ray from some near-by point was focused upon Norman's door. It was picking up the murmur of the three voices and humming a little with the door's interference.

For that second I stiffened, with my Banning gun pointing down the spiral. Was the eavesdropper down there? Abruptly I was aware that the hum was gone—as though he had learned what he wanted to know.

I recall that I was part-way down the spiral. And then I heard a groan from below—a ghastly, gurgling groan as though from a throat and mouth choked with blood.

And then came my name: "Halory—I'm here——"

It was Mac. He had misjuggled his job, just for once in his life. But once was too much. I found him lying in a black recess of the lower corridor. A knife handle protruded from his chest. His hands were futilely plucking at it.

"Halory—get them—all three of them to the Control Turret——" Blood was grewsome in his throat. "Halory—I'm gone—you hurry—they know now he is on board—you get to the Turret—your only chance because all hell will break loose——"

His words were lost in the blood that gushed from his mouth. Then he twitched and the light went out of his eyes.

For a second I stood transfixed. And in that second, as Mac had warned, all hell broke loose. From somewhere in the ship, like a signal, a brief penetrating little whine sounded. There was a distant scream from the crew's quarters under me—the sizzling, muffled flash of a Banning gun—the tramp of running feet—men's shouting voices——

I turned and leaped up the incline to the catwalk balcony—pounded on Normah's door. They had heard the commotion, of course. The door swung inward as Roberoh opened it to my imperative voice. In the center of the dim cabin, Normah stood with her arms around an elderly man. He was pallid, trembling; his head and one arm were bound with surgical bandages.

Roberoh swung toward me. "My father," he said swiftly. "He did not die. The surgeons—were loyal. We pretended he died, you see? Or the mob would have come again and killed him surely——"

I was barely aware of Roberoh's tense words. The interior of the *Wanderer* resounded with the distant commotion. Banning flashes—several screams now and doors slamming. The aroused passengers were screaming with terror—screams that turned ghastly with agony as the bandits struck them down.

"They've killed Mac," I said. "We've got to get to the Control Turret."

Oncoming footsteps thudded in the corridor under us as we went to the catwalk. A figure was coming up the spiral. I turned sternward. We ran some thirty feet on the catwalk, then went up another incline to the upper deck. Forward on the turret bridge, I saw Chief Navigator Collins. He had a Banning gun in each hand.

"Halory!" he shouted. "Halory—Lord, what's happening?"

The aged President Velah stumbled as Roberoh and I gripped him, half carrying him. Obviously he was numbed by terror, and by the pain of his wounds.

"What is this?" he muttered in English. "What is this going on?"

"You're all right," I said. "Just a little further—hurry——"

My arm was around Normah, guiding her. From Green's helio cubby, Wavvy came dashing at us. "I sent a call for help," he shouted. "Contacted the Interplanetary Patrol cruise ship. It'll come in a few hours."

From across the starlit deck a shadow rose up. A Banning gun spat its sizzling heat-ray, drilled Green and ended with a violet-red shower of sparks up on the metal dome-casing. Wavvy flung up his arms silently and went down. It was Dr. Blake who had drilled him. I saw the running figure heading sternward—and I didn't miss. My heat-stab went through him, so clean and swift a drilled little hole that, though he was dead, his body of its own momentum seemed to keep on running with buckling legs. Then his head crashed against a metal ventilator.

We shoved the numbed President into the Turret and slid its metal door-slide. Captain Jaquero had locked the controls and came running at me. "Halory," he gasped, "murder—death everywhere on my ship—are we all who have survived?"

Except the traitors. I could not doubt it. Ruthlessly, the passengers and all our loyal crew had been killed. And here in the Turret there were only the Captain, Collins, and I; the President, Roberoh, and Normah. I had taken Normah and her

father to a side couch across the circular little Control Room. The bulls-eye windows gave us a vista in every direction of the starlit ship. The forepeak—empty save for the crumpled figure of the lookout lying weltering beside his electro-telescope—the narrow, empty side-decks between the Turret and the dome-sides—and sternward, along the empty star-deck where the figures of Green and Dr. Blake lay sprawled.

Then from the dull glare of Venus-light at the stern, a figure with a raised handkerchief was slowly advancing. It was Graeff.

"Do not fire," he called. "Will you have a truce so that we may talk? It may save your lives."

Our microphone picked up his voice and amplified it in the Turret. The bulls-eye sternward was partly open. Chief Navigator Collins stood there and raised a handkerchief.

"Very good," Graeff said. "I will trust you."

He had stopped, but again he advanced, his long cloak swinging with his aged, tottering step. In the center of the deck, again he paused, and I saw him straighten from his bent, decrepit posture. It was a startling metamorphosis—the fellow was a skilled actor. His face had been altered by the disguiser's art. He was still old-looking of countenance as he stood grinning at us in the starlight. But his bent body had unlimbered; his sagging shoulders were squared; his legs straightened so that here was a burly fellow as tall as myself.

"By the Gods——" Collins muttered.

At the open bulls-eye, the angry Captain roared, "You damned murderer—what do you want?"

"I am Talone," the fellow said. "No murderer." He grinned sardonically up at us. "This is warfare, not murder. There is a distinction, even if little of difference. I come for President Velah."

"Well, you don't get him," I said. Behind me I was aware of the wounded old President coming forward, courageous despite his confusion and his pain. But I shoved him back.

"Keep him away from the window," I warned Roberoh. "Keep Normah over there."

"Oh, it is you, Halory," Talone was saying. "So you are yet alive? I speak with Captain Jaquero."

"Say what you wish and have done," the Captain shouted.

"Thank you. I demand Velah. Do you think I would permit him to reach Great London and protest me at the Interplanetary League?"

They had smuggled the wounded Velah on board to save his life. But it was true also that if he appeared alive in Great London before the League, by treaty, all the Planetary Governments would send an armed Interplanetary Patrol to Venus—to take over the ministration of the Free State, guaranteeing Velah's government and his personal safety. There could be no conquest by Talone, no crooked subsequent election of him later, as of course he planned.

"Well that's what we'll do," the Captain roared. "And jail you and your murderers."

"You jest with me, Captain," Talone retorted. "I have the ship. Your controls in the Turret—how can you shift the rocket jets when my men below are shifting them by the manual levers? Don't you see the heavens swinging already?"

I was aware of it. Over our stern Venus was slowly mounting; the great blazing black firmament was swinging.

"I offer you life," Talone was saying. "I can starve you there in the Turret. I can shut off your air-renewers——"

"That's a lie," I murmured to Roberoh. "We have pressure equalizers and emergency air renewers here in the Turret. The whole system independent of the rest of the ship."

"We'll drill any man who comes near us," the Captain roared. "Go back. We've had enough of your talk."

"Then I will just say I can navigate from below by disconnecting your controls," Talone retorted. "Already I have done that. We are returning to Ambelah. But I offer you life. If you toss out your weapons now, I will put you on an asteroid. Little kings to rule all you survey."

"By the Infernal—go back from the deck, you smidge," the Captain roared. "I will parley no more with a murderer."

Still grinning, Talone raised his white handkerchief with a derisive flaunting gesture and backed away. I barely saw his other hand go under his cloak. I had no time to shout a warning, or even to move. From beneath Talone's cloak, a flash spat through the fabric—the flash of an electronic spray gun. At our Turret window its lurid, blue-green bolt struck with a shower of sparks. Dimly I was aware of the Captain and Collins as they fell. I was close behind them. Not directly hit—but the aura of the bolt stunned me. All the world seemed bursting into a roaring glare of light which faded as I fell, with my senses whirling off into the soundless, black abyss of unconsciousness.

How long I was out I do not know. I recovered consciousness lying upon the Turret couch, with Normah bending over me. As I stirred, and my eyelids fluttered up, her fingers felt them.

"Oh," she murmured. "You're all right now?"

My head was roaring, but my strength came rapidly. President Velah was in a chair across the Turret. The white-faced Roberoh helped me to my feet. On the Turret floor-grid, Captain Jaquero and Collins lay with their clothes charred upon them. Both were dead.

"I bolted the bulls-eyes," Roberoh was saying. "No one has come to the deck. Oh, I am so glad you did not die."

He was grim with terror as he held the pallid Normah against him. In the chair his wounded old father seemed dazed. Roberoh was only a boy really; with me unconscious he had felt himself here alone, so that now with a rush of relief he clung to me.

The star-gazer's deck outside our bolted bulls-eyes was empty. Through the glassite plates of the enclosing dome I could see the black firmament. We were still in the cone of Venus' shadow. The great crescent of the planet lay now in advance of our bow. Talone had turned us, shifted the rocket jets so that with full drive and gravity added we were heading back.

The audiphone in the Turret buzzed. I jumped for it.

"This is Talone," the microphonic voice said. "Shall we talk again? Will you starve? Or shall I shut off your air?"

"You can't," I said. "We have emergencies here."

Talone knew that he could not risk an assault now upon the Turret. The aluminite walls and the bulls-eyes would resist his weapons. If we fired out of the ports, some of his attacking party undoubtedly would be killed.

But of what use for us to keep alive, imprisoned here until the *Wanderer* was racked at Ambelah? Talone's men would surround the ship and starve us out. Or, with the ship abandoned, blow us into Eternity.

He recognized my voice. "Oh—it is you, Halory? Are you yet alive? Will you stay there, or disarm and let me maroon you on an asteroid?"

I slammed the connection, and turned to Roberoh. The beginnings of a plan were in my mind, and as I told it to Roberoh, he listened with dropped jaw. It was so desperate a plan that Normah gasped,

"No—no, please!"

"You'll never get down there," Roberoh murmured. "They'll see you."

"Well I can try," I said. I grinned at him. But in truth I was as desperately tense as himself. "What else is there to do? If they—seize me——"

"Kill you," Normah corrected.

"All right—if they kill me, you'll be no worse off here."

As one of the ancient philosophers said, "Desperation doth make heroes of us all." I felt like that. When one is sure he is going to die it takes no courage to try and stay alive. Heaven knows, in all my eight years flying the star-ways, never had I had occasion to jump into Space from my vessel. But the occasion was here now.

The emergency air-suits were hung in a closet of the chartroom. I drew one out—a double-shell of fabricoid, with the Erentz pressure equalizing current circulating between the inner and the outer layer. With Roberoh watching me—and Normah white and silent peering with her sightless eyes—I donned the suit. From feet to neck it encased me with its black baggy folds. The mechanism pack was a great lump on my back, with the goggled helmet hinged back behind my head. For weapons there was a hook with a length of wire hung at my belt, and a knife stuck there.

With gloved hand, I clapped Roberoh on the back. "Good luck to us." And I touched Normah's sleek, blonde head.

Neither of them answered. Roberoh moved the door-slide a little. For a second I stood peering at the deck. It was only a few feet from here to the incline opening leading below. With the feeling that a flash from some near-by shadow would end all my problems, I jumped the few feet and darted into the companionway. There was no flash. The descending spiral seemed empty. I passed the catwalk where Normah's cabin door stood open—went down another flight to the main corridor.

Still there was no encounter. A little further along I came upon a dead passenger; near the stern, the body of Mrs. Reynolds, the Matron, hung over a catwalk rail, her head grewsomely dangling with crimsoned slashed throat.

It seemed a ship of the dead; silent, with just the purring hum of the Erentz current. I went down another little flight, knife in hand, silent as a cat on my rubberized soles. I was in the lower part of the hull now. The door to the lower Control Room, where the rocket-jet controls were located, stood open. As I stood silently peering I could hear the murmur of voices—Talone and his men who were gathered in there.

I went down another half flight, into the dim little pressure chamber of the lower keel-fin. Triumph was within me now. Nothing could stop me from my purpose. Talone and his men were roistering in the shifter-room, befuddled now by alcohol so that they had left the upper part of the vessel unguarded, secure in the belief that none of us would dare venture from the Turret.

The pressure chamber was almost wholly dark. The lower glassite trap was closed. I peered down through it at the vast starry abyss of the firmament. It took me no more than a minute to adjust my helmet and start the suit mechanisms. The suit bloated with air; my little pressure current hummed in my ears.

The pumps of the pressure chamber were at the side of the wall. In ten minutes, with the bulkhead door to the hull closed, I could have emptied the little chamber of its air. But Heaven knows I had no need to do that now. With the manual lever, cautiously, I opened the lower trap about an inch. The ship's air whined as it began going out—the interior pressure forcing it out into the vacuum of Space.

At the inch-wide slit I knelt, bracing myself against the downward rush of air. I sucked, whined, then howled as I slid the port a little farther. I was almost flattened now by the downward pressure. All the air in the ship—save only the hermetic, independent Turret—had egress here. The pressure of it had me almost pinned over the slit. I saw my danger, twisted and slid the big port wide.

There was a roar—a giant, tumbling torrent of wind, like water surging under pressure in a pipe—a cataclysm of outward rushing air. No doubt in every corner of the vessel the sucking draft and lowering pressure were at once apparent. And here at the open port it was a maelstrom. There was a second when I thought I would be hurled down against the casement of the port, my helmet to be smashed and make an end of me. Then I was blown down through the center of the opening—hurled outward, down into Space!

My first sensation was a nauseous feeling of falling. But in a moment it was gone. In soundless emptiness, I felt nothing—saw myself poised, the great, black dome of the firmament a vast enclosing shell, everywhere gem-strewn. But close over me—a hundred feet away perhaps—the hull of the *Wanderer* loomed sleek, shining with starlight. The torrent of air was pouring out of its lower port, but so instantly dissipating into the vacuum that already I was beyond its force. I had blown a hundred feet, still moving with small momentum. I saw the ship drifting away, and desperately threw from me the heavy magneto shoes designed to hold a man against the ship's outer skin. I still moved. But the gravity of the vessel was checking my velocity.

Within a minute I was poised. Then I began falling back, rising toward the ship. I had had a sidewise, diagonal thrust when the mass of the heavy boots left me. It balanced with the *Wanderer's* gravity pull so that my movement now was a

curve—an ellipse, with the vessel at one of its foci.

I was a tiny satellite—and the *Wanderer* my greater world. It was a dizzying experience, for slowly I was turning upon an axis of my own, so that all the firmament and the vessel seemed shifting. Within a minute I had swung up over the upper dome, where I could see the Turret and its upper little pressure port at the dome-peak. Then my orbit took me down the other side, and again under the hull. The port I had opened was a black rectangle, with the air still an outpouring maelstrom. And as I stared, a bloated figure like my own came hurtling out. It was Talone. Of all his roistering fellows, only he had had the knowledge and the presence of mind to seize an air-suit and don it. Doubtless he had intended to cling within the ship, but had been blown out.

At all events he was here. He, too, broke the rush of velocity that would have carried him off into depths of space. Now he was another little satellite like myself. He was closer to the vessel, revolving slightly more swiftly, and with a more nearly circular orbit. I stared down at him as he swung past some twenty feet under me. And doubtless he stared up. Then he was gone ahead of me, while still I was only passing over the turret.

Within two rotations he had caught me again. It chanced that I was at the perihelion of my little orbit here. Talone was no more than ten feet from me. And suddenly I flung the heavy metal hook which was at my belt. It struck past his leg, and as I jerked the wire, the hook caught his ankle. My pulls on the wire hauled us together. I saw the naked knife blade gleaming with star-sheen as he clutched it in his gloved hand. But I had him at a disadvantage. He was coming at me feet first, floundering to twist himself around.

My knife flashed; ripped his bloated suit. It deflated as his air puffed out; and then, suffocating, with bursting lung tissues and blood-vessels, he died.

The *Wanderer* had only one satellite now—Talone and I, the dead and the living, our bodies merged as we rotated in our new, combined little orbit.

All that was five years ago. I have little to add to my brief narrative of that ill-starred Voyage 13. I was able to cast my hook, pull myself down to the dome, and like a fly crawl flattened to the Turret's upper pressure port. Roberoh had pumped out the air of the tiny upper chamber. I crawled in, closed the outer slide, and then he let in the air upon me.

It was indeed a ship of death. But in the turret, with emergency air renewers working, we remained for that day until the Interplanetary Patrol—seeking us after poor Green's helio call for help—came and rescued us.

Normah and I have been married for nearly five years now. Her father appeared before the League in protest at Talone's Government. But he did not desire to renew his Presidency; he was shattered in health. The Venus Free State had a fair election, with the Interplanetary League presiding, so that no duplicate of Talone could come into power.

The Venus Free State is talking now of a union with the great Anglo-Saxon Alliance of Earth. Normah and I are interested in that, because in our own small way already we have accomplished it. Our little son seems to combine the best of both his parent worlds. We are very proud of him.

[The end of *Voyage 13* by Ray Cummings]