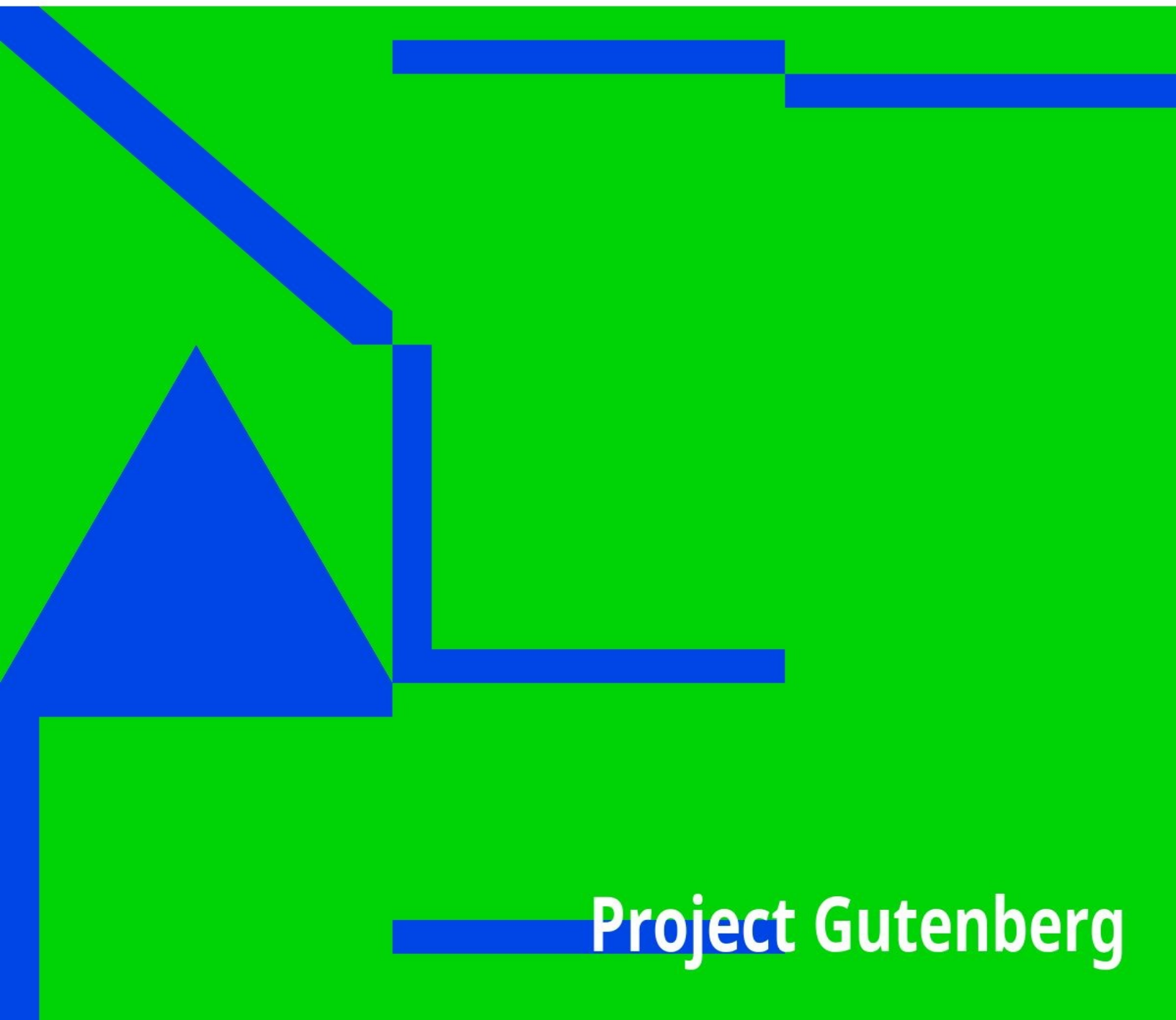


Medal of Honor

Mack Reynolds



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**MEDAL
OF
HONOR**



By **MACK REYNOLDS**

ILLUSTRATED by BERNKLAU

According to tradition, the man who held the Galactic Medal of Honor could do no wrong. In a strange way, Captain Don Mathers was to learn that this was true.

DON MATHERS snapped to attention, snapped a crisp salute to his superior, said, "Sub-lieutenant Donal Mathers reporting, sir."

The Commodore looked up at him, returned the salute, looked down at the report on the desk. He murmured, "Mathers, One Man Scout V-102. Sector A22-K223."

"Yes, sir," Don said.

The Commodore looked up at him again. "You've been out only five days, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir, on the third day I seemed to be developing trouble in my fuel injectors. I stuck it out for a couple of days, but then decided I'd better come in for a check." Don Mathers added, "As per instructions, sir."

"Ummm, of course. In a Scout you can hardly make repairs in space. If you have any doubts at all about your craft, orders are to return to base. It happens to every pilot at one time or another."

"Yes, sir."

"However, Lieutenant, it has happened to you four times out of your last six patrols."

Don Mathers said nothing. His face remained expressionless.

"The mechanics report that they could find nothing wrong with your engines,

Lieutenant."

"Sometimes, sir, whatever is wrong fixes itself. Possibly a spot of bad fuel. It finally burns out and you're back on good fuel again. But by that time you're also back to the base."

The Commodore said impatiently, "I don't need a lesson in the shortcomings of the One Man Scout, Lieutenant. I piloted one for nearly five years. I know their shortcomings—and those of their pilots."

"I don't understand, sir."

The Commodore looked down at the ball of his thumb. "You're out in space for anywhere from two weeks to a month. All alone. You're looking for Kraden ships which practically never turn up. In military history the only remotely similar situation I can think of were the pilots of World War One pursuit planes, in the early years of the war, when they still flew singly, not in formation. But even they were up there alone for only a couple of hours or so."

"Yes, sir," Don said meaninglessly.

The Commodore said, "We, here at command, figure on you fellows getting a touch of space cafard once in a while and, ah, *imagining* something wrong in the engines and coming in. But," here the Commodore cleared his throat, "four times out of six? Are you sure you don't need a psych, Lieutenant?"

Don Mathers flushed. "No, sir, I don't think so."

The Commodore's voice went militarily expressionless. "Very well, Lieutenant. You'll have the customary three weeks leave before going out again. Dismissed."

Don saluted snappily, wheeled and marched from the office.

Outside, in the corridor, he muttered a curse. What did that chairborne brass hat know about space cafard? About the depthless blackness, the wretchedness of free fall, the tides of primitive terror that swept you when the animal realization hit that you were away, away, away from the environment that gave you birth. That you were alone, alone, *alone*. A million, a million-million miles from your nearest fellow human. Space cafard, in a craft little larger than a good-sized closet! What did the Commodore know about it?

Don Mathers had conveniently forgotten the other's claim to five years' service in the Scouts.

He made his way from Space Command Headquarters, Third Division, to Harry's Nuevo Mexico Bar. He found the place empty at this time of the day and climbed onto a stool.

Harry said, "Hi, Lutenant, thought you were due for a patrol. How come you're back so soon?"

Don said coldly, "You prying into security subjects, Harry?"

"Well, gee, no Lutenant. You know me. I know all the boys. I was just making conversation."

"Look, how about some more credit, Harry? I don't have any pay coming up for a week."

"Why, sure. I got a boy on the light cruiser *New Taos*. Any spaceman's credit is good with me. What'll it be?"

"Tequila."

Tequila was the only concession the Nuevo Mexico Bar made to its name. Otherwise, it looked like every other bar has looked in every land and in every era. Harry poured, put out lemon and salt.

Harry said, "You hear the news this morning?"

"No, I just got in."

"Colin Casey died." Harry shook his head. "Only man in the system that held the Galactic Medal of Honor. Presidential proclamation, everybody in the system is to hold five minutes of silence for him at two o'clock, Sol Time. You know how many times that medal's been awarded, Lutenant?" Before waiting for an answer, Harry added, "Just thirty-six times."

Don added dryly, "Twenty-eight of them posthumously."

"Yeah." Harry, leaning on the bar before his sole customer, added in wonder, "But imagine. The Galactic Medal of Honor, the bearer of which can do no wrong. Imagine. You come to some town, walk into the biggest jewelry store,

pick up a diamond bracelet, and walk out. And what happens?"

Don growled, "The jewelry store owner would be over-reimbursed by popular subscription. And probably the mayor of the town would write you a letter thanking you for honoring his fair city by deigning to notice one of the products of its shops. Just like that."

"Yeah." Harry shook his head in continued awe. "And, imagine, if you shoot somebody you don't like, you wouldn't spend even a single night in the Nick."

Don said, "If you held the Medal of Honor, you wouldn't have to shoot anybody. Look, Harry, mind if I use the phone?"

"Go right ahead, Lootenant."

Dian Fuller was obviously in the process of packing when the screen summoned her. She looked into his face and said, surprised, "Why, Don, I thought you were on patrol."

"Yeah, I was. However, something came up."

She looked at him, a slight frown on her broad, fine forehead. "Again?"

He said impatiently, "Look, I called you to ask for a date. You're leaving for Callisto tomorrow. It's our last chance to be together. There's something in particular I wanted to ask you, Di."

She said, a touch irritated, "I'm packing, Don. I simply don't have time to see you again. I thought we said our goodbyes five days ago."

"This is important, Di."

She tossed the two sweaters she was holding into a chair, or something, off-screen, and faced him, her hands on her hips.

"No it isn't, Don. Not to me, at least. We've been all over this. Why keep torturing yourself? You're not ready for marriage, Don. I don't want to hurt you, but you simply aren't. Look me up, Don, in a few years."

"Di, just a couple of hours this afternoon."

Dian looked him full in the face and said, "Colin Casey finally died of his wounds this morning. The President has asked for five minutes of silence at two o'clock. Don, I plan to spend that time here alone in my apartment, possibly

crying a few tears for a man who died for me and the rest of the human species under such extreme conditions of gallantry that he was awarded the highest honor of which man has ever conceived. I wouldn't want to spend that five minutes while on a date with another member of my race's armed forces who had deserted his post of duty."

Don Mathers turned, after the screen had gone blank, and walked stiffly to a booth. He sank onto a chair and called flatly to Harry, "Another tequila. A double tequila. And don't bother with that lemon and salt routine."

An hour or so later a voice said, "You Sub-lieutenant Donal Mathers?"

Don looked up and snarled. "So what? Go away."

There were two of them. Twins, or could have been. Empty of expression, heavy of build. The kind of men fated to be ordered around at the pleasure of those with money, or brains, none of which they had or would ever have.

The one who had spoken said, "The boss wants to see you."

"Who the hell is the boss?"

"Maybe he'll tell you when he sees you," the other said, patiently and reasonably.

"Well, go tell the boss he can go to the ..."

The second of the two had been standing silently, his hands in his great-coat pockets. Now he brought his left hand out and placed a bill before Don Mathers. "The boss said to give you this."

It was a thousand-unit note. Don Mathers had never seen a bill of that denomination before, nor one of half that.

He pursed his lips, picked it up and looked at it carefully. Counterfeiting was a long lost art. It didn't even occur to him that it might be false.

"All right," Don said, coming to his feet. "Let's go see the boss, I haven't anything else to do and his calling card intrigues me."

At the curb, one of them summoned a cruising cab with his wrist screen and the three of them climbed into it. The one who had given Don the large denomination bill dialed the address and they settled back.

"So what does the boss want with me?" Don said.

They didn't bother to answer.

The Interplanetary Lines building was evidently their destination. The car whisked them up to the penthouse which topped it, and they landed on the terrace.

Seated in beach chairs, an autobar between them, were two men. They were both in their middle years. The impossibly corpulent one, Don Mathers vaguely recognized. From a newscast? From a magazine article? The other could have passed for a video stereotype villain, complete to the built-in sneer. Few men, in actuality, either look like or sound like the conventionalized villain. This was an exception, Don decided.

He scowled at them. "I suppose one of you is the boss," he said.

"That's right," the fat one grunted. He looked at Don's two escorts. "Scotty, you and Rogers take off."

They got back into the car and left.

The vicious-faced one said, "This is Mr. Lawrence Demming. I am his secretary."

Demming puffed, "Sit down, Lieutenant. What'll you have to drink? My secretary's name is Rostoff. Max Rostoff. Now we all know each other's names. That is, assuming you're Sub-lieutenant Donal Mathers."

Don said, "Tequila."

Max Rostoff dialed the drink for him and, without being asked, another cordial for his employer.

Don placed Demming now. Lawrence Demming, billionaire. Robber baron, he might have been branded in an earlier age. Transportation baron of the solar system. Had he been a pig he would have been butchered long ago; he was going unhealthily to grease.

Rostoff said, "You have identification?"

Don Mathers fingered through his wallet, brought forth his I.D. card. Rostoff

handed him his tequila, took the card and examined it carefully, front and back.

Demming huffed and said, "Your collar insignia tells me you pilot a Scout. What sector do you patrol, Lieutenant?"

Don sipped at the fiery Mexican drink, looked at the fat man over the glass. "That's military information, Mr. Demming."

Demming made a move with his plump lips. "Did Scotty give you a thousand-unit note?" He didn't wait for an answer. "You took it. Either give it back or tell me what sector you patrol, Lieutenant."

Don Mathers was aware of the fact that a man of Demming's position wouldn't have to go to overmuch effort to acquire such information, anyway. It wasn't of particular importance.

He shrugged and said, "A22-K223. I fly the V-102."

Max Rostoff handed back the I.D. card to Don and picked up a Solar System sector chart from the short-legged table that sat between the two of them and checked it. He said, "Your information was correct, Mr. Demming. He's the man."

Demming shifted his great bulk in his beach chair, sipped some of his cordial and said, "Very well. How would you like to hold the Galactic Medal of Honor, Lieutenant?"

Don Mathers laughed. "How would you?" he said.

Demming scowled. "I am not jesting, Lieutenant Mathers. I never jest. Obviously, I am not of the military. It would be quite impossible for me to gain such an award. But you are the pilot of a Scout."

"And I've got just about as much chance of winning the Medal of Honor as I have of giving birth to triplets."

The transportation magnate wiggled a disgustingly fat finger at him, "I'll arrange for that part of it."

Don Mathers goggled him. He blurted finally, "Like hell you will. There's not enough money in the system to fiddle with the awarding of the Medal of Honor. There comes a point, Demming, where even *your* dough can't carry the load."

Demming settled back in his chair, closed his eyes and grunted, "Tell him."

Max Rostoff took up the ball. "A few days ago, Mr. Demming and I flew in from Io on one of the Interplanetary Lines freighters. As you probably know, they are completely automated. We were alone in the craft."

"So?" Without invitation, Don Mathers leaned forward and dialed himself another tequila. He made it a double this time. A feeling of excitement was growing within him, and the drinks he'd had earlier had worn away. Something very big, very, very big, was developing. He hadn't the vaguest idea what.

"Lieutenant, how would you like to capture a Kraden light cruiser? If I'm not incorrect, probably Miro class."

Don laughed nervously, not knowing what the other was at but still feeling the growing excitement. He said, "In all the history of the war between our species, we've never captured a Kraden ship intact. It'd help a lot if we could."

"This one isn't exactly intact, but nearly so."

Don looked from Rostoff to Demming, and then back. "What in the hell are you talking about?"

"In your sector," Rostoff said, "we ran into a derelict Miro class cruiser. The crew—repulsive creatures—were all dead. Some thirty of them. Mr. Demming and I assumed that the craft had been hit during one of the actions between our fleet and theirs and that somehow both sides had failed to recover the wreckage. At any rate, today it is floating, abandoned of all life, in your sector." Rostoff added softly, "One has to approach quite close before any signs of battle are evident. The ship looks intact."

Demming opened his eyes again and said, "And you're going to capture it."

Don Mathers bolted his tequila, licked a final drop from the edge of his lip. "And why should that rate the most difficult decoration to achieve that we've ever instituted?"

"Because," Rostoff told him, his tone grating mockery, "you're going to radio in reporting a Miro class Kraden cruiser. We assume your superiors will order you to stand off, that help is coming, that your tiny Scout isn't large enough to do anything more than to keep the enemy under observation until a squadron arrives. But you will radio back that they are escaping and that you plan to

attack. When your reinforcements arrive, Lieutenant, you will have conquered the Kraden, single-handed, against odds of—what would you say, fifty to one?"

Don Mathers' mouth was dry, his palms moist. He said, "A One Man Scout against a Miro class cruiser? At least fifty to one, Mr. Rostoff. At least."

Demming grunted. "There would be little doubt of you getting the Galactic Medal of Honor, Lieutenant, especially since Colin Casey is dead and there isn't a living bearer of the award. Max, another drink for the Lieutenant."

Don said, "Look. Why? I think you might be right about getting the award. But why, and why me, and what's your percentage?"

Demming muttered, "Now we get to the point." He settled back in his chair again and closed his eyes while his secretary took over.

Max Rostoff leaned forward, his wolfish face very serious. "Lieutenant, the exploitation of the Jupiter satellites is in its earliest stages. There is every reason to believe that the new sources of radioactives on Callisto alone may mean the needed power edge that can give us the victory over the Kradens. Whether or not that is so, someone is going to make literally billions out of this new frontier."

"I still don't see ..."

"Lieutenant Mathers," Rostoff said patiently, "the bearer of the Galactic Medal of Honor is above law. He carries with him an unalienable prestige of such magnitude that ... Well, let me use an example. Suppose a bearer of the Medal of Honor formed a stock corporation to exploit the pitchblende of Callisto. How difficult would it be for him to dispose of the stock?"

Demming grunted. "And suppose there were a few, ah, crossed wires in the manipulation of the corporation's business?" He sighed deeply. "Believe me, Lieutenant Mathers, there are an incredible number of laws which have accumulated down through the centuries to hamper the business man. It is a continual fight to be able to carry on at all. The ability to do no legal wrong would be priceless in the development of a new frontier." He sighed again, so deeply as to make his bulk quiver. "Priceless."

Rostoff laid it on the line, his face a leer. "We are offering you a three-way

partnership, Mathers. You, with your Medal of Honor, are our front man. Mr. Demming supplies the initial capital to get underway. And I ..." He twisted his mouth with evil self-satisfaction. "I was present when the Kraden ship was discovered, so I'll have to be cut in. I'll supply the brains."

Demming grunted his disgust, but added nothing.

Don Mathers said slowly, looking down at the empty glass he was twirling in his fingers, "Look, we're up to our necks in a war to the death with the Kradens. In the long run it's either us or them. At a time like this you're suggesting that we fake an action that will eventually enable us to milk the new satellites to the tune of billions."

Demming grunted meaninglessly.

Don said, "The theory is that all men, all of us, ought to have our shoulders to the wheel. This project sounds to me like throwing rocks under it."

Demming closed his eyes.

Rostoff said, "Lieutenant, it's a dog-eat-dog society. If we eventually lick the Kradens, one of the very reasons will be because we're a dog-eat-dog society. Every man for himself and the devil take the hindmost. Our apologists dream up some beautiful gobbledygook phrases for it, such as free enterprise, but actually it's dog-eat-dog. Surprisingly enough, it works, or at least has so far. Right now, the human race needs the radioactives of the Jupiter satellites. In acquiring them, somebody is going to make a tremendous amount of money. Why shouldn't it be us?"

"Why not, if you—or we—can do it honestly?"

Demming's grunt was nearer a snort this time.

Rostoff said sourly, "Don't be naive, Lieutenant. Whoever does it, is going to need little integrity. You don't win in a sharper's card game by playing your cards honestly. The biggest sharper wins. We've just found a joker somebody dropped on the floor; if we don't use it, we're suckers."

Demming opened his pig eyes and said, "All this is on the academic side. We checked your background thoroughly before approaching you, Mathers. We know your record, even before you entered the Space Service. Just between the three of us, wouldn't you like out? There are a full billion men and women in our

armed forces, you can be spared. Let's say you've already done your share. Can't you see the potentialities in spending the rest of your life with the Galactic Medal of Honor in your pocket?"

It was there all right, drifting slowly. Had he done a more thorough job of his patrol, last time, he should have stumbled upon it himself.

If he had, there was no doubt that he would have at first reported it as an active enemy cruiser. Demming and Rostoff had been right. The Kraden ship looked untouched by battle.

That is, if you approached it from the starboard and slightly abaft the beam. From that angle, in particular, it looked untouched.

It had taken several circlings of the craft to come to that conclusion. Don Mathers was playing it very safe. This thing wasn't quite so simple as the others had thought. He wanted no slip-ups. His hand went to a food compartment and emerged with a space thermo which should have contained fruit juice, but didn't. He took a long pull at it.

Finally he dropped back into the position he'd decided upon, and flicked the switch of his screen.

A base lieutenant's face illuminated it. He yawned and looked questioningly at Don Mathers.

Don said, allowing a touch of excitement in his voice, "Mathers, Scout V-102, Sector A22-K223."

"Yeah, yeah ..." the other began, still yawning.

"I've spotted a Kraden cruiser. Miro class, I think."

The lieutenant flashed into movement. He slapped a button before him, the screen blinked, to be lit immediately again.

A gray-haired Fleet Admiral looked up from papers on his desk.

"Yes?"

Don Mathers rapped, "Miro class Kraden in sector A22-K223, sir. I'm lying

about fifty miles off. Undetected thus far—I think. He hasn't fired on me yet, at least."

The Admiral was already doing things with his hands. Two subalterns came within range of the screen, took orders, dashed off. The Admiral was rapidly firing orders into two other screens. After a moment, he looked up at Don Mathers again.

"Hang on, Lieutenant. Keep him under observation as long as you can. What're your exact coordinates?"

Don gave them to him and waited.

A few minutes later the Admiral returned to him. "Let's take a look at it, Lieutenant."

Don Mathers adjusted the screen to relay the Kraden cruiser. His palms were moist now, but everything was going to plan. He wished that he could take another drink.

The Admiral said, "Miro class, all right. Don't get too close, Lieutenant. They'll blast you to hell and gone. We've got a task force within an hour of you. Just hang on."

"Yes, sir," Don said. An hour. He was glad to know that. He didn't have much time in which to operate.

He let it go another five minutes, then he said, "Sir, they're increasing speed."

"Damn," the Admiral said, then rapid fired some more into his other screens, barking one order after another.

Don said, letting his voice go very flat, "I'm going in, sir. They're putting on speed. In another five minutes they'll be underway to the point where I won't be able to follow. They'll get completely clear."

The Admiral looked up, startled. "Don't be a fool."

"They'll get away, sir." Knowing that the other could see his every motion, Don Mathers hit the cocking lever of his flakflak gun with the heel of his right hand.

The Admiral snapped, "Let it go, you fool. You won't last a second." Then, his voice higher, "That's an order, Lieutenant!"

Don Mathers flicked off his screen. He grimaced sourly and then descended on the Kraden ship, his flakflak gun beaming it. He was going to have to expend every erg of energy in his Scout to burn the other ship up to the point where his attack would look authentic, and to eliminate all signs of previous action.

The awarding of the Galactic Medal of Honor, as always, was done in the simplest of ceremonies.

Only the President and Captain Donal Mathers himself were present in the former's office in the Presidential Palace.

However, as they both knew, every screen in the Solar System was tuned into the ceremony.

Don Mathers saluted and stood to attention.

The President read the citation. It was very short, as Medal of Honor citations were always.

... for conspicuous gallantry far and beyond the call of duty, in which you single-handedly, and against unbelievable odds, attacked and destroyed an enemy cruiser while flying a Scout armed only with a short-beam flakflak gun ...

He pinned a small bit of ribbon and metal to Don Mathers' tunic. It was an inconspicuous, inordinately ordinary medal, the Galactic Medal of Honor.

Don said hoarsely, "Thank you, sir."

The President shook hands with him and said, "I am President of the United Solar System, Captain Mathers, supposedly the highest rank to which a man can attain." He added simply, "I wish I were you."

Afterwards, alone in New Washington and wanting to remain alone, Don Mathers strolled the streets for a time, bothered only occasionally when someone recognized his face and people would stop and applaud.

He grinned inwardly.

He had a suspicion already that after a time he'd get used to it and weary to death of it, but right now it was still new and fun. Who was the flyer, way back in

history, the one who first flew the Atlantic in a propeller-driven aircraft? His popularity must have been something like this.

He went into O'Donnell's at lunch time and as he entered the orchestra broke off the popular tune they were playing and struck up the Interplanetary Anthem. The manager himself escorted him to his table and made suggestions as to the specialties and the wine.

When he first sat down the other occupants of the restaurant, men and women, had stood and faced him and applauded. Don flushed. There could be too much of a good thing.

After the meal, a fantastic production, Don finished his cigar and asked the head waiter for his bill, reaching for his wallet.

The other smiled. "Captain, I am afraid your money is of no value in O'Donnell's, not for just this luncheon but whenever you honor us." The head waiter paused and added, "in fact, Captain, I doubt if there is a restaurant in the Solar System where your money holds value. Or that there will ever be."

Don Mathers was taken aback. He was only beginning to realize the ramifications of his holding his Galactic Medal of Honor.

At Space Command Headquarters, Third Division, Don came to attention before the Commodore's desk and tossed the other a salute.

The Commodore returned it snappily and leaned back in his chair. "Take a seat, Captain. Nice to see you again." He added pleasantly, "Where in the world have you been?"

Don Mathers slumped into a chair, said wearily, "On a bust. The bust to end all busts."

The Commodore chuckled. "Don't blame you," he said.

"It was quite a bust," Don said.

"Well," the Commodore chuckled again, "I don't suppose we can throw you in the guardhouse for being A.W.O.L. Not in view of your recent decoration."

There was nothing to say to that.

"By the way," the Commodore said, "I haven't had the opportunity to congratulate you on your Kraden. That was quite a feat, Captain."

"Thank you, sir," Don added, modestly, "rather foolish of me, I suppose."

"Very much so. On such foolishness are heroic deeds based, Captain." The Commodore looked at him questioningly. "You must have had incredible luck. The only way we've been able to figure it was that his detectors were on the blink. That may be what happened."

"Yes, sir," Don nodded quickly. "That's the way I figure it. And my first blast must have disrupted his fire control or something."

The Commodore said, "He didn't get in any return fire at all?"

"A few blasts. But by that time I was in too close and moving too fast. Fact of the matter is, sir, I don't think they ever recovered from my first beaming of them."

"No, I suppose not," the Commodore said musingly. "It's a shame you had to burn them so badly. We've never recovered a Kraden ship in good enough shape to give our techs something to work on. It might make a basic difference in the war, particularly if there was something aboard that'd give us some indication of where they were coming from. We've been fighting this war in our backyard for a full century. It would help if we could get into *their* backyard for a change. It's problematical how long we'll be able to hold them off, at this rate."

Don Mathers said uncomfortably, "Well, it's not as bad as all that, sir. We've held them this far."

His superior grunted. "We've held them this far because we've been able to keep out enough patrol ships to give us ample warning when one of their task forces come in. Do you know how much fuel that consumes, Captain?"

"Well, I know it's a lot."

"So much so that Earth's industry is switching back to petroleum and coal. Every ounce of radioactives is needed by the Fleet. Even so, it's just a matter of time."

Don Mathers pursed his lips. "I didn't know it was that bad."

The Commodore smiled sourly at him. "I'm afraid I'm being a wet blanket thrown over your big bust of a celebration, Captain. Tell me, how does it feel to

hold the system's highest award?"

Don shook his head, marveling. "Fantastic, sir. Of course, like any member of the services I've always known of the Medal of Honor, but ... well, nobody ever expects to get it." He added wryly, "Certainly not while he's still alive and in health. Why, sir, do you realize that I haven't been able to spend one unit of money since?" There was an element of awe in his voice. "Sir, do you realize that not even a beggar will take currency from me?"

The Commodore nodded in appreciation. "You must understand the position you occupy, Captain. Your feat was inspiring enough, but that's not all of it. In a way you combine a popular hero with an *Unknown Soldier* element. Awarding you the Galactic Medal of Honor makes a symbol of you. A symbol representing all the millions of unsung heroes and heroines who have died fighting for the human species. It's not a light burden to carry on your shoulders, Captain Mathers. I would imagine it a very humbling honor."

"Well, yes, sir," Don said.

The Commodore switched his tone of voice. "That brings us to the present, and what your next assignment is to be. Obviously, it wouldn't do for you to continue in a Scout. Big brass seems to be in favor of using you for morale and ..."

Don Mathers cleared his throat and interrupted. "Sir, I've decided to drop out of the Space Service."

"Drop out!" The other stared at Mathers, uncomprehending. "We're at war, Captain!"

Don nodded seriously. "Yes, sir. And what you just said is true. I couldn't be used any longer in a Scout. I'd wind up selling bonds and giving talks to old ladies' clubs."

"Well, hardly that, Captain."

"No, sir, I think I'd really be of more use out of the services. I'm tendering my resignation and making arrangements to help in the developing of Callisto and the other Jupiter satellites."

The Commodore said nothing. His lips seemed whiter than before.

Don Mathers said doggedly, "Perhaps my prestige will help bring volunteers to work the new mines out there. If they see me, well, sacrificing, putting up with the hardships ..."

The Commodore said evenly, "Mr. Mathers, I doubt if you will ever have to put up with hardships again, no matter where you make your abode. However, good luck. You deserve it."

Outside headquarters, Don Mathers summoned a cab and dialed his hotel. On the way over, he congratulated himself. It had gone easier than he had expected, really. Although, come to think of it, there wasn't a damn thing that the brass could do.

He had to laugh to himself.

Imagine if he'd walked in on the Commodore a month ago and announced that he was going to *drop out* of the Space Service. He would have been dropped all right, all right. Right into the lap of a squadron of psycho experts.

At the hotel he shucked his uniform, an action which gave him considerable gratification, and dressed in one of the score of civilian costumes that filled his closets to overflowing. He took pleasure in estimating what this clothing would have cost in terms of months of Space Service pay for a Sub-lieutenant or even a Captain. *Years, my boy, years.*

He looked at himself in the dressing-room mirror with satisfaction, then turned to the autobar and dialed himself a stone-age-old Metaxa. He'd lost his taste for the plebian tequila in the last few days.

He held the old Greek brandy to the light and wondered pleurably what the stuff cost, per pony glass. Happily, he'd never have to find out.

He tossed the drink down and whistling, took his private elevator to the garages in the second level of the hotel's basement floors. He selected a limousine and dialed the Interplanetary Lines building.

He left the car at the curb before the main entrance, ignoring all traffic regulations and entered the building, still whistling softly and happily to himself. He grinned when a small crowd gathered outside and smiled and clapped their hands. He grinned and waved to them.

A receptionist hurried to him and he told her he wanted to see either Mr. Demming or Mr. Rostoff, and then when she offered to escort him personally he noticed her pixie-like cuteness and said, "What're you doing tonight, Miss?"

Her face went pale. "Oh, anything, sir," she said weakly.

He grinned at her. "Maybe I'll take you up on that if I'm not too busy."

He had never seen anyone so taken aback. She said, all flustered, "I'm Toni. Toni Fitzgerald. You can just call this building and ask for me. Any time."

"Maybe I'll do that," he smiled. "But now, let's see Old Man Demming."

That took her back too. Aside from being asked for a date—if asked could be the term—by the system's greatest celebrity, she was hearing for the first time the interplanetary tycoon being called *Old Man Demming*.

She said, "Oh, right this way, Captain Mathers."

Don said, "Mr. Mathers now, I'm afraid. I have new duties."

She looked up into his face. "You'll always be Captain Mathers to me, sir." She added, softly and irrelevantly, "My two brothers were lost on the *Minerva* in that action last year off Pluto." She took a deep breath, which only stressed her figure. "I've applied six times for Space Service, but they won't take me."

They were in an elevator now. Don said, "That's too bad, Toni. However, the Space Service isn't as romantic as you might think."

"Yes, sir," Toni Fitzgerald said, her soul in her eyes. "You ought to know, sir."

Don was somehow irritated. He said nothing further until they reached the upper stories of the gigantic office building. He thanked her after she'd turned him over to another receptionist.

Don Mathers' spirits had been restored by the time he was brought to the door of Max Rostoff's office. His new guide evidently hadn't even bothered to check on the man's availability, before ushering Mathers into the other's presence.

Max Rostoff looked up from his desk, wolfishly aggressive-looking as ever. "Why, Captain," he said. "How fine to see you again. Come right in. Martha, that will be all."

Martha gave the interplanetary hero one more long look and then turned and left.

As soon as the door closed behind her, Max Rostoff turned and snarled, "Where have you been, you rummy?"

He couldn't have shocked Don Mathers more if he'd suddenly sprouted a unicorn's horn.

"We've been looking for you for a week," Rostoff snapped. "Out of one bar, into another, our men couldn't catch up with you. Dammit, don't you realize we've got to get going? We've got a dozen documents for you to sign. We've got to get this thing underway, before somebody else does."

Don blurted, "You can't talk to me that way."

It was the other's turn to stare. Max Rostoff said, low and dangerously, "No? Why can't I?"

Don glared at him.

Max Rostoff said, low and dangerously, "Let's get this straight, Mathers. To everybody else, but Demming and me, you might be the biggest hero in the Solar System. But you know what you are to us?"

Don felt his indignation seeping from him.

"To us," Max Rostoff said flatly, "you're just another demi-buttocked incompetent on the make." He added definitely, "And make no mistake, Mathers, you'll continue to have a good thing out of this only so long as we can use you."

A voice from behind them said, "Let me add to that, period, end of paragraph."

It was Lawrence Demming, who'd just entered from an inner office.

He said, even his voice seemed fat, "And now that's settled, I'm going to call in some lawyers. While they're around, we conduct ourselves as though we're three equal partners. On paper, we will be."

"Wait a minute, now," Don blurted. "What do you think you're pulling? The agreement was we split this whole thing three ways."

Demming's jowls wobbled as he nodded. "That's right. And your share of the

loot is your Galactic Medal of Honor. That and the dubious privilege of having the whole thing in your name. You'll keep your medal, and we'll keep our share." He growled heavily, "You don't think you're getting the short end of the stick, do you?"

Max Rostoff said, "Let's knock this off and get the law boys in. We've got enough paper work to keep us busy the rest of the week." He sat down again at his desk and looked up at Don. "Then we'll all be taking off for Callisto, to get things under way. With any luck, in six months we'll have every ounce of pitchblende left in the system sewed up."

There was a crowd awaiting his ship at the Callisto Spaceport. A crowd modest by Earth standards but representing a large percentage of the small population of Jupiter's moon.

On the way out, a staff of the system's best speech writers, and two top professional actors had been working with him.

Don Mathers gave a short preliminary talk at the spaceport, and then the important one, the one that was broadcast throughout the system, that night from his suite at the hotel. He'd been well rehearsed, and they'd kept him from the bottle except for two or three quick ones immediately before going on.

The project at hand is to extract the newly discovered deposits of pitchblende on these satellites of Jupiter.

He paused impressively before continuing.

It's a job that cannot be done in slipshod, haphazard manner. The system's need for radioactives cannot be overstressed.

In short, fellow humans, we must allow nothing to stand in the way of all out, unified effort to do this job quickly and efficiently. My associates and I have formed a corporation to manage this crash program. We invite all to participate by purchasing stock. I will not speak of profits, fellow humans, because in this emergency we all scorn them. However, as I say, you are invited to participate.

Some of the preliminary mining concessions are at present in the hands of individuals or small corporations. It will be necessary that these turn over their holdings to our single all-embracing organization for the sake of efficiency. Our experts will evaluate such holdings and recompense the owners.

Don Mathers paused again for emphasis.

This is no time for quibbling. All must come in. If there are those who put private gain before the needs of the system, then pressures must be found to be exerted against them.

We will need thousands and tens of thousands of trained workers to operate our mines, our mills, our refineries. In the past, skilled labor here on the satellites was used to double or even triple the wage rates on Earth and the settled planets and satellites. I need only repeat, this is no time for personal gain and quibbling. The corporation announces proudly that it will pay only prevailing Earth rates. We will not insult our employees by "bribing" them to patriotism through higher wages.

There was more, along the same lines.

It was all taken very well. Indeed, with enthusiasm.

On the third day, at an office conference, Don waited for an opening to say, "Look, somewhere here on Callisto is a young woman named Dian Fuller. After we get me established in an office, I'd like her to be my secretary."

Demming looked up from some reports he was scanning. He grunted to Max Rostoff, "Tell him," and went back to the papers.

Max Rostoff, settled back into his chair. He said to the two bodyguards, stationed at the door, "Scotty, Rogers, go and make the arrangements to bring that damned prospector into line."

When they were gone, Rostoff turned back to Don Mathers. "You don't need an office, Mathers. All you need is to go back to your bottles. Just don't belt it so hard that you can't sign papers every time we need a signature."

Don flushed angrily, "Look, don't push me, you two. You need me. Plenty. In fact, from what I can see, this corporation needs me more than it does you." He looked scornfully at Demming. "Originally, the idea was that you put up the money. What money? We have fifty-one percent of the stock in my name, but all the credit units needed are coming from sales of stock." He turned to Rostoff. "You were supposed to put up the brains. What brains? We've hired the best mining engineers, the best technicians, to do their end, the best corporation

executives to handle that end. You're not needed."

Demming grunted amusement at the short speech, but didn't bother to look up from his perusal.

Max Rostoff's face had grown wolfishly thin in his anger. "Look, bottle-baby," he sneered, "you're the only one that's vulnerable in this set-up. There's not a single thing that Demming and I can be held to account for. You have no beefs coming, for that matter. You're getting everything you ever wanted. You've got the best suite in the best hotel on Callisto. You eat the best food the Solar System provides. And, most important of all to a rummy, you drink the best booze and as much of it as you want. What's more, unless either Demming or I go to the bother, you'll never be exposed. You'll live your life out being the biggest hero in the system."

It was Don Mathers' turn to sneer. "What do you mean, I'm the only one vulnerable? There's no evidence against me, Rostoff, and you know it. Who'd listen to you if you sounded off? I burned that Kraden cruiser until there wasn't a sign to be found that would indicate it wasn't in operational condition when I first spotted it."

Demming grunted his amusement again.

Max Rostoff laughed sourly. "Don't be an ass, Mathers. We took a series of photos of that derelict when we stumbled on it. Not only can we prove you didn't knock it out, we can prove that it was in good shape before you worked it over. I imagine the Fleet technician would have loved to have seen the inner workings of that Kraden cruiser—before you loused it up."

Demming chuckled flatly. "I wonder what kind of a court martial they give a hero who turns out to be a saboteur."

He ran into her, finally, after he'd been on Callisto for nearly eight months. Actually, he didn't remember the circumstances of their meeting. He was in an alcoholic daze and the fog rolled out, and there she was across the table from him.

Don shook his head, and looked about the room. They were in some sort of night spot. He didn't recognize it.

He licked his lips, scowled at the taste of stale vomit.

He slurred, "Hello, Di."

Dian Fuller said, "Hi, Don."

He said, "I must've blanked out. Guess I've been hitting it too hard."

She laughed at him. "You mean you don't remember all the things you've been telling me the past two hours?" She was obviously quite sober. Dian never had been much for the sauce.

Don looked at her narrowly. "What've I been telling you for the past two hours?"

"Mostly about how it was when you were a little boy. About fishing, and your first .22 rifle. And the time you shot the squirrel, and then felt so sorry."

"Oh," Don said. He ran his right hand over his mouth.

There was a champagne bucket beside him, but the bottle in it was empty. He looked about the room for a waiter.

Dian said gently, "Do you really think you need any more, Don?"

He looked across the table at her. She was as beautiful as ever. No, that wasn't right. She was pretty, but not beautiful. She was just a damn pretty girl, not one of these glamour items.

Don said, "Look, I can't remember. Did we get married?"

Her laugh tinkled. "Married! I only ran into you two or three hours ago." She hesitated before saying further, "I had assumed that you were deliberately avoiding me. Callisto isn't that big."

Don Mathers said slowly, "Well, if we're not married, let me decide when I want another bottle of the grape, eh?"

Dian flushed. "Sorry, Don."

The headwaiter approached bearing another magnum of vintage wine. He beamed at Don Mathers. "Having a good time, sir?"

"Okay," Don said shortly. When the other was gone he downed a full glass, felt

the fumes almost immediately.

He said to Dian, "I haven't been avoiding you, Di. We just haven't met. The way I remember, the last time we saw each other, back on Earth, you gave me quite a slap in the face. The way I remember, you didn't think I was hero enough for you." He poured another glass of the champagne.

Di's face was still flushed. She said, her voice low, "I misunderstood you, Don. Even after your brilliant defeat of that Kraden cruiser, I still, I admit, think I basically misunderstood you. I told myself that it could have been done by any pilot of a Scout, given that one in a million break. It just happened to be you, who made that suicide dive attack that succeeded. A thousand other pilots might also have taken the million to one suicide chance rather than let the Kraden escape."

"Yeah," Don said. Even in his alcohol, he was surprised at her words. He said gruffly, "Sure anybody might've done it. Pure luck. But why'd you change your mind about me, then? How come the switch of heart?"

"Because of what you've done since, darling."

He closed one eye, the better to focus.

"Since?"

He recognized the expression in her eyes. A touch of star gleam. That little girl back on Earth, the receptionist at the Interplanetary Lines building, she'd had it. In fact, in the past few months Don had seen it in many feminine faces. And all for him.

Dian said, "Instead of cashing in on your prestige, you've been devoting yourself to something even more necessary to the fight than bringing down individual Kraden cruisers."

Don looked at her. He could feel a nervous tic beginning in his left eyebrow. Finally, he reached for the champagne again and filled his glass. He said, "You really go for this hero stuff, don't you?"

She said nothing, but the star shine was still in her eyes.

He made his voice deliberately sour. "Look, suppose I asked you to come back to my apartment with me tonight?"

"Yes," she said softly.

"And told you to bring your overnight bag along," he added brutally.

Dian looked into his face. "Why are you twisting yourself, your inner-self, so hard, Don? Of course I'd come—if that's what you wanted."

"And then," he said flatly, "suppose I kicked you out in the morning?"

Dian winced, but she kept her eyes even with his, her own moist now. "You forget," she whispered. "You have been awarded the Galactic Medal of Honor, the bearer of which can do no wrong."

"Oh, God," Don muttered. He filled his glass, still again, motioned to a nearby waiter.

"Yes, sir," the waiter said.

Don said, "Look, in about five minutes I'm going to pass out. See that I get back to my hotel, will you? And that this young lady gets to her home. And, waiter, just send my bill to the hotel too."

The other bowed. "The owner's instructions, sir, are that Captain Mathers must never see a bill in this establishment."

Dian said, "*Don!*"

He didn't look at her. He raised his glass to his mouth and shortly afterward the fog rolled in again.

When it rolled out, the unfamiliar taste of black coffee was in his mouth. He shook his head for clarity.

He seemed to be in some working class restaurant. Next to him, in a booth, was a fresh-faced Sub-lieutenant of the—Don squinted at the collar tabs—yes, of the Space Service. A Scout pilot.

Don stuttered, "What's ... goin' ... on?"

The pilot said apologetically, "Sub-lieutenant Pierpont, sir. You seemed so far under the weather, I took over."

"Oh, you did, eh?"

"Well, yes, sir. You were, well, reclining in the gutter, sir. In spite of your, well, appearance, your condition, I recognized you, sir."

"Oh." His stomach was an objecting turmoil.

The Lieutenant said, "Want to try some more of this coffee now, sir? Or maybe some soup or a sandwich?"

Don groaned. "No. No, thanks. Don't think I could hold it down."

The pilot grinned. "You must've thrown a classic, sir."

"I guess so. What time is it? No, that doesn't make any difference. What's the date?"

Pierpont told him.

It was hard to believe. The last he could remember he'd been with Di. With Di in some nightclub. He wondered how long ago that had been.

He fumbled in his clothes for a smoke and couldn't find one. He didn't want it anyway.

He growled at the Lieutenant, "Well, how go the One Man Scouts?"

Pierpont grinned back at him. "Glad to be out of them, sir?"

"Usually."

Pierpont looked at him strangely. "I don't blame you, I suppose. But it isn't as bad these days as it used to be while you were still in the Space Service, sir."

Don grunted. "How come? Two weeks to a month, all by yourself, watching the symptoms of space cafard progress. Then three weeks of leave, to get drunk in, and then another stretch in space."

The pilot snorted deprecation. "That's the way it used to be." He fingered the spoon of his coffee cup. "That's the way it still should be, of course. But it isn't. They're spreading the duty around now and I spend less than one week out of four on patrol."

Don hadn't been listening too closely, but now he looked up. "What'd'ya mean?"

Pierpont said, "I mean, sir, I suppose this isn't bridging security, seeing who you

are, but fuel stocks are so low that we can't maintain full patrols any more."

There was a cold emptiness in Don Mathers' stomach.

He said, "Look, I'm still woozy. Say that again, Lieutenant."

The Lieutenant told him again.

Don Mathers rubbed the back of his hand over his mouth and tried to think.

He said finally, "Look, Lieutenant. First let's get another cup of coffee into me, and maybe that sandwich you were talking about. Then would you help me to get back to my hotel?"

By the fourth day, his hands weren't trembling any longer. He ate a good breakfast, dressed carefully, then took a hotel limousine down to the offices of the Mathers, Demming and Rostoff Corporation.

At the entrance to the inner sanctum the heavysset Scotty looked up at his approach. He said, "The boss has been looking for you, Mr. Mathers, but right now you ain't got no appointment, have you? Him and Mr. Rostoff is having a big conference. He says to keep everybody out."

"That doesn't apply to me, Scotty," Don snapped. "Get out of my way."

Scotty stood up, reluctantly, but barred the way. "He said it applied to everybody, Mr. Mathers."

Don put his full weight into a blow that started at his waist, dug deep into the other's middle. Scotty doubled forward, his eyes bugging. Don Mathers gripped his hands together into a double fist and brought them upward in a vicious uppercut.

Scotty fell forward and to the floor.

Don stood above him momentarily, watchful for movement which didn't develop. The hefty bodyguard must have been doing some easy living himself. He wasn't as tough as he looked.

Don knelt and fished from under the other's left arm a vicious-looking short-barrelled scrambler. He tucked it under his own jacket into his belt, then turned,

opened the door and entered the supposedly barred office.

Demming and Rostoff looked up from their work across a double desk.

Both scowled. Rostoff opened his mouth to say something and Don Mathers rapped, "Shut up."

Rostoff blinked at him. Demming leaned back in his swivel chair. "You're sober for a change," he wheezed, almost accusingly.

Don Mathers pulled up a stenographer's chair and straddled it, leaning his arms on the back. He said coldly, "Comes a point when even the lowest worm turns. I've been checking on a few things."

Demming grunted amusement.

Don said, "Space patrols have been cut far below the danger point."

Rostoff snorted. "Is that supposed to interest us? That's the problem of the military—and the government."

"Oh, it interests us, all right," Don growled. "Currently, Mathers, Demming and Rostoff control probably three-quarters of the system's radioactives."

Demming said in greasy satisfaction, "More like four-fifths."

"Why?" Don said bluntly. "Why are we doing what we're doing?"

They both scowled, but another element was present in their expressions too. They thought the question unintelligent.

Demming closed his eyes in his porcine manner and grunted, "Tell him."

Rostoff said, "Look, Mathers, don't be stupid. Remember when we told you, during that first interview, that we wanted your name in the corporation, among other reasons, because we could use a man who was above law? That a maze of ridiculously binding ordinances have been laid on business down through the centuries?"

"I remember," Don said bitterly.

"Well, it goes both ways. Government today is also bound, very strongly, and even in great emergency, not to interfere in business. These complicated laws balance each other, you might say. Our whole legal system is based upon them.

Right now, we've got government right where we want it. This is free enterprise, Mathers, at its pinnacle. Did you ever hear of Jim Fisk and his attempt to corner gold in 1869, the so-called Black Friday affair? Well, Jim Fisk was a peanut peddler compared to us."

"What's this got to do with the Fleet having insufficient fuel to ..." Don Mathers stopped as comprehension hit him. "You're holding our radioactives off the market, pressuring the government for a price rise which it can't afford."

Demming opened his eyes and said fatly, "For triple the price, Mathers. Before we're through, we'll corner half the wealth of the system."

Don said, "But ... but the species is ... at ... *war*."

Rostoff sneered, "You seem to be getting noble rather late in the game, Mathers. Business is business."

Don Mathers was shaking his head. "We immediately begin selling our radioactives at cost of production. I might remind you gentlemen that although we're supposedly a three-way partnership, actually, everything's in my name. You thought you had me under your thumb so securely that it was safe—and you probably didn't trust each other. Well, I'm blowing the whistle."

Surprisingly fast for such a fat man, Lawrence Demming's hand flitted into a desk drawer to emerge with a twin of the scrambler tucked in Don's belt.

Don Mathers grinned at him, even as he pushed his jacket back to reveal the butt of his own weapon. He made no attempt to draw it, however.

He said softly, "Shoot me, Demming, and you've killed the most popular man in the Solar System. You'd never escape the gas chamber, no matter how much money you have. On the other hand, if I shoot you ..."

He put a hand into his pocket and it emerged with a small, inordinately ordinary bit of ribbon and metal. He displayed it on his palm.

The fat man's face whitened at the ramifications and his hand relaxed to let the gun drop to the desk. "Listen, Don," he broke out. "We've been unrealistic with you. We'll reverse ourselves and split, honestly—split three ways."

Don Mathers laughed at him. "Trying to bribe me with money, Demming? Why

don't you realize, that I'm the only man in existence who has no need for money, who can't spend money? That my fellow men—whom I've done such a good job of betraying—have honored me to a point where money is meaningless?"

Rostoff snatched up the fallen gun, snarling, "I'm calling your bluff, you gutless rummy."

Don Mathers said, "Okay, Rostoff. There's just two other things I want to say first. One—I don't care if I die or not. Two—you're only twenty feet or so away, but you know what? I think you're probably a lousy shot. I don't think you've had much practice. I think I can get my scrambler out and cut you down before you can finish me." He grinned thinly, "Wanta try?"

Max Rostoff snarled a curse and his finger whitened on the trigger.

Don Mathers fell sideward, his hand streaking for his weapon. Without thought there came back to him the long hours of training in hand weapons, in judo, in hand to hand combat. He went into action with cool confidence.

At the spaceport he took a cab to the Presidential Palace. It was an auto-cab, of course, and at the Palace gates he found he had no money on him. He snorted wearily. It was the first time in almost a year that he'd had to pay for anything.

Four sentries were standing at attention. He said, "Do one of you boys have some coins to feed into this slot? I'm fresh out."

A sergeant grinned, approached, and did the necessary.

Don Mathers said wearily, "I don't know how you go about this. I don't have an appointment, but I want to see the President."

"We can turn you over to one of the assistant secretaries, Captain Mathers," the sergeant said. "We can't go any further than that. While we're waiting, what's the chances of getting your autograph, sir? I gotta kid ..."

It wasn't nearly as complicated as he'd thought it was going to be. In half an hour he was seated in the office where he'd received his decoration only—how long ago was it, really less than a year?

He told the story briefly, making no effort to spare himself. At the end he stood up long enough to put a paper in front of the other, then sat down again.

"I'm turning the whole corporation over to the government...."

The President said, "Wait a minute. My administration does not advocate State ownership of industry."

"I know. When the State controls industry you only put the whole mess off one step, the question then becomes, who controls the State? However, I'm not arguing political economy with you, sir. You didn't let me finish. I was going to say, I'm turning it over to the government to untangle, even while making use of the inventories of radioactives. There's going to be a lot of untangling to do. Reimbursing the prospectors and small operators who were blackjacked out of their holdings by our super-corporation. Reimbursing of the miners and other laborers who were talked into accepting low pay in the name of patriotism." Don Mathers cut it short. "Oh, it's quite a mess."

"Yes," the President said. "And you say Max Rostoff is dead?"

"That's right. And Demming off his rocker. I think he always was a little unbalanced and the prospect of losing all that money, the greatest fortune ever conceived of, tipped the scales."

The President said, "And what about you, Donal Mathers?"

Don took a deep breath. "I wish I was back in the Space Services, frankly. Back where I was when all this started. However, I suppose that after my court martial, there won't be ..."

The President interrupted gently. "You seem to forget, Captain Mathers. You carry the Galactic Medal of Honor, the bearer of which can do no wrong."

Don Mathers gaped at him.

The President smiled at him, albeit a bit sourly. "It would hardly do for human morale to find out our supreme symbol of heroism was a phoney, Captain. There will be no trial, and you will retain your decoration."

"But I don't want it!"

"I'm afraid that is the cross you'll have to bear the rest of your life, Captain Mathers. I don't suppose it will be an easy one."

His eyes went to a far corner of the room, but unseeingly. He said after a long

moment, "However, I am not so very sure about your not deserving your award, Captain."

THE END

Transcriber's Note: This etext was produced from *Amazing Science Fiction Stories* November 1960. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed. Minor spelling and typographical errors have been corrected without note. Variant spellings have been retained.

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