



Final Victim, Ray Bradbury

Final Victim

Amazing Stories (1946)

Hunting a criminal is tough enough, but it's even tougher when it's on a bit of Hell's own rock in the void of space

THE space-suited figure scrambled frantically over the edge of the ragged asteroid cliff, and lay panting from the exertion of the long climb upward. The pale face beneath the helmet was drawn in a tight grimace as it stared at the tiny Patrol ship on the plain below. No access to it now! He was trapped.

The young man rose to his feet, stared down the steep ravine he had just traversed. He saw the plodding figure of the Patrolman coming up toward him. There was a frightening relentlessness about that figure. He caught a dull glint of metal and knew the Patrolman had drawn his atom-blast.

"If only I hadn't lost my gun, down there!" And then he laughed bitterly, for he knew he never would have used it. He stepped out in plain sight, threw his hands up in the universal gesture of surrender. His mind was awry with bitter thoughts. He had never killed anyone in all his life! But the Patrol thought he had, and that's what counted now. He was glad it was all over. He would surrender, go back and face trial though the evidence was all against him.

Now the Patrolman's bulging, space-suited figure loomed up before him just ten yards away. He raised his hands still higher to make sure the other saw them.

The Patrolman saw them all right. His lips parted in a wide grin beneath his Crystyte plate. He lifted his big hand, full of dull metal, and took careful aim at the young man limned against the cobalt heaven.

There was something strange, and wrong, in the big Patrolman's grin. The youth waved frantically with his hands and screamed terrified words that only echoed inside his helmet until his eardrums rang. This was crazy! This couldn't happen! It was never in the Patrol's code to kill men in cold blood....

His thoughts abruptly ceased. His helmet plate shattered inward and his face was a mask of red. He screamed, but it ended in a gurgling moan, as he tried with futile fingers to tear out the slug that was chewing at his brain. He sank to his knees, toppled over the cliff and did a crazy jerking dance as his gravity plates pulled him to the rock eighty feet below.

Jim Skeel, Patrolman, still grinned.

"Number fourteen," said he, and holstered his gun.

Jim Skeel stalked triumphantly down to the base of the cliff. He exulted with all six-feet-four of his big sun-parched body. He felt the palms of his hands a little sweaty as he clenched and unclenched them, and a curious tremor came over him as he viewed the body lying there. The familiar pounding of blood was in his temples again, a hot, fierce pounding,

FOR a long moment he closed his eyes tight and pressed hard fists against his temples and stood there trembling. But the fierce remembrance would not go away, as he knew it would not. Again the scene was with him that had haunted him through the years. Once again the flash of electro-guns tore through his tortured brain, and he saw defenseless men all about him dying and he heard their screams as they died....

He stood quite still until his trembling stopped and that feeling went away. Then with his toe he nudged the young man's body so that it rolled over, and the pale leprous sunlight licked at the blood-masked features. "Pretty good shot," Skeel grunted. He bent and searched the body, retrieving all identification cards.

A sudden dark shadow swept over the scene. Skeel looked up, startled. Then he knew what it was. Utter night had come without any warning, as it always did on these slowly rotating asteroids. Toward the caverns and crannies at the base of the cliff he glimpsed vague horrid things, pale and wriggling, with sensitive amoeboid tentacles where eyes

should have been. He heard strange sibilances from these asteroid creatures who hated light but loved the dark and loved blood, which they got too seldom.

Skeel arose hastily and hurried to his Patrol cruiser a short distance away. He looked back but once, and glimpsed scores of the vague nightmare shapes swarming over a prone human form there in the cliff shadow.

CHAPTER II

ARRIVING at the Federation Patrol headquarters on Ceres Base, Skeel eased his solo cruiser into the glassite dome with an expert hand. None of the men spoke to him. They tried not even to look at him. But if Jim Skeel noticed this he gave no indication. He sauntered over to the door marked "Commander" and entered without knocking.

Commander Anders looked up from his desk. At sight of Skeel his leathery jaw tightened a little. A look of distaste flashed into his steel gray eyes.

"Reporting, sir," said Skeel. He carefully, a little too carefully, spread out the identification cards he had taken from the fugitive's pockets.

Anders rose slowly to his feet. His knuckles were white as he placed his fists on the desk and leaned tautly forward.

"You didn't capture the man?" Anders' voice was a monotone, as though he had asked that question more than once.

"Sorry, sir. He's dead."

"Dead." There was not much of surprise in Anders' voice. Then the voice and the gray eyes became simultaneously harder. "Did you kill him?"

"Kill him, sir?" Skeel's eyebrows arched. "No, sir. I had to chase him clear to Asteroid 78 in the Lanisar Group, and there he—he fell off a cliff. I only had time to get his identification cards and get away, before the night creatures came swarming out. Sorry."

Anders kicked his chair back against the wall and came surging around the desk. He was white-faced. "Sorry! You're not sorry, Skeel! In God's name, how do you have the ghastly nerve to come back here each and every time? How can you face me—no, more than that, how can you face your conscience? I wonder what goes on inside that riveted skull, behind that paper-mache expression of yours!" He paused and drew a breath. "What makes you kill, Skeel? How many does this make — eleven? Twelve?"

Skeel sighed, and spread his hands in an exaggerated gesture. "You always were a long winded louse, sir. There are Miller's papers. And I didn't kill him. He fell off a cliff. Is that all, sir?"

"No! That's not all!" Anders came even closer, and glared up at Skeel who towered above him. "You've been in the Patrol a long time, Skeel. Luckily, or I should say unluckily, your previous good record and your seniority permits you to get away with this—until we prove something. Some day you'll slip and we will prove it. I pray that day'll come soon!"

SKEEL'S own eyes, which had been amused, now took on a hard glint. He spoke and his voice was different.

"Since you bring up the subject of my seniority, let me remind you that it would permit me to take your place here if I so chose. I do not so choose—yet. As to the other thing you imagine about me, I could tell you a story, sir. A story that—" He stopped abruptly as the fierce rush of blood came to his throbbing temples again.

"Yes, man, go on! You were about to tell me why you kill." Anders waited. "Weren't you!"

"No, sir." Skeel's voice was a whisper now, but controlled.

"I know you must have some sort of hellish reason. But whatever the reason, it's an insult to everything you learned in the Federation Patrol! All right, Skeel, I'll tell you something about young Miller, your latest victim. He was innocent, do you hear? Innocent! The evidence against him was purely circumstantial, but now he has been cleared! I just got the news an hour ago!"

"You got the news—here? How?"

"Never mind how. It's authentic!" Skeel didn't move a muscle. His face became a little paler and his eyes widened momentarily. Then his face was an impassive mask again.

"You see, Skeel?" Anders was livid with suppressed fury now. "Any normal man would squirm at the news I just told you! Any decent man would blow his brains out at the thought of the ghastly thing he'd done! But not you, Skeel. No, not you, because you're neither a decent nor a normal man any longer! You've allowed this thing to get hold of you until it's a fetish, it's warped your brain and now it's become a sadistic pleasure... this killing... Anders choked and couldn't go on.

"Is that all, sir?"

"That sure as hell is all! Isn't it enough? Get out of here! Get your filthy face out of my sight before I smash it to pulp."

Skeel's lips became a tight slash across his square featured face. He turned on his heel and strode stiffly out.

WITH an effort Anders stifled the rising anger in him. He strode across the room to the opposite door. It was slightly ajar. He flung it open.

The girl sitting in the next room looked up, but seemed to stare through Anders rather than at him. Her slender uniformed figure was unbending as crystal, her knuckles white as she gripped the arms of the chair. Her eyes, an unbelievable blue, were now misted with the shock of horror. She didn't bother to brush back the lock of taffy-toned hair that had fallen down against the pallor of her cheek.

Anders spoke.

"You heard, Miss Miller?" he said quietly.

Her breath caught in her throat and it took her some seconds to speak. When she did her voice was terrible in its tonelessness.

"Yes, I heard... quite enough, Commander. Thanks."

"I'm truly sorry you had to learn about it this way! But I wanted you to see the man who killed your brother. You wouldn't have believed me otherwise."

"I—still find it a little hard to-believe—and to understand." She rose very slowly and stood facing him. There was a world of contempt in her voice. "The Patrol never kills! That's what we've learned to believe. That's become a motto on three planets. The Patrol, the noble Patrol, guardians of the spaceways! What mockery! Why was my brother killed, Commander? Why is such a monster as this man Skeel allowed—"

"Miss Miller, please. I know it's hard for you, or any outsider to understand, but you must try. Skeel was once one of the best men we had. His reputation was clean as flame, and on the records it still is. Very few men stand above him in seniority, and in the Patrol that's what counts, because —"

"That's what counts, is it? I came here to Ceres from Mars, bringing my brother's release papers, only to learn that you'd sent this Skeel out after him; all the time knowing—"

Anders sighed, and spread his hands helplessly. "I see you still don't understand. But please believe me, if I'd known your brother was innocent I wouldn't have allowed Skeel to accept this assignment; no, not even if I'd have to ray him down and face court-martial for it! It was Skeel's mission if he wanted it. It was his prerogative to accept or refuse the assignment, and he never refuses them. And Miss Miller, I hope this will mean something to you: there's hardly a man in the Patrol who doesn't suspect Skeel for what he is, and hate him for it; but I doubt if any of 'em, given the chance, would obliterate him in cold blood. You see the code is ingrained deeply in these men. As yet there's no proof that Skeel is a killer."

"You speak glibly of proof," the girl echoed mockingly. "Why don't you get proof?"

"I'm going to! Personally. A frame-up is the only way. But it'll be hard, because the man always works alone."

"Yes, and then there is always the code against you. Well, Commander, I have no such code to hamper me and I am going to avenge my brother!" Nadia Miller's face, ordinarily lovely, was not lovely now. "I have a plan. I could use your help, but with or without your help I am going through with it. All I want is to get this man Skeel back out to those rocks—alone."

Anders smiled tolerantly. "That would be a dangerous thing, especially for a girl. Skeel's a deadly killer, an expert shot. And you'd be on your own, the Patrol couldn't sanction any such plan."

"Naturally, Commander. Will you listen to me for five minutes? I'll tell you how to get this man out of the Patrol before he kills other people whose only crime was a momentary mental disturbance." Her face clouded with pain as she thought of her brother.

Anders listened as she unfolded her plan. When he spoke again there was less of doubt in his voice and a respectful admiration in his eyes.

"Miss Miller, I like your plan and I agree to it for one reason only. It has an advantage over anything I could attempt. Skeel suspects me now, and will see to it that any future assignment he accepts is fool-proof; but your idea might turn that very caution against him."

"I hope so. And you needn't worry about me. I know most of those big rocks in the asteroid belt well enough."

"All right. At least I can set the stage for you, and I wish I could do more." Anders looked at her with a sudden new interest, admiring the firm line of her chin, the trimness of her space uniform, the hard bold blueness of her eyes which he imagined could easily be soft on less drastic occasions than this. With an effort he brought his mind back to the immediate problem. "It will be at least a week from now. Ceres is no place for you, but since you're here I suggest you go over to Ceres City, the mining town on the other side of our little planet. I'll keep in touch with you and let you know just when to pick up your solo cruiser. Okay? Goodbye for now—and good luck!"

FOR three days Anders haunted the helio tower, doggedly flashing signals in the direction of Ganymede, currently the nearest of Jupiter's satellites. Their entire plan would depend on how soon the Ganymede Base received these signals. Sometimes atmospheric conditions weren't right and it took days to get a message through.

He was lucky. On the third day he received the answering flash that told him his signal had been picked up. Quickly he checked the orbital positions of both planets, then sighted the huge silvery screens carefully and locked them into place. Manipulating the shields with expert fingers, Anders began his message.

HELLO GANYMEDE. CERES

BASE SENDING. ANSWER!

Minutes later it came:

CONDITIONS OKAY. GANYMEDE BASE SENDING. GO AHEAD CERES.

Anders' fingers were lightning fast as he operated the rows of levers controlling the solar shields. He tried to be terse, for there was no time to waste and it took minutes for a message to cross such vast reaches of space.

MOST IMPORTANT. WANT ANY AVAILABLE NEWS ON THE LONELY ONE. HIS LAST KNOWN WHEREABOUTS PRESENT POSITION AND ACTIVITIES.

ANDERS.

Anders' fingers were lightning fast as operated the rows of levers controlling exertion. Usually it took a two-man crew to manipulate those shields. He smoked a cigarette as he awaited the answer.

Minutes later it came, transmitted into little electric flashes on the screen above his head. WHAT GOES ON? THAT PIRATE IS OUR MEAT SO HANDS OFF. ESCAPED OUR TRAP TWO WEEKS AGO BUT IS NOW BELIEVED OPERATING FROM SECRET CALLISTO BASE. HE'S OURS! SPURLIN.

Anders leaped for the levers and threw the following message:

THREE DAYS FROM NOW FLASH NEWS HERE THAT THE LONELY ONE IS HEADED BELTWARD. MUST SOUND AUTHENTIC BUT DO NOT TRANSMIT TO EARTH HEADQUARTERS. PERSONAL FAVOR. EXPLAIN LATER.

The answer read:

OKAY ANDERS YOU'LL GET YOUR MESSAGE BUT I HOPE YOU KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING AND I'LL WANT THAT EXPLANATION. DID I EVER TELL YOU THE ONE ABOUT—

The little flashes on the screen continued, but Anders didn't stay to watch. He descended the tower stairs and found Lohss, the regular helio man, over in the barracks.

"Okay," he told Lohss. He had explained to him that he was merely making a routine check-up on the equipment. When the message about the Lonely One came he wanted it to be a distinct surprise to every man here.

IT WAS. It came three and a half days later. Lohss shoved excitedly into Anders' little office, waving one of the official helio pads.

"Here's something I thought you ought to see right away, Commander."

Anders read the message:

ATTENTION CERES BASE! MARS-BOUND FREIGHTER FROM GANYMEDE MINES RAMMED AND LOOTED. HANDIWORK OF THE LONELY ONE. HE IS HEADING TOWARD THE ASTEROIDS. SOLID BLACK ONE-MAN CRUISER AS USUAL. FULL ARMAMENT. GET BUSY AND GOOD LUCK!

Anders smiled to himself and was grateful to Spurlin over on Ganymede for coming through so nicely.

Soon Ceres Base was ringing with the news. Every man there had dreamed of being some day sent on the Lonely One mission. To bring in that famous pirate would be a feather in anyone's cap, and would mean immediate promotion. Consequently it was with mumblings of displeasure that the men saw Jim Skeel stalk arrogantly into Commander Anders' office.

"Good morning, sir. You sent for me?"

"I did, Skeel. I guess you've heard the news about the Lonely One. Want to make a try for him? Just the job for you." The tinge of contempt in Anders' voice didn't go unnoticed.

Nor did the little hint of cunning that he couldn't keep out of his eyes. Skeel said:

"You never were anxious to send me out before, Commander. This couldn't be some plan of yours to get rid of me?" He smiled a little but there was no humor in it.

"It doesn't matter this time, Skeel. There's a dead or alive warrant on the Lonely One. But I don't mind telling you this is the chance I've been waiting for! You're a killer and so is the Lonely One. I'll be praying that he gets you first, so the Patrol will be rid of scum like you."

Skeel's eyes narrowed. "When do I leave?"

"Soon's you can get your cruiser ready. You're sure you want to handle this alone? You can select a crew, up to six men."

Skeel laughed aloud. "Do you think any of 'em would ride with me? Don't worry, Anders, I'll bring back the Lonely One—alive."

"You needn't pretend with me any more, Skeel."

"Very well, sir. Goodbye."

"Goodbye—but not good luck." Anders ignored the proffered hand. Skeel stiffened, then turned and strode for the door, exiting quickly.

Anders sank back in his chair, procured a cigarette and lit it thoughtfully. Now the doubts were beginning to crowd in. Nadia Miller had been overwrought and full of revenge. Suppose she did know the asteroids as well as she knew her own library? Skeel did, too, and he was ruthless and cunning. Suppose she did have the fastest cruiser this side of Mars? Skeel was the best solo spaceman in the Patrol.

Anders viciously ground out the burning end of his cigarette. He thought of Nadia Miller's tense but pretty face again, her trim figure and bright hair and hard blue eyes that he wanted to see soft. If anything happened to that girl—

But there was nothing he could do now. Nothing, except face an agony of waiting.

CHAPTER III

JIM SKEEL leaped to his controls, as the Visipanel came to life with a tiny gash of flame that tore a hole in the blackness of space. That would be the Lonely One again! Feverishly he changed his course in a sharp parabola toward the rocket blasts far ahead.

He would keep that ship within range this time! Reaching to the V-panel, he twisted the magnifying dial. The blackness swam and expanded. The tiny orange rocket blasts seemed to leap backward at him. He had to look closely to distinguish the outline of the ship, but then he grunted with satisfaction. It was the solid black solo cruiser, all right. It bore absolutely no insignia, strictly against the Space Code.

Skeel grinned through his weariness. For more than twenty hours he had played hide and seek with that elusive black cruiser. He could never quite get within beam range, and sometimes he lost it out of his V-panel altogether.

Once it had led him straight into the Kennison Group of asteroids, a vast expanse of treacherous rocks with wild, eccentric orbits. This was sheer suicide for cruisers as tiny as theirs, minus the repulsion plates to shunt the rock masses from them. Skeel, in a cold sweat of horror, had finally given up the chase. He had laboriously circled the entire Kennison Group, and now—

Now he had picked up the Lonely One again! He couldn't deny a thrill of admiration as he realized the black ship must have threaded its way entirely through the Kennison Group! Well, he would not lose it again. It was still out of beam range but he should be able to keep it centered in his V-panel.

Skeel threw over the lever feeding his tubes full blast. He exulted at the new fierce surge of power as his ship leaped ahead. But this time the Lonely One didn't try to outrace him! The black ship came nearer and nearer. Skeel's eyes narrowed. The pirate was supposed to have a much faster ship than his! Could this be some trick? He twisted the magnifying dial again, bringing his quarry more sharply into focus.

Then Skeel laughed aloud, laughed exultantly as he saw the reason for the other's lack of speed. The black cruiser was limping along on but four rocket tubes! Two other tubes, on the starboard side, were smashed and mangled hopelessly. Apparently the pirate hadn't come through that asteroid swarm unscathed after all!

THIS was the break for which Skeel had been waiting. Calmly now with deadly precision he sighted his forward electro-gun control. His fingers leaped to the distance gauge and set the charge to its fullest power. He heard the increasing whine of the coils. Still his gaze was riveted on the V-panel dial, watching the rapidly diminishing distance. Two hundred miles. One hundred. Fifty. There! Electrobeams were deadly at that distance. He glanced at the sights, saw they were perfect... and depressed the forward electro-button.

A crackling, radiant blue beam lashed from the prow of his craft and seemed to uncoil across the miles of space. Simultaneously a little bubble of color leaped backward from the pirate cruiser. Swift as light it came, expanding into a huge sphere of crimson. Skeel's electro-beam struck the sphere. It burst in a coruscating riot of writhing sparks that leaped back along the beam, devouring it hungrily.

Skeel's hand darted out to shut off the power. It was too late. The electro-gun coils burst from their housing in a shower of incandescent wire and metal, as a strong smell of ozone pervaded the ship. Skeel cursed in pain, clapping a hand to his arm where a white-hot strand of wire had struck.

"So that's that!" he gritted fiercely. "Not close enough yet to use the Tynyte bombs." There was nothing to do now but continue the chase, and Skeel saw that it wouldn't last long. Indirectly ahead was a bright dot of sunlight which must have been an asteroid of considerable size. The pirate ship was veering, limping toward it on crippled rockets. Skeel followed, closing in fast. He was sure of his quarry now! When it came to close combat on these big rocks, he was a past master.

The rock loomed up. It was a big one all right, nearly twenty miles in diameter with dangerous plateaus and ugly serrated cliffs reaching up. The pirate seemed in pell-mell panic now. The black ship swung in perilously near, made one complete circuit of the rock and landed on a tiny plateau with a shallow sweep that must have sheared part of the under-hull away! Skeel brought his own cruiser down with ease, several hundred yards distant.

Even as he was adjusting his helmet and gravity plates, he glimpsed a space-suited figure leaping away from the black ship. Skeel exited quickly, snatched out his electro-pistol and took careful aim. He fired.

The distance was a little too great. The beam hacked down, cutting a shallow path in the rock immediately behind the running figure. The figure looked back but didn't stop running. Skeel grunted and went leaping after it in long swinging strides. He was very casual and confident now. This was all so familiar....

Familiar? It was too darned familiar! Skeel stopped and shielded his eyes against the surface glare of sunlight. He stared at the low line of cliffs toward which the figure was running. A strange, insistent hammering seemed to pound away at Skeel's brain. And then, with a little thrill he knew! This was the same asteroid where he had chased

his last quarry, in circumstances very similar to this! Those might be the very cliffs where he had killed young—what was his name? Didn't matter now.

Skeel leaped forward again. For a moment he kept the figure in sight, then it seemed to dissolve in the sunlight and disappear. That puzzled him, until he came very close and saw a little cave mouth in the bosom of the cliff. It was there his quarry had fled. Skeel chuckled deep in his throat. He loosened the gun in his belt. Swell! It was as good as over now. Whenever he got this close to the victim he stuck with it to the finish.

SKEEL stood just within the darkened cave, listening, pistol clutching in his corded hand. A narrow passage seemed to lead slightly downward. Far along it he saw a dim light glow that was not sunlight.

He made his way carefully toward that phenomenon. Soon the sides of the rocky cave were sprinkled with little flat creatures about the size of a silver dollar. They were miniature beacons, exuding light through their tenuous, transparent surfaces! Yet it wasn't phosphorescence Skeel stopped to examine one of them. It was more like actual sunlight, but there was no heat. He touched one of them gingerly, the light immediately went out and it became the same gray color of the stone to which it clung.

Skeel plunged on. Soon the walls became thick with the blazing things. But as he ran by, the vibration of his leaden shoes seemed to frighten them. They blinked off, huge patches of them, remaining gray and quiescent 'til he had passed. Then they came on again. As a result he was running in a constant little patch of darkness, with light ahead and light behind, but always darkness where the reverberation of his pounding feet frightened the button-lichen things.

The tunnel turned and twisted, and several other large ones branched from it. There was no further sight of his quarry. Skeel moved more

slowly now. He clicked on his helmet radio but heard no sound of receding feet. Nevertheless he knew his quarry had passed this way not many minutes before, because a few of the light-creatures ahead of him were blinking on again laggardly. Grim-lipped now, a weapon in hand, Skeel pressed on a little more slowly and watched and listened.

He stopped in a dim little grotto where three tunnel mouths gaped. He hesitated, then chose the tunnel to the left and proceeded along it with infinite caution. Still there was no sign his quarry had come this way. Skeel suddenly realized he had acted with foolhardy recklessness. This might be a trap! He started to turn back. "Stand right where you are!"

THE words rasped through his helmet phones and echoed in his ears. Something jabbed into his ribs with a viciousness that made him grunt.

Skeel slowly raised his arms but the voice rasped again:

"Don't raise your hands! Drop them to your side. Slowly! That's it. Now drop your gun."

Skeel did so. The figure behind him swooped and picked it up.

"Now you can turn around."

Skeel did that too, then expressed himself in three thunderous words. "Blazes! A female!"

"Sure. But don't let it give you ideas." She stepped back a pace keeping the two pistols carefully centered on him.

"A trick!" bellowed Skeel. "This is Anders' work, I might have known it!"

"No. It's my work." Her voice was soft in the phones and her smile beneath the helmet was hardly a smile; it showed teeth, but they were no more gleaming than the ice-hard gleam in her blue eyes. "My work,"

she repeated. "And now that you know I'm not the Lonely One, I shall tell you who I really am. The name's Nadia Miller."

She saw the dawn of realization in his eyes.

"Miller," she said again slowly, savoring the word. "My brother was Arnold Miller—the man you killed."

"Look here, Miss Miller, I'm afraid you've got this figured out wrong. I knew your brother, sure. I was after him. But I didn't kill him, he fell off—"

"He fell off a cliff. I don't doubt it, after you got through with him." She gestured imperatively with the gun in her right hand. "All right, walk ahead of me. Move!"

Skeel shrugged and obeyed, watching the clusters of light-creatures blink off at the reverberation of their steps. For five minutes they continued in silence, in their continuous little patch of darkness. They made several turns as the tunnel angled sharply.

Finally Skeel said: "Where are you taking me?"

"Out to your Patrol cruiser. There you'll sign a written confession or I'll kill you. I almost hope you'll refuse to sign it."

"We won't get out of here at this rate! I'm afraid you made a wrong turn to the left back there."

"I don't think so. Just keep moving, because if I bump into you one of these pistols might go off."

SKEEL cursed but kept moving, because she sounded as though she meant it.

"That was a neat trick of yours," he said, "coming clear through that rogue group of asteroids."

"I thought so. Of course, I hoped you'd follow me and never come out of there."

"Kind of a risky chance to take, wasn't it?"

"It was worth it—even if it didn't work out."

"I don't think this'll work out either. We're going in the wrong direction, back into the cliff instead of out."

"Just keep moving."

They walked on.

She called a stop at the next intersection, where a much narrower passage came into theirs at a sharp angle. She hesitated, looking around.

"I told you," Skeel chuckled.

"You're lost. You made two wrong turns, but luckily for us I noticed them. Want me to go back and show you?"

"No! Keep moving straight ahead." She didn't sound very confident.

This time Skeel didn't move. "Listen," he said grimly. "Do you realize it'll soon be night out there? Maybe it's come already!"

"Well?"

"Well!" he repeated in amazement, whirling to face her in the dim light.

"Do you mean to say you aren't familiar with a night on an asteroid? Especially a lone one this big?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that when night comes on these big rocks, strange things come out to greet it; creatures that stir and scramble out of the crevices, tentacular things that hate the sunlight but come out in the dark and are plenty dangerous! Usually the dark side of an asteroid is thick with 'em. This is one such asteroid. I've been here before."

"You can't frighten me." But her little gasp belied the words. "Anyway, I've made up my mind. We'll wait until morning."

Now he laughed. "Morning? That'll be ten hours from now. This planet has a very slow axial rotation. Know how much oxygen we have left in these tanks? About four hours' worth. We haven't time to stand here talking. I'm going to try to make it back out to the cruiser. You can do as you please."

Ignoring the weapons in her hands, Skeel strode past her. She hesitated a split second, then followed. She knew he was right about the oxygen, but wondered how much of the rest he was making up, trying to trick her. Anyway, so long as she still had the weapons....

SKEEL had been right. He made several turns and the route led gradually upward. She felt foolish for not having thought of that herself. Presently Skeel called:

"There we are!"

Peering past him, she glimpsed a little circle of light that was the cave entrance. Skeel raced forward. She quickly followed. The entrance loomed before them, but they stopped abruptly. Between them and the outside surface was a dark stretch of tunnel. Beyond it they could plainly see the wide rocky terrain, and the bluish-silver glint of the Patrol cruiser resting in pale sunlight. But night had already come. The

ebon shadow of the cliff was creeping slowly out, swallowing up everything. It had almost reached the cruiser.

"It's too late," Skeel groaned. "We're stuck here now!"

She suddenly knew there was no trickery in this. "There's still time! Run for it!"

"No!... Mechanically Skeel's hand darted out to stop her. But already she was past him, hurrying down the last part of the tunnel.

Skeel followed slowly, knowing she wouldn't go far. His sharp eyes had glimpsed something she had not yet seen; shapeless, writhing masses surging toward them in the darkness. He was right behind her when she screamed. Several tenacular things had reared up to claw blindly at her face-plate. She screamed, staggered backward into Skeel and half raised her hand holding an electro-pistol. But before she could fire, her legs seemed turned into rubber and she fainted in a heap at Skeel's feet.

"Thought so," Skeel grunted. "You can only go so far on raw nerve, then it lets you down." He dragged her back several yards into the artificial light. Her hands still held tightly to the pistols. Skeel smiled grimly, reached slowly down and took both weapons.

SHE swam up out of a sea of darkness.

A blaze of light hurt her eyes. Sitting up, she saw she was still in the cave, at a place where the button-light creatures were thickest.

A short distance away at the edge of the darkness Skeel was crouched, peering. Presently he came back to her.

"Hello, Miller. I was just taking a survey of our little pets out there. The place is lousy with 'em but don't worry, they won't come too near this

light." She got to her feet hurriedly and eyed the two weapons in his belt. "I might have known you'd take advantage—"

"What do you expect? I can't afford to be running around on an asteroid with an armed woman at my heels."

She looked past him into the darkness. "Doesn't look as if we're going to do any more running."

"That's right, lady, it doesn't. We're in a pretty bad spot." He drew one of the pistols. "So you may as well have this." He tossed it to her and she caught it deftly.

"Thanks," she said dryly. "Now how do you know I won't kill you with it? That's what I came out here to do, you know."

"Uh-huh, but you won't. Know why? The vibration of that beam would turn out every light in this cave, and the night things would come rushing in."

She nodded, knowing he was perfectly right. "Stalemate, is it? Okay, Jim Skeel. But if we never get out of here I shall kill you at the very last moment. I'll never let those night beasts deprive me of the pleasure."

Skeel grinned. She was getting her nerve back again! The more he saw of this girl the more he liked her. He liked the determined curve of her orchid-pale chin, the tight slash of her lips and the courage that gleamed behind a false hardness in her eyes. He shrugged. "Four more hours of oxygen. I suggest you regulate the flow to two-thirds and breathe shallowly. That'll give you a few hours more," he spoke quietly.

"No. If I can't find a way out of here in four hours— Well, I won't sit here and wait for the end. I'm going to explore. Coming?"

"I guess so," Skeel agreed. "Not that I think we'll find another exit, for we won't. But walking helps me to think, and I know there must be a way out of this!"

CHAPTER IV

THEY walked side by side in silence, entered joining tunnels and adjacent caves but were careful to remember the way back. Everywhere the walls were lighted by the button-creatures but nowhere was there an entrance to the outside. Not that it would do them any good. They both realized that now. The night horrors would be out there everywhere, waiting for new victims.

"You said walking helped you to think,' 'she said dully. "Are you thinking?"

"Yes."

"What about?"

He stopped, turned suddenly to face her. She was startled by a new perplexed look on his face.

"I've been thinking things over from the beginning," Skeel said gruffly "You say you came out here to kill me. You've had plenty of chance."

"But I didn't, and you can't understand it. There is a code, after all. I understand now what Commander Anders meant." She spoke softly, almost to herself. They walked in silence for a minute then she added as an afterthought:

"You had your chance, too. Back there when I fainted—"

"Do you think," Skeel almost snarled, "I'd fire an electro-beam here in the caves, where these light-creatures mean our very lives?"

"There are other ways" She looked steadily at him. "You might have opened all my oxygen tanks."

"Didn't think of it." He turned his face away abruptly. "Quit bothering me, I'm still trying to think."

"You can think later," she was insistent. "Tell me one thing, Skeel. What made you turn killer? You once had the best record in the Patrol!"

"I'm still the best man in the Patrol!"

"No you're not, Skeel."

"Damn you, I—" He stopped.

Then in a voice scarcely audible: "I have a reason. I've never told my story to anyone."

"You almost told Anders. I was in his office that day."

"Anders is a fool!"

"I'd like you to tell me." There was a way she said it, a certain tone in her voice that hinted of feeling. Perhaps even, of understanding.

HE was suddenly speaking, pouring out his story in a fierce rush, of words as if he wanted to finish before that awful throbbing pain came again.

"It was in the early days when the Mars mines were opening. Lawless, bloody days. The Patrol received news that a freighter was being looted just a few hours from Earth. We got out there fast—too fast. Sixteen of us. The pirates hadn't yet left the drifting hulk. We walked into an ambush and there was nothing to do but give up without a struggle. They removed our weapons, then without warning began burning us down with electros. I dropped and played dead, while all about me my

friends were really dying! It was all over in seconds, but I can still hear their dying screams and the hiss of the electros.

"I think something snapped inside of me. I was in a mental hospital for days. When I came out I swore a terrible oath. I swore to avenge my fifteen friends, to the last man! Any criminal would serve the purpose. There was a bitter hatred in me for all of them. I guess you know the rest. Since then I've always worked alone, and I've never given any criminal quarter. I've killed, yes. Fourteen times. I've almost reached my goal!"

He stopped, and her eyes were steadily upon him. "But will that be the end, Jim Skeel?"

He didn't answer.

"I remember something Anders said that day—"

"I remember it too!" he whispered. "God knows I remember, and it's haunted me ever since. He said any normal man would squirm at the thing I'd done! Your brother, Miss Miller— he was innocent—but God help me, I feel no remorse! For the very first time, this thing frightens me!"

He expected her to answer—to say something, anything — but she was silent. For a long time Skeel sat motionless on the floor of the cave, fists pressed hard against his temples.

Nadia glanced up at the little dial above her eyes, inside the oxygen helmet. "Less than three hours now," she announced.

Skeel rose to his feet. "Come on," he said calmly. "I know the way out now."

"Out of these caves, do you mean?" Again her eyes were upon him steadily, those blue eyes that held something less than a crystal hardness now.

Skeel looked away. "Yes," he said. "Yes, that's what I mean."

THEY WALKED back to the cave entrance where the darkness surged in. But Skeel stopped just short of it. Approaching the cave wall, he touched one of the button-creatures. Instantly its light went out. Slowly, gingerly he detached it from the wall. It was rather gelatinous, he noticed, but was equipped with tiny, barely discernible sucker-cups.

Holding the grayish thing in his hand, Skeel approached Nadia and reached out toward her space-suited figure. She shrank back with a little shudder of loathing.

"Hold still!" Skeel demanded. "It's not going to hurt you, and it may save your life!"

He placed it on her shoulder where it remained quiescent for about ten seconds. Then it changed into a little disk of light again, like a miniature beacon.

"You see, it works! I should have thought of this before. Walk around! Your natural stride."

Nadia walked. At her second step the thing blinked off. She waited until it came on again, then carefully tip-toed around the cave. This time the creature's light stayed on.

Skeel nodded. "This isn't going to be fun, but it's the only way! We've got to plaster each other with those things until we become walking pillars of light! Then we'll tip-toe out through the darkness, through those slinking nightmare things until we reach my cruiser. It'll be an ordeal, agony. Think you can do it, Miller?"

She nodded, suppressing a shudder at the thought of those gelatinous blobs covering her body.

"All right," Skeel said. "You go to work on me first. Place them on my arms, shoulders and torso. But cover every inch! The more light we have, the easier we'll get through those beasts out there."

She went to work, biting her lip every time she touched one of the light-creatures; but before she was through, she had overcome her repugnance. Skeel was soon bathed in a brilliant white halo from the waist up.

"I think I know the secret of these things," Skeel said as he busied himself decorating her. They must come out onto the surface when the sun is there. They store up enough light energy to last them through the dark period. Somehow they assimilate the heat energy. This is cold light." As a finishing touch he placed some of the things in a little crown of light around her helmet.

"Now for the real test," he pronounced grimly. "We'll walk side by side. Don't get nervous, Miller, and above all walk slowly, on tip-toe. If these things go out, it's our finish!"

Like figures in a slow-motion film they moved across the cave toward the outer darkness.

IMMEDIATELY they knew it was going to be a nightmare of agony. The wall of night seemed to flutter before them and then recede. Receding with the darkness, too, were half-seen grayish shapes close to the ground. But behind and all around them the darkness closed in again. The night creatures closed in too, staying just beyond the little circle of light.

Their tentacles were long and sensitive and reached in close to the ground where the light hardly shone. One of them whipped against Skeel's ankles, and he felt the strength of it. He heard Nadia gasp and

knew the same thing had happened to her. But they didn't stop in their slow, tip-toeing stride.

"Steady!" he warned. "Once we get outside maybe they won't be so thick."

In a few minutes that seemed like hours, they were outside and could see the glint of stars against a cobalt sky. They paused to rest. Their eyes were becoming used to the dark and they could see hordes of the grayish night things surging in toward them.

"Afraid I was wrong," Skeel murmured. "They're worse out here."

"Just so they keep their distance," Nadia shuddered. "If they come any closer, I—I might get panicky and run for it."

"You'd never make it," he warned. They moved on, careful step by step, pushing the darkness back. They made nearly half the distance before their tired muscles forced them to rest again. The surging shapes seemed to be getting bolder. Skeel could feel them all around his feet now. He had to fight the impulse to run, to kick out at them, anything to keep them away. Instead, he bent slowly, reaching out with his blazing arms. The shapes retreated momentarily.

"Afraid we'd better not rest any more," he said. "Come on, we'll try to make it to the cruiser this time." They could see the dark, looming shape of it perhaps a hundred yards away. It seemed like a hundred miles.

Once his left arm bumped into her. Every light-creature on that side blinked off. In about ten seconds they came on again, as he held his arm motionless. He moved a little away, turned his head and looked at her. She was staring straight ahead. He saw her profile beneath the little halo of light around her helmet; that light enhanced every taut little muscle in her face, and Skeel suddenly realized her face was never meant to be drawn up into such a tight, grim mask. She was going along

on raw nerve again. Skeel swore softly beneath his breath, marveling at her.

Strange, too, how swiftly and clearly he could think in all this nightmare slowness and blackness. He had never seen things so clearly before. Never—

His mind came back abruptly as something whipped around his ankles. His feet seemed caught in a net of lashing, spiked tentacles! Slowly, with some effort, he managed to disentangle himself. He took another step forward. His foot came down on something soft and squirmy which lashed up at him. He took a hasty step backward, lost his footing and fell prone in utter darkness as every light-button on him blinked out.

FOR a single horrified instant Nadia stood there, despite the tentacles moving around her own feet.

"Keep going!" Skeel grated from the darkness where he lay. "You can make it now, don't mind me!"

But she didn't move, except to lean far over in Skeel's direction. Slowly she lowered herself, so that her entire light-glowing body almost covered his. All the buttons on her right arm blinked out as her hand touched the ground with a slight jar. She prayed that the pounding of her heart wouldn't cause the others to go out! Tensely she propped herself there, scarcely breathing, watching the dim lashing horrors. A dozen tentacles seemed to come from one central body. At the end of each tentacle was a bulbous thing with wiry, waving antennae, and below the antennae were gaping slashes that opened and closed and might have been lips.

With sickening horror she saw some of the bulbous things pounding at Skeel's face-plate. Others tore at his fabricoid suit. Slowly she shifted her weight, brought her left arm around and moved it toward them.

The things retreated from the light slowly. Seconds later Skeel's own light-buttons began flashing on, and he rose gingerly to his feet.

Nadia saw that his face was white. For a moment he stood quite still and stared at her. "That does it," he muttered, but she didn't know what he meant. Carefully now she forged her way ahead. Skeel moved too, ever more slowly, staying always behind her.

The cruiser was scarcely fifty feet ahead, and she had almost reached it. It was now or never, Skeel knew. She would gain the cruiser and blast back to Ceres Base. He had told her his story, confessed to being a killer—the killer of fourteen men! She would take that story back to Ceres Base and they would believe her. There was only one thing to do.

Her voice came to him just then. "Hurry! I think you can run and make it now!"

"No, there's not any hurry. Not now, Miller."

She must have detected some strange note in his voice. She looked back just as he was drawing the electro from his belt. Carefully he raised his arm in a straight line.

Skeel saw the sudden startled look on her white face, he saw her mouth open, but she did not have time to speak.

"I guess this is it, Miller! Number fifteen!" He pulled the trigger and the electro hissed its flame.

THE men at Ceres Base stood in excited little groups near the dome air-lock. Every eye was on the gigantic V-panel that reflected the tiny speck far out in space that was curving in toward them. A solo cruiser, yes—but which one? The black one the girl had used? Or would this be Skeel returning from another of his murderous missions? Every man there knew about the plot by now.

Anders stood there now, his face a picture of conflicting emotions. A thousand times he had blamed himself for allowing Nadia Miller to go out on that crazy mission! He had lived through a thousand agonies of waiting.

The dot grew larger in the Visipanel and resolved at last into the bluish-silver cruiser of the Space Patrol. Anders' face went suddenly white, then a fever of fury burned through him. If this was Skeel— If Nadia didn't come back—

Minutes later the blue and silver cruiser neared the dome. The lock automatically opened. It swept gracefully in, and powerful magniplates brought it to rest. A figure climbed wearily out and walked toward the men.

"Nadia!" Anders cried, and leaped forward eagerly to help her out of the space suit. "Are you all right? What about Skeel?"

She smiled at him. "Jim Skeel won't come back." Quickly she related the story of the caves and the light-button creatures and their perilous path through the night beasts toward the cruiser.

"Skeel was a changed man in those final minutes," she explained. "He must have known what he was going to do—what he had to do. It was all so deliberate. I had almost reached the cruiser, not realizing he was so far behind me. I turned just in time to see him raise the weapon. He called, 'Number fifteen!' Then he fired."

"Fired at you?" Anders was puzzled.

"No. I thought he meant to. But the beam didn't come within twenty feet of me. He merely fired at random, and instantly all the light-things on him went out. Then I—I could see those horrible night beasts rushing in—from all sides—waves of them—" She buried her face in her hands, trying to shut out the memory.

"The electro-beam," Anders said musingly. "Yes, that would do it. You fire one of those pistols, especially full power, and it sends a slight electric shock all through you. But Skeel knew that! Why did he do it? If it was to save you, now, I might understand; but you say you had already gained the ship—"

"To save me?" Nadia murmured. "No. I think it was to save himself."

Anders still looked a little puzzled. "But what about your brother? Did Skeel confess anything?"

She looked up and her eyes were shining, but she was not crying. Within her was only a vast, singing quiet too deep for tears.

"My brother, Commander? When you enter that case into the records you might say—you may say, Commander, that my brother was killed when he fell off a cliff."

The End