



I, Rocket, Ray Bradbury

I, Rocket

Amazing Stories (1944)

A thing of steel and alloy—a rocket ship. Yet it claimed respect and gave a great enduring loyalty.

AT THE rate things are coming and going it'll take a few hundred years to break me down into rust and corrosion. Maybe longer. In the meantime I'll have many days and nights to think it all over. You can't stop atoms from revolving and humming their life-orbits inside metal. That's how metal lives its own special life. That's how metal thinks.

Where I lie is a barren, pebbled plateau, touched here and there with pale weedy growths, a few hunched trees coming up out of planetoid rock.

There's a wind comes over the plateau every morning. There's rain comes in the twilight, and silence comes down even closer in the night. That's my whole life now, lying here with my jets twisted and my fore-plates bashed.

Somehow I feel I haven't fulfilled my destiny in toto. A rocket ship isn't built to lie on a hard gray plateau in the wind and rain—alone. After those trips through space it's almost too much to believe, that the rest of my clays will be wasted here—

But while I'm rusting and wondering, I can think it all over. How I came to be here, how I came to be built....

I've taken them all in their time, the crew; seen them wounded, crushed by centrifuge, or shattered by space-bombs; and once or twice I've had my rear-jets pounded off in a double-fisted foray: there's hardly a plate in my hull hasn't been welded again and again, not a chronometer in my control console hasn't been blasted and replaced.

But the hardest thing of all was replacing the men inside me. The little guys who ran around with greasy faces, yelling and fighting for air, and getting their guts frozen to their peritoneum every time I swung into an unexpected arc during the days when free gravity was experimental.

The little guys were hard to find, harder to replace after a particularly violent thrust between worlds. I loved the little guys, the little guys loved me. They kept me shining like a nickel moon, nursed me, petted me, and beat me when I deserved it.

From the very first I wanted to be of some help in the wild excursions from Earth to Deimos-Phobos coordinate Bases, the war moons held by Earth to strike against the Martians.

My birth-period, and the Base where I was integrated, skeleton, skin and innards, went through the usual birth-pains. It is a dim portion in my memory, but when the final hull was melted to me, the last runway and console fitted to my hulk, the awareness was there. A metal awareness. The free electrical atom flow of metal come aware.

I could think and could tell nobody that I thought.

I was a war rocket. Fore and aft they placed their space-artillery nozzles, and weighted me with scarlet ammunition. I began to feel my purpose, expectantly, perhaps a bit impatiently.

I wasn't really alive yet. I was like a child half out of the womb, but not yet breathing or making any sound or making any movement. I was waiting for the slap on the back to give me strength and directed purpose.

"Hurry it up, hurry it up! Skip!" directed the munitions-lieutenant, standing by my opened air-locks that day so many years ago. Sunlight baked my metal as men hustled in and out with small rubber-tired trucks bearing the tetron space explosives. "We've got a war to meet!" cried the lieutenant.

The men hurried.

There was some fancy bit of business about a christening going on simultaneously with this scurrying about in my cargo cubicles. Some mayor from some city crashed a bottle of foaming liquor on my prow. A few reporters flicked their cameras and a small crowd put up their hands, waved them a fraction and put them down again, as if they realized how stupid it really was, wasting that fine champagne.

IT WAS then and there I saw the captain, Metal bless him, for the first time. He came running across the field. The Master of my Fate, the Captain of my Soul. I liked him right off. He was short and whipped out of wrinkled hard brown leather, with green, implacable diamond eyes set in that hard leather, and a slit of white uneven teeth to show to anybody who disobeyed.

He stomped into the airlock and set his clipping boots down and I knew I had my master. Small tight knuckle bones and wrists told that, and the way he made fists and the quick, smooth manner in which he cracked out the orders of the day:

"Snap it!" he said. "Get rid of that damned mayor out there! Clear apron! Seal the locks, clamp ports and we'll push the hell out of here!"

Yes, I liked him. His name was Lamb; ironic for a man lacking lamblike qualities. Captain Lamb, who threw his voice around inside me and made me like the steel edge to it. It was a voice like silk-covered brass knucks. It flowed like water, but burned like acid.

They rapped me tight. They expelled the mayor and his splintered champagne bottle, which by now seemed childish. Sirens shouted across the base apron. The crew did things to my alimentary canal. Twenty-seven of them.

Captain Lamb shouted.

That was the slap on the back that brought me my first breath, my first sound, my first movement. Lamb pounded me into living.

I threw out wings of fire and powder and air. The captain was yelling, snuggled in his crash-hammock, zippered up to his sharp chin; men were swaying, sweating in all their suspensory control hammocks. Quite suddenly I wasn't just metal lying in the sun any more. I was the damnedest biggest bird that ever sang into the sky. Maybe my voice wasn't anything but thunder, but it was still singing to me. I sang loud and I sang long.

This was the first time I had been outside the hangar and the base to see the world.

I was surprised to find that it was round.

ADOLESCENCE is to man his days from thirteen to eighteen when overnight his viewpoints are radically reformed, so it was with my first plunge into space. Life was thrown at me in one solid piece. All of the life I would ever know was given to me without apprenticeship, suckling or consideration. I had growing pains. There were stresses, forces attacking me from all sides simultaneously, feelings, impressions I had never considered possible. The solid understandable gravity of Earth was suddenly taken away and the competition of space gravities each tried their luck with me.

The moon, and after the moon a thousand dark meteors crashing by, silent. Tides of space itself, indescribable, and the urge of stars and planets. And then a thing called momentum when my jets were cut and I moved without breathing or trying to move.

Captain Lamb sat in the control room, cracking his knuckles. "She's a good ship. A fine ship. We'll pound the holy marrow out of those Martians."

The young man by the name of Conrad sat beside the captain at the duo-control. "We'd better," he said anxiously. "There's a girl waiting in York Port for us to come back."

The captain scowled. "Both of you? You and Hillary?"

Conrad laughed. "The two of us. Both on the same war-rocket, going to the fray. At least I can keep my eye on that drunkard this way. I'll know he's not down in York Port scudding along on my acceleration. . . "

Captain Lamb usually said all his words quick, fast, like lines of mercury. "Space is a funny place to talk about love. Funny place to talk about anything. It's like laughing out loud in a big cathedral, or trying to make a waltz out of a hymn."

"Lo, the sentimentalist," remarked Conrad.

Lamb jerked. He scowled at himself, "Lo, the damned fool," he said, and got up to measure the control room with his little strides.

They were part of me. Lamb, Conrad and the crew. Like blood pulsing in the arteries of a warm body, like leucocytes and bacteria and the fluid that sustains them—air—locomoting through my chambers into my heart, my driving engines, feeding my livened appetites, never knowing that they were only units of energy like corpuscles giving a greater mass—myself—nourishment, life, and drive.

Like any body—there were microbes. Destroying elements. Disease, as well as the sentinal leucocytes.

We had one job to do. I knew of this. To fend off the ever increasing attacks against earth's Phobos-Deimos citadels. I felt tension spreading,

growing as each day went by. There was too much cigarette smoking, lip biting, swearing among the crew-members. Big things lay ahead.

THE microbes within my body were in a small dosage; but virulent because they moved free, unchecked, unsuspected. Their names were Anton Larian and Leigh Belloc. I refer to them as bacteria simply because, like microscopic forms in a large body, their function was to poison and destroy me. And the best way to render me inactive would be the destruction of part of my red-blood. That meant Captain Lamb. Or part of his technical war-staff. Larian and Belloc planned for their poisoning, quietly, carefully.

Self-preservation is an eternal, all-encompassing thing. You find it in metal as you find it in amoebas; you find it in metal as you find it in men. My body would be attacked. From outside I feared nothing. From inside I was uncertain. Coming from an unexpected quarter that attack might kill me so very soon after my birth. I didn't approve of the idea.

I went through space toward Mars. I couldn't speak.

I could only feel voice-vibrations throughout my length. The voices of Hillary and Conrad arguing about their woman named Alice in York Port, and the captain snapping at the heels of his crew when we hit the asteroid-skirt, and then the subtle undercurrent of poison stirring in the midst of this— Larian and Belloc—their voices touched my hull:

"You're familiar with the plan, Belloc; I don't want you turning silly at the crisis."

"I know what to do. Don't worry. What the hell."

"All right, I'm just explaining. Now—as far as killing Captain Lamb, that's out. We're only two against twenty-four others. I want to be alive to collect that money we're guaranteed, for this—work."

"Logically, then—the engines...."

"I'm in favor of it, if you are. This is a war-rocket; spare parts, excess cargo, all that's eliminated for speed. Timebombs should work miracles with the main jet-engines. And when it happens we can be out and away in space in plenty of time?"

"When?"

"During the next shift of crew relief. There's a certain amount of inescapable confusion then. Half the crew's too tired to worry, the other half is just turning out, groggy."

"Sounds okay. Huh. It seems a damn shame though, in a way."

"What?"

"Nice new rocket, never tested before. Revolutionary design. I never enjoyed working on engines before, until I got my station with this jalopy. She's sweet. Those engines—sweet as the guts of a flower. And it all goes to hell before it has a chance to prove itself."

"You'll get paid for it. What else do you want?"

"Yeah, I'll get paid, won't I? Yeah."

"Shut up, then. Come on."

The routine circulation of crew-blood through the arteries of the ship took Larian and Belloc below to their stations in the fuel and engine cubicles. The poison was in my heart, waiting.

What went on inside my metal is not to be described. There are no similes, comparatives for the hard, imprisoned, frustrated vibrations that surge through tongueless durasteel. The rest of the blood in me was still good, still untouched and untainted and tireless.

"Captain." A salute.

"Belloc." Lamb returned the salute. "Larian."

"Captain."

"Going below?" said the captain. "Yes, sir."

"I'll be down in—" Lamb eyed his wrist watch. "Make it thirty minutes. We'll check the auxiliaries together, Belloc."

"Right, sir."

"Go on down, then."

Belloc and Larian descended.

LAMB walked quickly into the computation cube and struck up a rapid word exchange with young Ayres. Ayres, who looked like he was barely out of blushing and floppy hair and semantics school, and still not shaving as often as the others. His pink face glowed when the captain was around. They got on like grandfather and grandson.

They probed charts together. When they finished, Lamb walked off the yardage in the computation room, scowling, examining his boots. Ayres computed.

Lamb paused, looked out the visual-port concernedly. After a moment he said, "When I was a very little kid I stood on the edge of the Grand Canyon, and I thought I'd seen everything there was to see—" A pause, "And now I've got my first captaincy, and—" he patted the hull of my body quietly "—a fine first rate lady of a ship." Quick, to Ayres: "What are you, Ayres?"

Startled, Ayres blinked. "Me, sir?"

The captain stood with his strong, small back to Ayres, inspecting the stars as if they were a celestial regiment under his personal say-so.

"Yes. I mean religion," he explained.

"Oh." Ayres pulled his right earlobe with finger and thumb, musing. "I was a first class agnostic. Graduated, or should I say demoted? From an Atheist academy."

The captain kept looking at the stars. "You use the word 'was,' Ayres. You emphasize that word."

Ayres half-smiled. "Sure. I mean— yes, sir. But this is my first trip, sir, so that changes things."

"Does it?"

"Yes it does, sir."

The captain rocked casually on his heels. "How's that, Ayres?"

"You know the tale as well as I, sir. It's an old tale. And a good one, I might add. To put it one way: 'A Baptist is an atheist who took a trip to the Moon.' "

"That holds true for Methodists, Episcopalians and Holy Rollers, doesn't it?"

"It does, sir."

The captain made a noise that sounded like laughter. "We're all the same. Every damned one of us, Ayres. Hard-shelled God-fighters, good and true, when we're home in Brooklyn and Waushawkee. Take away land and gravity, though, and we're babes, undiapered and crying in a long dark night. Hell, there's not a man rocketing today who isn't religious, Ayres!"

"Are you religious, Captain?"

Lamb closed his mouth, looked out the port straight ahead. He raised one small-boned hand, spreading it in a measured movement. "It's always the same, Ayres. The first trip converts us. The very first trip. All you have to do is stand here for fifteen minutes or half an hour looking at space, feeling how insignificant you are flying around like a gnat in the middle of it, looking at those damned wonderful stars, and first thing you know you're down on your knees, crying your eyes out, with a hot stomach, a wild head and a humble attitude forever after."

Lamb pulled back from himself suddenly, snapped around, stalked to a down-ladder, grabbed a rung and glared at Ayres. "And so," he pointed out, "you'll notice that I never look at the stars too long! I've a ship to run—no time for it. And in case you believe all I tell you—go to hell! I should demerit you for questioning a superior!"

Lamb dropped down the rungs like a weight.

AYRES sat there a moment, trying to computate. After a while he looked up at the star-port. His eyes dilated very dark and wide. He stood up. He walked across the computation room and stood there, staring out. He looked like he was listening to music. His lips moved.

"What did the Cap say? Stand here fifteen minutes or half an hour? Why, hell—" He bent his knees until they touched the deck. "I got the Cap's time beat all hollow!"

Good blood. Good leucocyte. Good Ayres.

Mars come up ahead, the first really intense gravity I had felt since leaving earth and moon behind. It came up like a ruddy drop of dried blood on the void. Mass is the sexual drive of space, and gravity the intensified yearning of that mass, the gravitic libido of one tremendous body for the love, the following of any and all smaller bodies who

transgress its void boundaries. I have heard the simple men within me speak of a planet as one speaks of a queen bee. The ultimate gravity toward which all smaller gravities and bodies yearn. Merciless harlot, mating with all, leading all on to destruction. Queen bee followed by the swarms. And now I was part of a swarm, the first of many yet to follow, answering the urge of one gravity, refusing another.

But still the poison was in me. And no way possible for Captain Lamb's crew to know of it. Time ticked on my console-chronometers and swung by, imperceptibly majestic in the moves of stars.

Captain Lamb went down to the engine rooms, examined my heart and my auxiliaries. Bitingly, he commented and instructed, interspersing that with vituperative barks. Then he hopped up the rungs to the galley for something to eat.

Belloc and Larian stayed below. "First now, Belloc, you checked the life-boats?"

"I did. Number Three boat's ready. I fixed it an hour ago."

"Good. Now...."

The Slop put out a bowl of soup for Captain Lamb. Lamb pursed his lips to a spoon of it, and smacked them in appreciation. "Slop?"

"Yes, sir?" Slop wiped greasy hands on a large towel.

"Did you invent the gravity soup-bowl and gravity spoon?"

Slop looked at his feet. "I did, sir."

"An admirable invention, Slop. I recall the day when all rocket liquids were swilled by suction from a nipples bottle. Made me feel like a god-damned baby doing it."

Slop chuckled deep, as he returned to cleaning the mess-plates. "Ship gravity wasn't strong enough to hold soup down, so I thunk up the gravity spoon in my spare time. It helped."

The captain ate in silence. After a moment he said, "I must be getting old, Slop. I think I'm sick."

"Captain!"

Lamb waved his spoon, irritated. "Oh, nothing as bad as all that. I mean I'm getting soft-headed. Today, I feel—how should I put it? Dammit to hell, it's hard finding words. Why did you come along on this war-rocket, Slop?"

Slop twisted his towel tight. "I had a little job to do with some Martians who killed my parents three years ago."

"Yes," said the captain.

Belloc and Larian were down below.

Slop looked at his chief. At the tight little brown face that could have been thirty-five as easily as forty or fifty.

Lamb glared up at him, quick. Slop gulped. "Pardon me."

"Uh?"

"I was just wondering. . .?"

"About. . . ?"

Belloc. Larian. Belloc down below. Larian climbing rungs, on his way to get the time-bombs. Mars looming ahead. Time getting shorter, shorter.

In a dozen parts of my body things were going on at an oblivious, unsuspecting norm. Computators, gunners, engineers, pilots performed their duties as Lamb and Slop talked casual talk in the galley. While Larian muscled it up the rungs toward his secreted time-explosives.

Slop said, "About why you became captain on a war-rocket, yourself, sir?"

"Me?" Lamb snorted, filled his mouth half a dozen times before answering very slowly. "Five years ago I was in a Blue Canal liquor dive on Mars. I met a Martian girl there. . ."

"Oh, yes. . ."

"Yes, nothing, you biscuit-burner! Damn but she was sweet. With a temper like a very fine cat-animal, and morals to match. Hair like glossy black spider-silk, eyes like that deep cold blue canal water. I wanted to bring her back to Earth with me. The war came, I was recalled and—"

"And someday," finished Slop, "when you've helped get the war over, you'll go looking for her. And being at Deimos-Phobos Base, maybe you can sneak down and kidnap her sometime."

Lamb ate awhile, making motions. "Pretty childish, isn't it?"

"No, I guess it's all right if she's still waiting."

"She is—if I know Yrela, she is." Ayres in Computation.

Mars off in space, blood-red and growing.

Lamb in the galley.

Hillary and Conrad in control room One!

And down below, where all of my power grew and expanded and burst out into space, I felt the vibration of Belloc. And coming up the ladder to the supply room—Larian.

Larian passed through the galley. "Sir."

Lamb nodded without looking up from his meal.

Larian proceeded up to Computation, passed through Computation, whistling, and lingered in Supply AC.

Space vibrated with my message.

MY GUNS were being trimmed, oiled and ready. Ammunition passed up long powered tracks from Locker Five to Blister Fourteen. Scarlet ammunition. Men sweated and showed their teeth and swore. Belloc waited down below, his face twitching its nerves, in the engine room. The captain ate his meal. I drove through space, Ayres computed. Belloc waited. Captain, eating. Space. Larian. Time-bombs. Captain. Belloc. Guns. Waiting. Waiting. Driving.

The metal of my structure was sickened, stressing, striving inward, trying to shout, trying to tell all that I knew in my positive-negative poles, in my sub-atomic awareness, in my neutronic vibrations.

But the blood of my body moved with a mind of its own, pulsing from chamber to chamber in their sweating, greasy togs, with their waiting, tightened faces. Pulsing nervously. Pulsing, pulsing, pulsing, not knowing that soon poison might spread through every and all of my compartments.

And there was a girl named Alice waiting in York Port. And the memory of two parents dead. And on Mars a cool-eyed Martian dancing girl, still dancing, perhaps, with silver bells on her thumbs, tinkling. Mars was

close. I made an angry jolt and swerve in space. I leaped with metal frustration!

Around and around and around went my cogger, the flashing, glinting muscles of my soul's heart. Oil surged through my metal veins. And Belloc was down below, smoking one cigarette after another.

I thought about Ayres, about Captain Lamb and the way he barked, about Ayres and the way he kneeled and felt what he had to feel. About Hillary and Conrad thinking about a woman's lips. About The Slop troubling to invent a gravity soup plate.

I thought about Belloc waiting.

And Mars getting near. And about the war I had never seen but always heard about. I wanted to be part of it. I wanted to get there with Lamb and Hillary and The Slop!

The Slop took away the plate the captain had cleansed with his spoon. "More?"

Lamb shook his head. "No. just a hunk of fruit now. An apple or something." He wiped his small mouth with the back of his hand.

"Okay," said The Slop.

At that moment there was a hiss, an explosion.

Somebody screamed, somewhere.

I knew who it was and where it was.

The captain didn't. "Dammit to hell!" he barked, and was out of the galley in three bounds. Slop dropped a soup kettle, following.

WARNING bells clamored through me. Ayres, in Computation, grinding out a parabolic problem, jerked his young, pink face and fear came into it instantly. He arose and tried walking toward the drop-rungs, but he couldn't do it. He didn't have legs for the job.

Conrad scuttled down the rungs, yelling. He vanished toward the engine room; the floor ate him up.

Hillary grabbed the ship-controls and froze to them, listening and waiting. He said one word. "Alice—"

Slop and the captain got there first in Section C.

"Cut that feed valve!" yelled Lamb. The Slop grasped a valve-wheel glinting on the wall in chubby fingers, twisted it, grunting.

The loud, gushing noise stopped. Steam-clouds billowed in my heart, wrapping Captain Lamb and The Slop tight and coughing. Conrad fell the rest of the way down the ladder into my heart, and the steam began to clear away as my vacuum ventilators began humming.

When the steam cleared they saw Belloc.

The Slop said, "Gahh. That's bad. That's very bad."

Conrad said, "How'd it happen? Looks like he died quick."

Lamb's leather-brown face scowled. "Quick is the word. That oil-tube burst, caught him like a steel whip across the bridge of his nose. If that hadn't killed him, scalding oil would have." Crumpled there, Belloc said not a word to anybody. He just bled where the oil pipe had caught him on the nose and cheek and plunged on back into his subconscious. That was all there was to him now.

Captain Lamb cursed. Conrad rubbed his cheek with the trembling flat of his hand. "I checked those oil-lines this morning. They were okay. I don't see—"

Footsteps on the rungs. Larian came down, feet first, quick, and turned to face them. "What happened... ?" He looked as if somebody had kicked him in the stomach when he saw Belloc lying there. His face sucked bone-white, staring. His jaw dropped down and he said, empty, "You—killed him. You—found out what we were going to do—and you killed him..."

The Slop's voice was blank. "What?"

"You killed him," repeated Larian. He began to laugh. He opened his mouth and let the laughter come out in the steam-laden room. He darted about suddenly and leaped up the rungs. "I'll show you!"

"Stop him!" said Lamb.

Conrad scuttled up at Larian's heels. Larian stopped and kicked. Conrad fell, heavy, roaring. Larian vanished. Conrad got up, yelling, and pursued. Captain Lamb watched him go, not doing anything himself, just watching. He just listened to the fading feet on the rungs, going up and up.

The deck and hull quivered under Lamb's feet.

Somebody shouted.

Conrad cried, from far off, "Watch it!"

There was a thumping noise.

Five minutes later Conrad came down the ladder lugging a time-bomb. "It's a good thing that oil-pipe burst, Cap. I found this in Supply AC. That's where Larian was hiding it. Him and Belloc—"

"What about Larian?"

"He tried to escape through an emergency life-boat air-lock. He opened the inner door, slammed it, and a moment later when I opened that same inner door, I almost got killed the same way—"

"Killed?"

"Yeah. The damned fool must have opened the outer door while he was still standing in the middle of the air-lock. Space suction yanked him right outside. He's gone for good."

The Slop swallowed thickly. "That's funny, he'd do that. He knew how those air-locks work, how dangerous they are. Must've been some mistake, an accident, or something..."

"Yeah," said Captain Lamb. "Yeah."

They held Belloc's funeral a few hours later. They thrust him overboard, following Larian into space.

My body was cleansed. The organic poison was eliminated.

Mars was very close now. Red. Bright red.

In another six hours we would be engaged in conflict.

I HAD my taste of war. We drove down, Captain Lamb and his men inside me, and I put out my arms for the first time, and I closed fingers of power around Martian ships and tore them apart, fifteen of them—who tried to prevent our landing at Deimos-Phobos Base. I received only minor damage to my section F. Plates.

Scarlet ammunition went across space, born out of myself. Child out of metal and exploding with blazing force, wounding the stratas of emptiness in the void. I exhilarated in my new found arms of strength. I screamed with it. I talked rocket talk to the stars. I shook Deimos Base

with my ambitious drive. I dissected Martian ships with quick calm strokes of my ray-arms, and spunky little Cap Lamb guided my vitals, swearing at the top of his lungs!

I had come into my own. I was fully grown, fully matured. War and more war, plunging on for month after month.

And young Ayres collapsed upon the computation deck one day, just like he was going to say a prayer, with a shard of shrapnel webbed in his lungs, blood dropping from his parted lips instead of a prayer. It reminded me of that day when first he had kneeled there and whispered, "Hell, I got the captain's time beat all hollow!"

Ayres died.

They killed Conrad, too. And it was Hillary who took the news back to York Port to the girl they had both loved.

After fourteen months we headed home. We landed in York Port, recruited men to fill our vacancies, and shot out again. We knocked holes in vacuum. We got what we wanted out of war, and then, quite suddenly one day space was silent. The Martians retreated, Captain Lamb shrugged his fine-boned little shoulders and commanded his men down to the computation room:

"Well, men, it's all over. The war's over. This is your last trip in this damned nice little war-rocket. You'll have your release as soon as we take gravity in York Port. Any of you want to stay on—this ship is being converted into cargo-freighting. You'll have good berths."

The crew muttered, shifting their feet, blinking their eyes. Cap said: "It's been good. I won't deny it. I had a fine crew and a sweet ship. We worked hard, we did what we had to do. And now it's all over and we have peace. Peace."

The way he said that word it meant something.

"Know what that means?" said Lamb. "It means getting drunk again, as often as you like; it means living on earth again, forgetting how religious you ever were out in space, how you were converted the first trip out. It means forgetting how non-gravity feels on your guts. It means a lot. It means losing friends, and the hard good times brawling at Phobos-Deimos Base.

"It means leaving this rocket." The men were silent.

"I want to thank you. You, Hillary. And you, Slop. And you, Ayres, for signing on after your brother died. And you, Thompson, and McDonald and Priory. And that's about all. Stand by to land!"

WE LANDED without fanfare.

The crew packed their duffles and left ship. Cap lingered behind awhile, walking through me with his short, brisk strides. He swore under his breath, twisted his small brown face. After awhile he walked away, too.

I wasn't a war-rocket anymore. They crammed me with cargo and shipped me back and forth to Mars and Venus for the next five years. Five long years of nothing but spider-silk, hemp and mineral-ore, a skeleton crew and a quiet voyage with nothing happening. Five years.

I had a new captain, a new, strange crew, and a strange peaceful routine going and coming across the stars.

Nothing important happened until July 17th, 2243.

That was the day I cracked up on this wild pebbled little planetoid where the wind whined and the rain poured and the silence was too damned silent.

The crew was crushed to death inside me, and I just lay here in the hot sun and the cold night wind, waiting for rescue that never seemed to come.

My life blood was gone, dead, crushed, killed. A rocket thinks in itself, but it lives through its crew and its captain. I had been living on borrowed time since Captain Lamb went away and never came back.

I lay here, thinking about it all. Glorious months of war, savage force and power of it. The wild insanity of it. I waited. I realized how out of place I was here, how helpless, like a gigantic metal child, an idiot who needs control, who needs pulsing human life blood.

Until very early one morning after the rain I saw a silver speck on the sky. It came down fast—a one-man Patrol inspector, used for darting about in the asteroid belt.

The ship came down, landing about one hundred yards away from my silent hulk. A small man climbed out of it.

He came walking up the pebbled hill very slowly, almost like a blind man.

He stood at my air-lock door. I heard him say, "Hello—"

AND I knew who it was. Standing there, not looking much older than when first he had clipped aboard me, little and lean and made of copper wire and brown leather.

Captain Lamb.

After all these years. Dressed in a black patrol uniform. An inspector of asteroids. No cargo job for him. A dangerous one instead. Inspector.

His lips moved.

"I heard you were lost four months ago," he said to me, quiet-like. "I asked for an appointment to Inspector. I thought—I thought I'd like to hunt for you myself. Just—just for old time's sake." His wiry neck muscles stood out, and tightened. He made his little hands into fists.

He opened my air-lock, laughing quietly, and walked inside me with his quick, short strides. It felt good to have him touch me again, to hear his clipped voice ring against my hull again. He climbed the rungs to my control room and stood there, swaying, remembering all the old times we had fought together.

"Ayres!"

"Aye, sir!"

"Hillary!"

"Aye, sir!"

"Slop!"

"Aye, sir!"

"Conrad!"

"Aye, sir!"

"Where in hell is everybody? Where in hell is everybody?" raged Lamb, staring about the control room. "Where in the God-blamed hell—!"

Silence. He quit yelling for people who couldn't answer him, who would never answer him again, and he sat down in the control chair and talked to me. He told me what he'd been doing all these years. Hard work, long hours, good pay.

"But it's not like it used to be," he told me. "Not by a stretched length. I think though—I think there'll be another war soon. Yes, I do." He nodded briskly. "And how'd you like to be in on it, huh? You can, you know."

I said nothing. My beams stretched and whined in the hot sun. That was all. I waited.

"Things are turning bad on Venus.

Colonials revolting. You're old-fashioned, but you're proud and tall, and a fighter. You can fight again."

He didn't stay much longer, except to tell me what would happen. "I have to go back to Earth, get a rescue crew and try to lift you under your own power next week. And so help me God, I'll be captain of you again and we'll beat the bloody marrow out of those Venerians!"

He walked back through my compartments, climbed down into my heart. The galley. The computation. The Slop, Ayres. Larian. Belloc. Memories. And he walked out of the airlock with eyes that were anything but dry. He patted my hull.

"After all, now—I guess you were the only thing I ever really loved..."

He went away into the sky, then. And so I'm lying here for a few more days, waiting with a stirring of my old anticipation and wonder and excitement. I've been dead a while. And Cap has showed up again to slap me back to life. Next week he'll be here with the repair crew and I'll sail home to Earth and they'll go over me from seam to seam, from dorsal to ventral.

And someday soon Cap Lamb'll stomp into my air-lock, cry, "Rap her tight!" and we'll be off to war again! Off to war! Living and breathing and moving again. Captain Lamb and I and maybe Hillary and Slop if we can find them after all this time. Next week. In the meantime I can think.

I've often wondered about that blue-eyed Martian dancing girl with the silver bells on her fingers.

I guess I could read it in Captain Lamb's eyes, how that turned out.

I wish I could ask him.

But at least I won't have to lie here forever. I'll be moving on—next week!

The end