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A "JOHNNY MAYHEM" ADVENTURE

A PLACE IN THE SUN

By C. H. THAMES

Mayhem, the man of many bodies, had been given some weird assignments in his time, but saving The Glory of the Galaxy wasn't difficult—it was downright impossible!

The SOS crackled and hummed through subspace at a speed which left laggard light far behind. Since subspace distances do not coincide with normal space distances, the SOS was first picked up by a Fomalhautian freighter bound for Capella although it had been issued from a point in normal space midway between the orbit of Mercury and the sun's corona in the solar system.



The terrible weapon blasted death and carnage through the ship.

The radioman of the Fomalhautian freighter gave the distress signal to the Deck Officer, who looked at it, blinked, and bolted 'bove decks to the captain's cabin. His face was very white when he reached the door and his heart pounded with excitement. As the Deck Officer crossed an electronic beam before the door a metallic voice said: "The Captain is asleep and will be disturbed for nothing but emergency priority."

Nodding, the Deck officer stuck his thumb in the whorl-lock of the door and entered the cabin. "Begging your pardon, sir," he cried, "but we just received an SOS from—"

The Captain stirred groggily, sat up, switched on a green night light and squinted through it at the Deck Officer. "Well, what is it? Isn't the Eye working?"

"Yes, sir. An SOS, sir...."

"If we're close enough to help, subspace or normal space, take the usual steps, lieutenant. Surely you don't need me to —"

"The usual steps can't be taken, sir. Far as I can make out, that ship is doomed. She's bound on collision course for Sol, only twenty million miles out now."

"That's too bad, lieutenant," the Captain said with genuine sympathy in his voice. "I'm sorry to hear that. But what do you want me to do about it?"

"The ship, sir. The ship that sent the SOS—hold on to your hat, sir—"

"Get to the point now, will you, young man?" the Captain growled sleepily.

"The ship which sent the SOS signal, the ship heading on collision course for Sol, is the *Glory of the Galaxy!*"

For a moment the Captain said nothing. Distantly, you could hear the hum of the subspace drive-unit and the faint whining of the stasis generator. Then the Captain bolted out of bed after unstrapping himself. In his haste he forgot the ship was in weightless deep space and went sailing, arms flailing air, across the room. The lieutenant helped him down and into his magnetic-soled shoes.

"My God," the Captain said finally. "Why did it happen? Why did it have to happen to the *Glory of the Galaxy*?"

"What are you going to do, sir?"

"I can't do anything. I won't take the responsibility. Have the radioman contact the Hub at once."

"Yes, sir."

The Glory of the Galaxy, the SOS ship heading on collision course with the sun, was making its maiden run from the assembly satellites of Earth across the inner solar system via the perihelion passage which would bring it within twenty-odd million miles of the sun, to Mars which now was on the opposite side of Sol from Earth. Aboard the gleaming new ship was the President of the Galactic Federation and his entire cabinet.

The Fomalhautian freighter's emergency message was received at the Hub of the Galaxy within moments after it had been sent, although the normal space distance was in the neighborhood of one hundred thousand light years. The message was bounced—in amazingly quick time—from office to office at the hub, cutting through the usual red tape because of its top priority. And—since none of the normal agencies at the Hub could handle it—the message finally arrived at an office which very rarely received official messages of any kind. This was the one unofficial, extra-legal office at the Hub of the Galaxy. Lacking official function, the office had no technical existence and was not to be found in any Directory of the Hub. At the moment, two young men were seated inside. Their sole job was to maintain liaison with a man whose very existence was doubted by most of the human inhabitants of the Galaxy but whose importance could not be measured by mere human standards in those early days when the Galactic League was becoming the Galactic Federation.

The name of the man with whom they maintained contact was Johnny Mayhem.

"Did you read it?" the blond man asked.

"I read it."

"If it got down here, that means they can't handle it anywhere else."

"Of course they can't. What the hell could normal slobs like them or like us do about it?"

"Nothing, I guess. But wait a minute! You don't mean you're going to send Mayhem, without asking him, without telling —"

"We can't ask him now, can we?"

"Johnny Mayhem's *elan* is at the moment speeding from Canopus to Deneb, where on the fourth planet of the Denebian system a dead body is waiting for him in cold storage. The turnover from League to Federation status of the Denebian system is causing trouble in Deneb City, so Mayhem—"

"Deneb City will probably survive without Mayhem. Well, won't it?"

"I guess so, but—"

"I know. The deal is we're supposed to tell Mayhem where he's going and what he can expect. The deal also is, every inhabited world has a body waiting for his *elan* in cold storage. But don't you think if we could talk to Mayhem now—"

"It isn't possible. He's in transit."

"Don't you think if we could talk to him now he would agree to board the *Glory of the Galaxy*?"

"How should I know? I'm not Johnny Mayhem."

"If he doesn't board her, it's certain death for all of them."

"And if he does board her, what the hell can he do about it? Besides, there isn't any dead body awaiting his *elan* on that ship or any ship. He wouldn't make a very efficacious ghost."

"But there are live people. Scores of them. Mayhem's *elan* is quite capable of possessing a living host."

"Sure. Theoretically it is. But damn it all, what would the results be? We've never tried it. It's liable to damage Mayhem. As for the host—"

"The host might die. I know it. But he'll die anyway. The whole shipload of them is heading on collision course for the sun."

"Does the SOS say why?"

"No. Maybe Mayhem can find out and do something about it."

"Yeah, maybe. That's a hell of a way to risk the life of the most important man in the Galaxy. Because if Mayhem boards that ship and can't do anything about it, he'll die with the rest of them."

"Why? We could always pluck his *elan* out again."

"If he were inhabiting a dead one. In a live body, I don't think so. The attraction would be stronger. There would be forces of cohesion—"

"That's true. Still, Mayhem's our only hope."

"I'll admit it's a job for Mayhem, but he's too important."

"Is he? Don't be a fool. What, actually, is Johnny Mayhem's importance? His importance lies in the very fact that he is expendable. His life—for the furtherance of the new Galactic Federation."

"But—"

"And the President is aboard that ship. Maybe he can't do as much for the Galaxy in the long run as Mayhem can, but don't you see, man, he's a figurehead. Right now he's the most important man in the Galaxy, and if we could talk to him I'm sure Mayhem would agree. Mayhem would want to board that ship."

"It's funny, we've been working with Mayhem all these years and we never even met the guy."

"Would you know him if you saw him?"

"Umm-mm, I guess not. Do you think we really can halt his *elan* in subspace and divert it over to the *Glory of the Galaxy*?"

"I take it you're beginning to see things my way. And the answer to your question is yes."

"Poor Mayhem. You know, I actually feel sorry for the guy. He's had more adventures than anyone since Homer wrote the *Odyssey* and there won't ever be any rest for him."

"Stop feeling sorry for him and start hoping he succeeds."

"Yeah."

"And let's see about getting a bead on his *elan*."

The two young men walked to a tri-dim chart which took up much of the room. One of them touched a button and blue light glowed within the chart, pulsing brightly and sharply where space-sectors intersected.

"He's in C-17 now," one of the men said as a gleaming whiteness was suddenly superimposed at a single point on the blue.

"Can you bead him?"

"I think so. But I still feel sorry for Mayhem. He's expecting to wake up in a cold-storage corpse on Deneb IV but instead he'll come to in a living body aboard a spaceship on collision course for the sun."

"Just hope he—"

"I know. Succeeds. I don't even want to think of the possibility he might fail."

In seconds, the gleaming white dot crawled across the surface of the tri-dim chart from sector C-17 to sector S-1.

The *Glory of the Galaxy* was now nineteen million miles out from the sun and rushing through space at a hundred miles per second, normal space drive. The *Glory of the Galaxy* thus moved a million miles closer to fiery destruction every three hours—but since the sun's gravitational force had to be added to that speed, the ship was slated to plunge into the sun's corona in little more than twenty-four hours.

Since the ship's refrigeration units would function perfectly until the outer hull reached a temperature of eleven hundred degrees Fahrenheit, none of its passengers knew that anything was wrong. Even the members of the crew went through all the normal motions. Only the *Glory of the Galaxy's* officers in their bright new uniforms and gold braid knew the grim truth of what awaited the gleaming two-thousand ton spaceship less than twenty-four hours away at the exact center of its perihelion passage.

Something—unidentified as yet—in all the thousands of intricate things that could go wrong on a spaceship, particularly a new one making its maiden voyage, had gone wrong. The officers were checking their catalogues and their various areas of watch meticulously—and not because their own lives were at stake. In spaceflight, your own life always is at stake. There are too many imponderables: you are, to a certain degree, expendable. The commissioned contingent aboard the *Glory of the Galaxy* was a dedicated group, hand-picked from all the officers in the solar system.

But they could find nothing. And do nothing.

Within a day, their lives along with the lives of the enlisted men aboard the *Glory of the Galaxy* and the passengers on its maiden run, would be snuffed out in a brilliant burst of solar heat.

And the President of the Galactic Federation would die because some unknown factor had locked the controls of the spaceship, making it impossible to turn or use forward rockets against the gravitational pull of the sun.

Nineteen million miles. In normal space, a considerable distance. A hundred miles a second—a very considerable

normal space speed. Increasing....

Ever since they had left Earth's assembly satellites, Sheila Kelly had seen a lot of a Secret Serviceman named Larry Grange, who was a member of the President's corps of bodyguards. She liked Larry, although there was nothing serious in their relationship. He was handsome and charming and she was naturally flattered with his attentions. Still, although he was older than Sheila, she sensed that he was a boy rather than a man and had the odd feeling that, faced with a real crisis, he would confirm this tragically.

It was night aboard the *Glory of the Galaxy*. Which was to say the blue-green night lights had replaced the white day lights in the companionways and public rooms of the spaceship, since its ports were sealed against the fierce glare of the sun. It was hard to believe, Sheila thought, that they were only nineteen million miles from the sun. Everything was so cool—so comfortably air-conditioned....

She met Larry in the Sunside Lounge, a cabaret as nice as any terran nightclub she had ever seen. There were stylistic Zodiac drawings on the walls and blue-mirrored columns supporting the roof. Like everything else aboard the *Glory of the Galaxy*, the Sunside Lounge hardly seemed to belong on a spaceship. For Sheila Kelly, though—herself a third secretary with the department of Galactic Economy—it was all very thrilling.

"Hello, Larry," she said as the Secret Serviceman joined her at their table. He was a tall young man in his late twenties with crewcut blond hair; but he sat down heavily now and did not offer Sheila his usual smile.

"Why, what on earth is the matter?" Sheila asked him.

"Nothing. I need a drink, that's all."

The drinks came. Larry gulped his and ordered another. His complete silence baffled Sheila, who finally said:

"Surely it isn't anything I did."

"You? Don't be silly."

"Well! After the way you said that I don't know if I should be glad or not."

"Just forget it. I'm sorry, kid. I—" He reached out and touched her hand. His own hand was damp and cold.

"Going to tell me, Larry?"

"Listen. What's a guy supposed to do if he overhears something he's not supposed to overhear, and—"

"How should I know unless you tell me what you overheard? It is you you're talking about, isn't it?"

"Yeah. I was going off duty, walking by officer quarters and ... oh, forget it. I better not tell you."

"I'm a good listener, Larry."

"Look, Irish. You're a good anything—and that's the truth. You have looks and you have brains and I have a hunch through all that Emerald Isle sauciness you have a heart too. But—"

"But you don't want to tell me."

"It isn't I don't want to, but no one's supposed to know, not even the President."

"You sure make it sound mysterious."

"Just the officers. Oh, hell. I don't know. What good would it do if I told you?"

"I guess you'd just get it off your chest, that's all."

"I can't tell anyone official, Sheila. I'd have my head handed to me. But I've got to think and I've got to tell someone. I'll go crazy, just knowing and not doing anything."

"It's important, isn't it?"

Larry downed another drink quickly. It was his fourth and Sheila had never seen him take more than three or four in the course of a whole evening. "You're damned right it's important." Larry leaned forward across the postage-stamp table. A liquor-haze clouded his eyes as he said: "It's so important that unless someone does something about it, we'll all be dead inside of twenty-four hours. Only trouble is, there isn't anything anyone can do about it."

"Larry—you're a little drunk."

"I know it. I know I am. I want to be a lot drunker. What the hell can a guy do?"

"What do you know, Larry? What have you heard?"

"I know they have the President of the Galactic Federation aboard this ship and that he ought to be told the truth."

"No. I mean—"

"They sent out an SOS, kid. Controls are locked. Lifeboats don't have enough power to get us out of the sun's gravitational pull. We're all going to roast, I tell you!"

Sheila felt her heart throb wildly. Even though he was well on the way to being thoroughly drunk, Larry was telling the truth. Instinctively, she knew that—was certain of it. "What are you going to do?" she said.

He shrugged. "I guess because I can't do a damned thing I'm going to get good and drunk. That's what I'm going to do. Or maybe—who the hell knows?—maybe in one minute I'm going to jump up on this table and tell everyone what I overheard. Maybe I ought to do that, huh?"

"Larry, Larry—if it's as bad as you say, maybe you ought to think before you do anything."

"Who am I to think? I'm one of the muscle men. That's what they pay me for, isn't it?"

"Larry. You don't have to shout."

"Well, isn't it?"

"If you don't calm down I'll have to leave."

"You can sit still. You can park here all night. *I'm* leaving."

"What are you going to do?"

"Oh ... that." Larry got up from the table. He looked suddenly green and Sheila thought it was because he had too much to drink. "You don't have to worry about that, Sheila. Not now you don't. I all of a sudden don't feel so good. Headache. Man, I never felt anything like it. Better go to my cabin and lie down. Maybe I'll wake up and find out all this was a dream, huh?"

"Do you need any help?" Sheila demanded, real concern in her voice.

"No. 'Sall right. Man, this headache really snuck up on me. Pow! Without any warning."

"Let me help you."

"No. Just leave me alone, will you?" Larry staggered off across the crowded dance floor. He drew angry glances and muttered comments as he disturbed the dancers waltzing to Carlotti's *Danube in Space*.

Why don't you admit it, Grange, Larry thought as he staggered through the companionway toward his cabin. That's what you always wanted, isn't it—a place of importance?

A place in the sun, they call it.

"You're going to get a place in the sun, all right," he mumbled aloud. "Right smack in the middle of the sun with everyone else aboard this ship!"

The humor of it amused him perversely. He smiled—but it was closer to a leer—and lunged into his cabin. What he said to Sheila was no joke. He really did have a splitting headache. It had come on suddenly and it was like no headache he had ever known. It pulsed and throbbed and beat against his temples and held red hot needles to the backs of his eyeballs, almost blinding him. It sapped all his strength, leaving him physically weak. He was barely able to close the door behind him and stagger to the shower.

An ice cold shower, he thought would help. He stripped quickly and got under the needle spray. By that time he was so weak he could barely stand.

A place in the sun, he thought....

Something grabbed his mind and wrenched it.

Johnny Mayhem awoke.

Awakening came slowly, as it always did. It was a rising through infinite gulfs, a rebirth for a man who had died a hundred times and might die a thousand times more as the years piled up and became centuries. It was a spinning, whirling, flashing ascent from blackness to coruscating colors, brightness, giddiness.

And suddenly, it was over.

A needle spray of ice-cold water beat down upon him. He shuddered and reached for the water-taps, shutting them. Dripping, he climbed from the shower.

And floated up—quite weightless—toward the ceiling.

Frowning with his new and as yet unseen face, Johnny Mayhem propelled himself to the floor. He looked at his arms. He was naked—at least that much was right.

But obviously, since he was weightless, he was not on Deneb IV. During his transmigration he had been briefed for the trouble on Deneb IV. Then had a mistake been made somehow? It was always possible—but it had never happened before.

Too much precision and careful planning was involved.

Every world which had an Earthman population and a Galactic League—now, Galactic Federation—post, must have a body in cold storage, waiting for Johnny Mayhem if his services were required. No one knew when Mayhem's services might be required. No one knew exactly under what circumstances the Galactic Federation Council, operating from the Hub of the Galaxy, might summon Mayhem. And only a very few people, including those at the Hub and the Galactic League Firstmen on civilized worlds and Observers on frontier planets, knew the precise mechanics of Mayhem's coming.

Johnny Mayhem, a bodiless sentience. Mayhem—Johnny Marlow then—who had been chased from Earth a pariah and a criminal seven years ago, who had been mortally wounded on a wild planet deep within the Sagittarian Swarm, whose life had been saved—after a fashion—by the white magic of that planet. Mayhem, doomed now to possible immortality as a bodiless sentience, an *elan*, which could occupy and activate a corpse if it had been preserved properly ... an *elan* doomed to wander eternally because it could not remain in one body for more than a month without body and *elan* perishing. Mayhem, who had dedicated his strange, lonely life to the services of the Galactic League—now the Galactic Federation—because a normal life and normal social relations were not possible to him....

It did not seem possible, Mayhem thought now, that a mistake could be made. Then—a sudden change in plans?

It had never happened before, but it was entirely possible. Something, Mayhem decided, had come up during transmigration. It was terribly important and the people at the Hub had had no opportunity to brief him on it.

But—what?

His first shock came a moment later. He walked to a mirror on the wall and approved of the strong young body which would house his sentience and then scowled. A thought inside his head said:

So this is what it's like to have schizophrenia.

What the hell was that? Mayhem thought.

I said, so this is what it's like to have schizophrenia. First the world's worst headache and then I start thinking like two different people.

Aren't you dead?

Is that supposed to be a joke, alter ego? When do the men in the white suits come?

Good Lord, this was supposed to be a dead body!

At that, the other sentience which shared the body with Mayhem snickered and lapsed into silence. Mayhem, for his part, was astounded.

Don't get ornery now, Mayhem pleaded. I'm Johnny Mayhem. Does that mean anything to you?

Oh, sure. It means I'm dead. You inhabit dead bodies, right?

Usually. Listen—where are we?

Glory of the Galaxy—bound from Earth to Mars on perihelion.

And there's trouble?

How do you know there's trouble?

Otherwise they wouldn't have diverted me here.

We've got the president aboard. We're going to hit the sun. Then, grudgingly, Larry went into the details. When he finished he thought cynically: *Now all you have to do is go outside yelling have no fear, Mayhem is here and everything will be all right, I suppose.*

Mayhem didn't answer. It would be many moments yet before he could adjust to this new, unexpected situation. But in a way, he thought, it would be a boon. If he were co-inhabiting the body of a living man who belonged on the *Glory of the Galaxy*, there was no need to reveal his identity as Johnny Mayhem to anyone but his host....

"I tell ya," Technician First Class Ackerman Boone shouted, "the refrigeration unit's gone on the blink. You can't feel it yet, but I ought to know. I got the refrigs working full strength and we gained a couple of degrees heat. Either she's on the blink or we're too close to the sun, I tell you!"

Ackerman Boone was a big man, a veteran spacer with a squat, very strong body and arms like an orangutan. Under normal circumstances he was a very fine spacer and a good addition to any crew, but he bore an unreasonable grudge against the officer corps and would go out of his way to make them look bad in the eyes of the other enlisted men. A large crowd had gathered in the hammock-hung crew quarters of the *Glory of the Galaxy* as Boone went on in his deep, booming voice: "So I asked the skipper of the watch, I did. He got shifty-eyed, like they always do. You know. He wasn't talking, but sure as my name's Ackerman Boone, something's wrong."

“What do you think it is, Acky?” one of the younger men asked.

“Well, I tell ya this: I know what it *isn't*. I checked out the refrigs three times, see, and came up with nothing. The refrigs are in jig order, and if I know it then you know it. So, if the refrigs are in jig order, there's only one thing it can be: we're getting too near the sun!” Boone clamped his mouth shut and stood with thick, muscular arms crossed over his barrel chest.

A young technician third class said in a strident voice, “You mean you think maybe we're plunging into the sun, Acky?”

“Well, now, I didn't say that. Did I, boy? But we *are* too close and if we are too close there's got to be a reason for it. If we stay too close too long, O.K. Then we're plunging into the sun. Right now, I dunno.”

They all asked Ackerman Boone, who was an unofficial leader among them, what he was going to do. He rubbed his big fingers against the thick stubble of beard on his jaw and you could hear the rasping sound it made. Then he said, “Nothing, until we find out for sure. But I got a hunch the officers are trying to pull the wool over the eyes of them politicians we got on board. That's all right with me, men. If they want to, they got their reasons. But I tell ya this: they ain't going to pull any wool over Acky Boone's eyes, and that's a fact.”

Just then the squawk box called: “Now hear this! Now hear this! Tech/1 Ackerman Boone to Exec's office. Tech/1 Boone to Exec.”

“You see?” Boone said, smiling grimly. As yet, no one saw. His face still set in a grim smile, Ackerman Boone headed above decks.

“That, Mr. President,” Vice Admiral T. Shawnley Stapleton said gravely, “is the problem. We would have come to you sooner, sir, but frankly—”

“I know it, Admiral,” the President said quietly. “I could not have helped you in any way. There was no sense telling me.”

“We have one chance, sir, and one only. It's irregular and it will probably knock the hell out of the *Glory of the Galaxy*, but it may save our lives. If we throw the ship suddenly into subspace we could pass right through the sun's position and—”

“I'm no scientist, Admiral, but wouldn't that put tremendous stress not only on the ship but on all of us aboard?”

“It would, sir. I won't keep anything from you, of course. We'd all be subjected to a force of twenty-some gravities for a period of several seconds. Here aboard the *Glory*, we don't have adequate G-equipment. It's something like the old days of air flight, sir: as soon as airplanes became reasonably safe, passenger ships didn't bother to carry parachutes. Result over a period of fifty years: thousands of lives lost. We'd all be bruised and battered, sir. Bones would be broken. There might be a few deaths. But I see no other way out, sir.”

“Then there was no need to check with me at all, I assure you, Admiral Stapleton. Do whatever you think is best, sir.”

The Admiral nodded gravely. “Thank you, Mr. President. I will say this, though: we will wait for a miracle.”

“I'm afraid I don't follow you.”

“Well, I don't expect a miracle, but the switchover to subspace so suddenly is bound to be dangerous. Therefore, we'll wait until the last possible moment. It will grow uncomfortably warm, let me warn you, but as long as the subspace drive is in good working order—”

“I see what you mean, Admiral. You have a free hand, sir; let me repeat that. I will not interfere in any way and I have the utmost confidence in you.” The President mopped his brow with an already damp handkerchief. It *was* growing warm, come to think of it. Uncomfortably warm.

As if everyone aboard the *Glory of the Galaxy* was slowly being broiled alive....

Ackerman Boone entered the crew quarters with the same smile still on his lips. At first he said nothing, but his silence drew the men like a magnet draws iron filings. When they had all clustered about him he spoke.

“The Exec not only chewed my ears off,” he boomed. “He all but spit them in my face! I was right, men. He admitted it to me after he saw how he couldn't get away with anything in front of Ackerman Boone. Men, we're heading on collision course with the sun!”

A shocked silence greeted his words and Ackerman Boone, instinctively a born speaker, paused dramatically to allow each man the private horror of his own thoughts for a few moments. Then he continued: “The Admiral figures we have one chance to get out of this alive, men. He figures—”

“What is it, Acky?”

“What will he do?”

“How will the Admiral get us out of this?”

Ackerman Boone spat on the polished, gleaming floor of the crew quarters. “He'll never get us out alive, let me tell you.

He wants to shift us into subspace at the last possible minute. Suddenly. Like this—” and Ackerman Boone snapped his fingers.

“There’d be a ship full of broken bones!” someone protested. “We can’t do a thing like that.”

“He’ll kill us all!” a very young T/3 cried hysterically.

“Not if I can help it, he won’t,” shouted Ackerman Boone. “Listen, men. This ain’t a question of discipline. It’s a question of living or dying and I tell you that’s more important than doing it like the book says or discipline or anything like that. We got a chance, all right: but it ain’t what the Admiral thinks it is. We ought to abandon the *Glory* to her place in the sun and scam out of here in the lifeboats—every last person aboard ship.”

“But will they have enough power to get out of the sun’s gravitational pull?” someone asked.

Ackerman Boone shrugged. “Don’t look at me,” he said mockingly. “I’m only an enlisted man and they don’t give enlisted men enough math to answer questions like that. But reckoning by the seat of my pants I would say, yes. Yes, we could get away like that—if we act fast. Because every minute we waste is a minute that brings us closer to the sun and makes it harder to get away in the lifeboats. If we act, men, we got to act fast.”

“You’re talking mutiny, Boone,” a grizzled old space veteran said. “You can count me out.”

“What’s the matter, McCormick? Yellow?”

“I’m not yellow. I say it takes guts to maintain discipline in a real emergency. I say *you’re* yellow, Boone.”

“You better be ready to back that up with your fists, McCormick,” Boone said savagely.

“I’m ready any time you’re ready, you yellow mutinous bastard!”

Ackerman Boone launched himself at the smaller, older man, who stood his ground unflinchingly although he probably knew he would take a sound beating. But four or five crewmen came between them and held them apart, one saying:

“Look who’s talking, Boone. You say time’s precious but you’re all set to start fighting. Every minute—”

“Every *second*,” Boone said grimly, “brings us more than a hundred miles closer to the sun.”

“What can we do, Acky?”

Instead of answer, Ackerman Boone dramatically mopped the sweat from his face. All the men were uncomfortably warm now. It was obvious that the temperature within the *Glory of the Galaxy* had now climbed fifteen or twenty degrees despite the fact that the refrigs were working at full capacity. Even the bulkheads and the metal floor of crew quarters were unpleasantly warm to the touch. The air was hot and suddenly very dry.

“I’ll tell you what we ought to do,” Ackerman Boone said finally. “Admiral Stapleton or no Admiral Stapleton, President of the Galactic Federation or no President of the Galactic Federation, we ought to take over this ship and man the lifeboats for everyone’s good. If they don’t want to save their lives and ours—let’s us save our lives and theirs!”

Roars of approval greeted Boone’s words, but Spacer McCormick and some of the other veterans stood apart from the loud speech-making which followed. Actually, Boone’s wild words—which he gambled with after the first flush of enthusiasm for his plan—began to lose converts. One by one the men drifted toward McCormick’s silent group until, finally, Boone had lost almost his entire audience.

Just then a T/2 rushed into crew quarters and shouted: “Hey, is Boone around? Has anyone seen Boone?”

This brought general laughter. Under the circumstances, the question was not without its humorous aspect.

“What’ll you have?” Boone demanded.

“The refrigs, Boone! They are on the blink. Overstrained themselves and burned themselves out. Inside of half an hour this ship’s going to be an oven hot enough to kill us all!”

“Half an hour, men!” Ackerman Boone cried. “Now, do we take over the ship and man those lifeboats or don’t we!”

The roar which followed his words was a decidedly affirmative one.

“These are the figures,” Admiral Stapleton said. “You can see, Mr. President, that we have absolutely no chance whatever if we man the lifeboats. We would perish as assuredly as we would if we remained with the *Glory of the Galaxy* in normal space.”

“Admiral, I have to hand it to you. I don’t know how you can think—in all this heat.”

“Have to, sir. Otherwise we all die.”

“The air temperature—”

“Is a hundred and thirty degrees and rising. We’ve passed salt tablets out to everyone, sir, but even then it’s only a matter of time before we’re all prostrated. If you’re sure you give your permission, sir—”

“Admiral Stapleton, you are running this ship, not I.”

“Very well, sir. I’ve sent our subspace officer, Lieutenant Ormundy, to throw in the subspace drive. We should know in a few moments—”

“No crash hammocks or anything?”

“I’m sorry, sir.”

“It isn’t your fault, Admiral. I was merely pointing out a fact.”

The squawk box blared: “Now hear this! Now hear this! T/3 Ackerman Boone to Admiral Stapleton. Are you listening, Admiral?”

Admiral Stapleton’s haggard, heat-worn face bore a look of astonishment as he listened. Ackerman said, “We have Lieutenant Ormundy, Admiral. He’s not killing us all by putting us into subspace in minutes when it ought to take hours, you understand. We have Ormundy and we have the subspace room. A contingent of our men is getting the lifeboats ready. We’re going to abandon ship, Admiral, all of us, including you and the politicians even if we have to drag you aboard the lifeboats at N—gunpoint.”

Admiral Stapleton’s face went ashen. “Let me at a radio!” he roared. “I want to answer that man and see if he understands exactly what mutiny is!”

While Ackerman Boone was talking over the squawk box, the temperature within the *Glory of the Galaxy* rose to 145° Fahrenheit.

“Fifteen minutes,” Larry Grange said. “In fifteen minutes the heat will have us all unconscious.” Only it wasn’t Larry alone who was talking. It was Larry and Johnny Mayhem. In a surprisingly short time the young Secret Serviceman had come to accept the dual occupation of his own mind. It was there: it was either dual occupation or insanity and if the voice which spoke inside his head said it was Johnny Mayhem, then it was Johnny Mayhem. Besides, Larry felt clear-headed in a way he had never felt before, despite the terrible, sapping heat. It was as if he had matured suddenly—the word matured came to him instinctively—in the space of minutes. Or, as if a maturing influence were at work on his mind.

“What can we do?” Sheila said. “The crew has complete control of the ship.”

“Secret Service chief says we’re on our own. There’s no time for co-ordinated planning, but somehow, within a very few minutes, we’ve got to get inside the subspace room and throw the ship out of normal space or we’ll all be roasted.”

“Some of your men are there now, aren’t they?”

“In the companionway outside the subspace room, yeah. But they’ll never force their way in time. Not with blasters and not with N-guns, either. Not in ten minutes, they won’t.”

“Larry, all of a sudden I—I’m scared. We’re all going to die, Larry. I don’t want—Larry, what are you going to do?”

They had been walking in a deserted companionway which brought them to one of the aft escape hatches of the *Glory of the Galaxy*. Their clothing was plastered to their bodies with sweat and every breath was agonizing, furnace hot.

“I’m going outside,” Larry said quietly.

“Outside? What do you mean?”

“Spacesuit, outside. There’s a hatch in the subspace room. If their attention is diverted to the companionway door, I may be able to get in. It’s our only chance—ours, and everyone’s.”

“But the spacesuit—”

“I know,” Larry said even as he was climbing into the inflatable vacuum garment. It was Larry—and it wasn’t Larry. He felt a certain confidence, a certain sense of doing the right thing—a feeling which Larry Grange had never experienced before in his life. It was as if the boy had become a man in the final moments of his life—or, he thought all at once, it was as if Johnny Mayhem who shared his mind and his body with him was somehow transmitting some of his own skills and confidence even as he—Mayhem—had reached the decision to go outside.

“I know,” he said. “The spacesuit isn’t insulated sufficiently. I’ll have about three minutes out there. Three minutes to get inside. Otherwise, I’m finished.”

“But Larry—”

“Don’t you see, Sheila? What does it matter? Who wants the five or ten extra minutes if we’re all going to die anyway? This way, there’s a chance.”

He buckled the spacesuit and lifted the heavy fishbowl helmet, preparing to set it on his shoulders.

“Wait,” Sheila said, and stood on tiptoes to take his face in her hands and kiss him on the lips. “You—you’re different,” Sheila said. “You’re the same guy, a lot of fun, but you’re a—man, too. This is for what might have been, Larry,” she said, and kissed him again. “This is because I love you.”

Before he dropped the helmet in place, Larry said. "It isn't for what might have been, Sheila. It's for what will be."

The helmet snapped shut over the shoulder ridges of the spacesuit. Moments later, he had slipped into the airlock.

"I say you're a fool, Ackerman Boone!" one of the enlisted men rasped at the leader of the mutiny. "I say now we've lost our last chance. Now it's too late to get into the lifeboats even if we wanted to. Now all we can do is—die!"

There were still ten conscious men in the subspace room. The others had fallen before heat prostration and lay strewn about the floor, wringing wet and oddly flaccid as if all the moisture had been wrung from their bodies except for the sweat which covered their skins.

"All right," Ackerman Boone admitted. "All right, so none of us knows how to work the subspace mechanism. You think that would have helped? It would have killed us all, I tell you."

"It was a chance, Boone. Our last chance and you—"

"Just shut up!" Boone snarled. "I know what you're thinking. You're thinking we ought to let them officers and Secret Servicemen to ram home the subspace drive. But use your head, man. Probably they'll kill us all, but if they don't—"

"Then you admit there's a chance!"

"Yeah. All right, a chance. But if they don't kill us all, if they save us by ramming home the subspacer, what happens? We're all taken in on a mutiny charge. It's a capital offense, you fool!"

"Well, it's better than sure death," the man said, and moved toward the door.

"Allister, wait!" Boone cried. "Wait, I'm warning you. Any man who tries to open that door—"

Outside, a steady booming of blaster fire could be heard, but the assault-proof door stood fast.

"—is going to get himself killed!" Boone finished.

Grimly, Allister reached the door and got his already blistered fingers on the lock mechanism.

Ackerman Boone shot him in the back with an N-gun.

Larry's whole body felt like one raw mass of broken blisters as, flat on his belly, he inched his way along the outside hull of the *Glory of the Galaxy*. He had no idea what the heat was out here, but it radiated off the hot hull of the *Glory* in scalding, suffocating waves which swept right through the insulating of the spacesuit. If he didn't find the proper hatch, and in a matter of seconds....

"Anyone else?" Ackerman Boone screamed. "Anyone else like Allister?"

But one by one the remaining men were dropping from the heat. Finally—alone—Ackerman Boone faced the door and stared defiantly at the hot metal as if he could see his adversaries through it. On the other side, the firing became more sporadic as the officers and Secret Servicemen collapsed. His mind crazed with the heat and with fear, Ackerman Boone suddenly wished he could see the men through the door, wished he could see them die....

It was this hatch or nothing. He thought it was the right one, but couldn't be sure. He could no longer see. His vision had gone completely. The pain was a numb thing now, far away, hardly a part of himself. Maybe Mayhem was absorbing the pain-sensation for him, he thought. Maybe Mayhem took the pain and suffered with it in the shared body so he, Larry, could still think. Maybe—

His blistered fingers were barely able to move within the insulated gloves, Larry fumbled with the hatch.

Ackerman Boone whirled suddenly. He had been intent upon the companionway door and the sounds behind him—which he had heard but not registered as dangerous for several seconds—now made him turn.

The man was peeling off a space suit. Literally peeling it off in strips from his lobster-red flesh. He blinked at Boone without seeing him. Dazzle-blinded, Boone thought, then realized his own vision was going.

"I'll kill you if you go near that subspace drive!" Boone screamed.

"It's the only chance for all of us and you know it, Boone," the man said quietly. "Don't try to stop me."

Ackerman Boone lifted his N-gun and squinted through the haze of heat and blinding light. He couldn't see! He couldn't see....

Wildly, he fired the N-gun. Wildly, in all directions, spraying the room with it—

Larry dropped blindly forward. Twice he tripped over unconscious men, but climbed to his feet and went on. He could not see Boone, but he could see—vaguely—the muzzle flash of Boone's N-gun. He staggered across the room toward that muzzle-flash and finally embraced it—

And found himself fighting for his life. Boone was crazed now—with the heat and with his own failure. He bit and tore at Larry with strong claw-like fingers and lashed out with his feet. He balled his fists and hammered air like a windmill, arms flailing, striking flesh often enough to batter Larry toward the floor.

Grimly Larry clung to him, pulled himself upright, ducked his head against his chest and struck out with his own fists, feeling nothing, not knowing when they landed and when they did not, hearing nothing but a far off roaring in his ears, a roaring which told him he was losing consciousness and had to act—soon—if he was going to save anyone....

He stood and pounded with his fists.

Pounded—air.

He did not know that Boone had collapsed until his feet trod on the man's inert body and then, quickly, he rushed toward the control board, rushed blindly in its direction, or in the direction he thought it would be, tripped over something, sprawled on the hot, blistering floor, got himself up somehow, crawled forward, pulled himself upright....

There was no sensation in his fingers. He did not know if he had actually reached the control board but abruptly he realized that he had not felt Mayhem's presence in his mind for several minutes. Was Mayhem conserving his energy for a final try, letting Larry absorb the punishment now so he—

Yes, Larry remembered thinking vaguely. It had to be that. For Mayhem knew how to work the controls, and he did not. Now his mind receded into a fog of semi-consciousness, but he was aware that his blistered fingers were fairly flying across the control board, aware then of an inward sigh—whether of relief or triumph, he was never to know—then aware, abruptly and terribly, of a wrenching pain which seemed to strip his skin from his flesh, his flesh from his bones, the marrow from....

"Can you see?" the doctor asked.

"Yes," Larry said as the bandages were removed from his eyes. Three people were in the room with the doctor—Admiral Stapleton, the President—and Sheila. Somehow, Sheila was most important.

"We are now in subspace, thanks to you," the Admiral said. "We all have minor injuries as a result of the transfer, but there were only two fatalities, I'm happy to say. And naturally, the ship is now out of danger."

"What gets me, Grange," the President said, "is how you managed to work those controls. What the devil do you know about sub-space, my boy?"

"The two fatalities," the Admiral said, "were Ackerman Boone and the man he had killed." Then the Admiral grinned. "Can't you see, Mr. President, that he's not paying any attention to us? I think, at the moment, the hero of the hour only has eyes for Miss Kelly here."

"Begging your pardons, sirs, yes," Larry said happily.

Nodding and smiling, the President of the Galactic Federation and Admiral Stapleton left the dispensary room—with the doctor.

"Well, hero," Sheila said, and smiled.

Larry realized—quite suddenly—that, inside himself, he was alone. Mayhem had done his job—and vanished utterly.

"You know," Sheila said, "it's as if you—well, I hope this doesn't get you sore at me—as if you grew up overnight."

Before he kissed her Larry said: "Maybe you're right. Maybe I'll tell you about it someday. But you'd never believe me."

THE END

Transcriber's note: the few typographical changes are indicated by a dotted red line under the word that has changed.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A PLACE IN THE SUN ***

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