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The Bureaucrat

by MALCOLM JAMESON

Bullard was a Grand Admiral now, and the red tape of high position bound him—they thought!—so tight he couldn't do a friend a favor. But what's a knowledge of high strategy for but to outmaneuver trouble?

*Though the mills of God grind slowly,
Yet they grind exceedingly small—*

The young man strode through endless corridors with the confident bearing of one sure of his right. Most of the guards who stopped him were satisfied with his ident and the uniform he wore. To those who doubted he tossed the formula he had tested earlier and found to work.

"I am bearer of a personal message to Grand Admiral Bullard," he would say, and hurry on as if already late.

That sufficed to pass him through the many red tape wound barriers of the vast Defense Building in the bowl of Tycho Crater. It worked well even in the first half-mile of the northwestern wing. But when he came up to the partition where hung the sign "Chief of the Bureau of Spatial Strategy," his boldness began to ebb. Facing him, seated at a receptionist's desk, was a grim-faced, battle-scarred three-striper. And he wore the aigulettes of a personal aide.

Young Benton slowed his pace, and tried to gauge the man who now sat athwart his way. The rows of iridescent ribbons on his breast and the golden shoulder loops indicated that he was no ordinary receptionist. He was on Bullard's staff probably because he had fought many a campaign by the side of that fabulous man himself, and surely had access to his senior's mind. No flimsy generality was likely to get by his guard.

Benton faltered. He bore a message, to be sure, but the man it was for was hardly more to him than a legend, while the man who had given it to him had been dead for five years. Would the admiral receive it after so long a lapse of time? More immediately, could this gold-laced Cerberus be convinced he would? Young Benton realized then how forlorn was the hope that had brought him to the Moon.

He braced himself. There was a war on—the first important one since his coming of age—and he wanted to take part in it, even as his father and the renowned Bullard had in those before he was born. He had to get in it, and there was only one card left unplayed—the ace-in-the-hole bequeathed him by his father. Perhaps Bullard would turn him down, even as they had in Personnel, but he had to make the try. His career, his self-

respect hung on it.

"Sir," he addressed the guardian of the door, "I am the son of Captain Roy Benton, who was killed off Io in '93—"

"I knew him," nodded the commander gravely. "A good shipmate and a brave fighter." He paused, then added, "Well?"

"He told me once," said Benton, uncertainly, "that if I ever got in a hole so deep that I couldn't see the light, and had done everything I knew how to get out and failed, I was to go to his old skipper—Bullard—if he was still alive, and tell him he sent me."

The commander was studying the young man with hard, expressionless eyes.

"You choose a moment in the greatest war in history to get yourself into a jam," he said, coldly, "and then expect the busiest man in the System to stop what he is doing and bail you out. I knew your father, and I do not believe he gave you any such message. He, like the admiral, helped only those who help themselves. You misunderstood him."

"Oh, no sir," cried Benton. "It's no ordinary jam—he told me I would have to weather those under my own power. But this is different—I'm up against a system. Oh, sir, can't you see ... it's nothing I've done, it's something being done to me ... I want to get into this war, I want to fight, and they won't let me!"

The grizzled aide relaxed the grimness of his expression. There was no doubting the sincerity of the eager youngster before him.

"The admiral is very busy," he said, "but if you're sure you're right—"

The commander turned as if to send in a message on the teletype, but apparently instantly thought better of it.

"Wait," he said, "I'll tell him you are here."

Young Benton stood stiffly as he had been left, tense and ill at ease, staring at the shut door. Until that moment he had thought only of his own troubles, not in the least as to how they stacked up in the perspective of stellar affairs. Now that his name had gone into the grand admiral he was a little appalled at his own temerity. For to him Bullard had been rather a legend than a reality, and in his despair young Benton had forgotten that he was a great deal more than a mere former shipmate of his dad. He was the director of all spatial strategy, a power who sat aloof like a dim deity, dealing only with fleets and flotillas, issuing orders that moved men by the million to violent action and sometimes death. Now that he was on the threshold of his office, the sickening doubt assailed Benton that the great man could not possibly find time to receive him or hear his story.

The aide was gone a long time.

As Benton sank onto a chair and waited, the enormity of his act of thoughtless intrusion was borne in with frightening force. For the anteroom behind him had filled up with a score of officers of flag rank—minor admirals and commodores—each laden with bulging brief cases, and each intent on seeing the bureau chief. The withering looks they gave him spoke their impatience. Benton reddened under their hostile stares, and then

at last the commander came back.

"Sorry, commodore," he said crisply to a glowering, walrus-mustached old officer who rose irritably as if to dash inside, "but the grand admiral is not free yet. You will have to wait."

As the florid commodore sat down sputtering, the aide turned to Benton.

"Go on in," he said.

Elation surged up in young Benton. He was in! He was inside the door and up onto a motor scooter piloted by an orderly.

"You had best ride, sir," the orderly had said, "it is quite a way yet."

But as the machine slid swiftly along gleaming passages, Benton saw that the private suite of the grand admiral was no small place. Through door after door he glimpsed tremendous activities. Occasionally they whizzed through open bays of desks where scraps of conversation could be overheard, while all about were annunciators flashing weird symbols incessantly.

"Sector 4," droned a voice, "*Pegasus* and *Altair* joining action.... *Pegasus* hit.... *Pegasus* blows up.... Cruiser Flotilla 36 moving in from lower port quarter.... *Altair* hit—"

As that faded, the orderly cut across the back of a balcony overlooking a great hall. Far down in the pit Benton could see a huge swirling ball of vapor, glittering with pin points of varicolored lights cast upon it by unseen projectors. That would be the ultra-secret Battle Integrator—the marvelous moving

solidograph that resolved six dimensions into four. Stern-faced officers watched it intently, snapping orders into phones, and uniformed girl messengers dashed everywhere. Then Benton was out of that place and passing other wonders.

Long before he reached the door that actually was Bullard's, Benton was a limp and chastened young man. Now he knew that the personal grievances that had brought him to the Moon were infinitesimally petty, as petty as the effrontery of his bringing them to harried Bullard's attention was colossal. His own place in the grand scheme of things now appeared as unimportant as the gyrations of a single atom in an ocean of brine. Benton was wondering whether it was still too late to apologize and make as graceful a withdrawal as possible when the scooter skidded to a stop before the paneled door.

"In there, sir," said the orderly, and was gone.

Grand Admiral Bullard received his visitor standing. He was tall and spare, as his pictures always showed him, and he stood beside a glass case in which rested a model of the famed *Pollux*, the ship in which he and the elder Benton had begun their climb to the top. Only the deep lines in his face and a thinning white mane hinted at his age. He smiled gently and offered his hand.

"I couldn't refuse to see the son of my old friend Benton," he said, "but I'll have to ask you to make it brief. You are in trouble?"

"I'm turret officer in the *Vindictive*," said Benton, "and can't get off."

He stopped. That told the whole story—if one knew him and also the gilded madhouse in which he was doomed to "serve."

"The only *Vindictive* I ever knew," said Bullard, shaking his head, "was a clumsy old monitor, but she was scrapped years ago."

"It's the same one, sir," said Benton, "They've pulled her off the junk heap and put her back in commission."

"Brief me on the *Vindictive*," Bullard said into an annunciator, jabbing at a button. "Let me have it by five."

He glanced dreamily past Benton's head, where unknown to his young visitor a succession of cryptic signals was being flashed in pale light. The code characters told the admiral that Benton was a graduate with honor of the Lunar Academy with six years excellent service behind him, including a commendation for behavior during the Patroclan Pacification campaign. Amazingly the series ended with the symbol "Sp-A1-Duration," which signified to Bullard that his present assignment was at the personal direction of the Secretary of Defense and was not to be altered for the duration.

"You don't like your duty?" queried Bullard mildly, but with a slight frown.

"I hate it!" said Benton fervently. "It is in a turret that cannot be fired, mounted on a ship that goes nowhere, and nobody else on board gives a—"

He broke off, reddening. He had almost committed a breach of one of the oldest sections of the Service's unwritten code. Short of reporting outright treason, one simply did not peach on shipmates, however unworthy.

"That is, sir, I'd like more active duty," Benton went on, floundering for his words, "My skipper laughs at me ... says I don't know when I'm well off. Personnel refuses to answer my letters.... I even tried to desert ... engaged an expert camofleur so I could enlist under another name and start over ... but it didn't get by the doctors ... he couldn't fake the eyeball veinings well enough."

Benton looked glum, then broke out fiercely.

"They laughed me out of the place and sent me back to the ship ... now the fellows call me the Boy Scout of the Void—"

Bullard simply stood and looked at him, saying nothing.

"Oh, it's my mother, sir," Benton wailed in a torrent of pent-up anguish, "she's changed so since dad went ... she says she won't let them make cannon fodder out of me ... and she has money enough to make it stick. It's that fortune from dad's ship detector ... she goes to all the bond rallies with Ungerhardt, the Minister of Finance, and buys in denominations of ten millions. She got him to work on the secretary and stick me where I am ... made me into a lily-fingered slacker. Can't you see the spot I'm on?"

"That's bad," murmured Bullard, and sighed. Wars had to be financed, and if two cabinet ministers had already interfered, Benton would have to reconcile himself to being a personal

sacrifice. Huge building programs were more important than the ambitions of any single young man. Bullard knew that if the secretary had already taken a stand, his own intervention would accomplish nothing.

"Young man," he said slowly, "your case is one of thousands. In a war of this magnitude there must be many square pegs in round holes. Unhappily there is no time to investigate and rectify each separate injustice. I would like to have the miraculous powers you credit me with, but it would be improper—and I am afraid useless—for me to interfere in personnel affairs. My job is to handle ships, and not even single ships as I once did," and he gave a loving glance at the gleaming model of the *Pollux*, "but whole forces and vast fleets. They are scattered from the dim reaches of trans-Plutonia to the fiery wastes of the circumsolar sector. I do not know half the commanders of them by name, let alone what is happening on board their vessel. I am sorry to let you down, but there is nothing I can do for you as an individual."

"Yes, sir," said Benton, miserably. Now he was getting it—the old brushoff. It was being administered in a kindly way, but nevertheless that was what it was—the brushoff.

"You must remember," continued Bullard, "that I am no longer a free agent. I am the impersonal entity known as the Bureau of Spatial Strategy, I cannot act in terms of individuals or even single units. My orders must apply to all ships alike. I am what is known as a bureaucrat, and bureaucrats are a notoriously callous lot. My advice to you is to return to your ship and be the best turret officer you know how. It may be that useful work can be found for her—"

"She is quite useless, sir," said Benton.

"We'll see," said Bullard, and smiled. He offered the young man his hand again, signifying the interview was terminated.

"I am a cog in a vast machines, no less than you," Bullard added. "Bigger and better placed, perhaps, but circumscribed as to function. Rest assured that my bureau will look into your case, and if action is indicated will act—but always as a bureau. I hope you understand."

"Thank you, sir," mumbled Benton.

After that he hardly remembered how he got out of the place. On the way back he hardly noticed the disgruntled brasshats he passed. They were coming in for their belated appointments, and glowered at him, wondering what business a mere cub could be on to gain him immediate access to the chief. As for Benton, he knew only that for all his polite reception he had got exactly nowhere. He was still of that dismal opinion when he reached the outer door. There the veteran aide regarded him gravely, dead-pan as before.

"What luck?" he asked.

"I ... don't ... know," said Benton, gloomily. "He didn't promise anything."

What happened next puzzled Benton for hours. The aide reached over and patted him affectionately on the shoulder.

"Tough," he said, with all solemnity. It was not the word spoken nor the friendly gesture that astonished Benton. Perhaps

any old shipmate of his father would have done the same. It was the slow, deliberate wink that accompanied them. It was such a sly and knowing wink!

Benton went the rest of the way to where his skyster was parked in something of a daze. Try as he might, he could remember nothing that Bullard said upon which he could pin hope. There was not a thing he could sink his teeth in. And yet—well, he could not forget some of the yarns his dad used to spin. The gist of them was that when it came to Bullard one never could tell.

The ponderous machine ground on. For a moment a tiny cog had wobbled on its shaft and brushed a great driving wheel, but the tinkle of its impact was hardly heard. Yet the contact was sufficient to enmesh a train of hitherto unused gears. Silently, efficiently, they took up the impulse imparted to them and passed it on. At the appointed hour a segment of the machine whirred briefly and spewed up a bit of grist.

"The report on the *Vindictive*, admiral."

It was Captain Shipstead, paunchy and bald.

"*Vindictive*?" puzzled Bullard. His afternoon had been full.
"Oh, yes."

"What good it will do you, I can't imagine," wheezed Shipstead. "She stinks."

"As bad as that?" queried Bullard. Now what young Benton had intimated was coming back to him. "What are the high spots?"

"Greed and cowardice in about equal parts, and opportunistic weak-spined officeholders for the rest. It's one of those things that probably will be probed and exposed after the war. Maybe. I don't know. The BI boys have given it a pretty good going over, and it scared 'em. They think the dope too hot to hold, so they buried it deep in their files. I almost missed it. But I can tell you that if you are planning to use the old tub she's a total loss."

"So I was given to understand," said Billiard dryly.

He took the report and riffled its pages. It was the not new story of avarice and fear and subtle bribery, the bribery of political and economic pressure. Certain rich young men feared the draft with its harsh policy of no exemptions. Some were merely playboys who did not want to be annoyed; many were able and energetic, but busy making vast profits out of the war; there were others who were just plain yellow. But their ends were the same. They pooled their immense resources and found the answer. It was the monitor *Vindictive*.

The Bourse, that aggregation of money and commodity exchanges that dotted the landscaped dreamland of Manhattan, was the most vital spot in all the seven planets. It deserved protection, and it petitioned for it. It wanted a warship to hover over it and guard it night and day—a big warship. When the request was refused the Bourse retaliated. Bond sales languished and procurement found commodities scarce and high. It was Ungerhardt, the Minister of Finance, who unblocked the

impasse. If no major warships were available, why not recommission one of the very old ones? Wires were pulled, and the Defense Department saw the light. The *Vindictive*, to be manned and operated by local boys, was the outcome of it.

"I suppose," said Bullard wearily, "that to fight a war someone has to think of where the money and supplies come from. Still—"

"We aren't out a thing," said Shipstead. "The ship is little better than a museum hulk and the crew are even more worthless—as helpless a bunch of stuffy brokers and lazy lounge lizards as could be assembled. I would trade the lot of 'em for one good, upstanding young man of the type we use."

"Exactly," said Bullard, thoughtfully.

"You can't touch 'em," warned Shipstead. "The ship is on special duty, subject only to orders of the secretary himself."

Bullard smiled.

"And I thought you were a good sky lawyer!"

He pulled open a drawer of his desk and abstracted a document of parchment from which dangled the great golden seal of the Grand Council.

"My precept of office," he said. "Read it."

Shipstead took it, skimming down through the well-known paragraphs.

"Mm-m-m," he mumbled, pursing his lips, "this part, you mean?—'and as chief of said Bureau you shall be responsible for the state of training of all vessels in full commission, whether acting singly or in fleets, and to that end are empowered to prescribe drills, make inspections, and'—?"

"As good a take-off point as any," smiled Bullard. "I knew I'd find something in that directives. Now let me think what I will do with it."

He stared dreamily at the ceiling for a moment.

"There's no way to make 'em fight," he said, "but we can make 'em work. Maybe we can make 'em mad enough to want to fight. Shipstead, take an order!"

Shipstead scribbled down the few words dictated.

"That's all we need to start the ball a-rolling. Send it to all ships and notify Operations. After that I think we can just let nature take its course. If I know the type, they'll yell and start pulling wires. The more they squirm the worse it will be for them."

Captain Shipstead snapped his notebook to and chuckled.

The war machine never rested, nor did it delay or question. What was fed into it it took up and bore along relentlessly. Its inertia was great. Once a train of impulses was passed on into its throbbing vitals, not even its nominal director dared tinker with it. It was too intricate.

Young Benton leveled off and savagely clicked out his code designation, as pasted on the dashboard. The hovering guard ship sent back the expected answer. There was no other in its vocabulary. "Permission granted to proceed." Benton noted it and put the skyster into a deep dive. He had complied with the empty formalities that were supposed to justify the presence of the fearsome looking *Vindictive*. But he had done it full of scornful rage, for no one knew better than he how toothless was the barking wardog. For all the stumpy old sky monster's mighty katatrons and gaping tubes, she could neither move nor shoot. Tugs had brought her there, tugs would have to take her in when the war was done. But he, like the masters of other passing vessels, observed the pleasant fiction. It was better to slow and answer the challenge than to receive endless letters from the Office Stratotrafic Control.

Benton dived on down onto the broad sky field of the Cosmos Club, landed neatly, and turned the borrowed yacht over to a flunky. That done, he rapidly mounted the club's swanky terrace. He loathed the place, and those who frequented it, but that day it had served his purpose. He had at least been able to shoot his last bolt, whether or not it had hit the mark. Now there was no other course open to him but to go back to his ship and try to follow the hard advice Bullard gave him.

He managed to avoid most of the lolling guests—many of them shipmates, as he knew from the glint of gold on their left breasts. For the shameless ones had gone so far as to wangle a special campaign badge—the Tellurian Defense Medal—whose ribbon was cloth of gold. Benton had to wear one, too, but he

did it with characteristic protest—scorning gold he bought one of plain silk ribbon, *yellow*. He was across the terrace and almost to the outer entrance when a slim young man with a tiny waxed mustache stepped out from the bar and detained him.

"Aw, haw do ye do, Benton," he drawled, in languid condescension, "Are you going up? If so, will you be good enough to tell the 'Zee I shawn't be up for a day or so—social obligations, ya knaw."

Benton scowled. The fellow could have phoned as well. They usually did. But Commander Van Draem—one of *the* Van Draems—had more to say.

"Meet yoah new assistant, ... Reggy Torrington, Benton. He'll be up shawtly and be yoah helpah—"

"In doing what?" glared Benton, ignoring the flabby hand. He had nothing in particular against Reggy Torrington, except that he was just one more idler, scion of the founder of the Plastics Trust. His draft number must have come up.

"*Haw, haw,*" snickered Van Draem. "Don't mind Benton, Reggy ... not a bad fellow, reahlly ... a bit touchy about ouah inactivity and all that, the ungrateful beggah—"

Benton did not hear the rest. With curling lip he was on his way to the door. Outside it he grabbed a crosstown autocar and hit for the landing stage. There had been a time when he looked forward to making port in Manhattan. Not any more. For real ships came in from time to time and disgorged their weary veterans for a few hours on Mother Earth. Benton could not bear to look into their space-bronzed faces or overhear their

bantering chatter of engagements they had survived. Most of all he dreaded meeting an old acquaintance, whose cheery, "Hiy'a, boy, what ship?" could not be answered without pain.

No one was at the landing stage but Purcell. Purcell was his classmate, the only other regular on board. It was not being of a rich family that had caused his shanghaiing to the *Vindictive*, but grim necessity. A slacker's haven need not be able to cruise, but those aboard it must have light and heat and water. A competent person had to see that the auxiliaries ran, and that was the hard lot that fell to Harry Purcell. He liked it as little as Benton did.

"How did you make out?" he asked, as soon as they were in the boat.

Benton shook his head.

"He saw me. Was friendly, but said it wasn't his pigeon."

"Bullard did that?" said Purcell, incredulously. "Why I always heard—"

"Yeh, I know," said Benton, disconsolately. "Oh, I don't blame him. He must have a lot on his mind—is getting old, too. He said I was to think of him only as a bureaucrat, and reminded me what they were—"

"Say," said Purcell, brightening, "now that's not a bad idea, at that. I wonder what one of those stodgy bureaus would be like if a man took hold and ran it like Bullard used to run the old *Pollux*?"

Benton did not answer. His gloom was too deep, and already

the boat was bumping the ship's side. He got out silently and clambered into the monitor's air lock.

He did no more than glance into the luxuriously appointed wardroom. There was no other in the skies like it. In reconditioning the ship money had been lavish as to living quarters. But that afternoon there were only a few officers lounging in it. Of the handful obliged to stay on board the others were either in their bunks sleeping off last night's round of the hot spots down in town, or in the communications shack parleying by phone with their floor traders. Benton noted that the time was six, and started for his own room to make ready for dinner. It was then a messenger overtook him with the news that the commander wanted to see him.

"Me?" Nobody ever asked Benton about anything. He was a misfit, for all his mother's money. It took several generations of great wealth to produce the perfect parasitic type that mainly manned the *Vindictive*.

It was Farentz, the Executive, who had sent for him. Farentz was a corporation lawyer and a good one. In Captain Dobson's eyes he was exactly the kind of man to handle the detail of running a ship, involved as it was with the endless red tape of departmental procedure. Dobson himself rarely came up from the great banking institution he headed.

"You understand this jargon," said Farentz, handing over a flimsy. "What does this mean in ordinary English?"

It was a message from the Department, not ten minutes old.

ALLPAT URGENT:

Amend Art 44 Tactexins as follows quote vessels mounting katatrons Mark VII to Mark XXIX inc shall be deemed cruisers for purposes of Tactical Exercises unquote acknowledge

1728 SPAST.

"It is from the Bureau of Spatial Strategy," Benton said, "to all ships. It modifies a certain article of the Instructions for Tactical Exercises, putting katatron ships in the cruiser class."

"Humph," said Farentz. "We mount katatrons—Mark XX's. I looked it up. What does it mean?"

"It means that we will have to perform the same drills cruisers do, I suppose." Benton's eyes suddenly went aglow. Could this be the fruit of his visit so soon? On the face of it the message seemed innocuous enough, and yet—

"It is absurd to talk of drills for us," said Farentz. "We don't know how and we haven't time for it. According to our understanding with the secretary we are exempt from such foolishness. I shall ignore this."

The messenger was back. He handed Farentz another flimsy. It read:

VINDICTIVE:

Ref SPAST ALLPAT 1728 your Form 1000 interrog expedite
OPS.

Farentz frowned.

"This one is for us," he growled. "What does *this* double-talk convey, if anything?"

"Operations," translated Benton, "says that since we are to be regarded as a cruiser, they want our Form 1000 and want it PDQ. That, I believe, is our operating schedule—for full acceleration test runs, target practice, and so on."

"Nonsense," snorted Farentz. "We are on detached duty. I shall protest it."

"Say over open ether that we can neither cruise nor shoot?" grinned Benton. "Their comeback would be that it was high time we learned to do both."

"Of course not," snarled Farentz. "I shall protest on the ground of discrimination. That multiple address is camouflage. Some busybody is sniping at us. No other ship had katatrons."

"Except," Benton reminded softly, "the other ten of this class—the *Relentless*, the *Implacable*, and the rest."

He knew those old relics were too far gone in rust to be reconditioned, but nevertheless there they were. Benton smiled happily at the ingenuity of the ALLPAT message. SPAST had the reputation of never backing water. If pushed, they would undoubtedly say that they *contemplated* putting a division of monitors in the air. The cruiser rule would stick.

Farentz evidently realized that too. He pulled a communicator to him and jabbed savagely at buttons.

"Get me Captain Dobson at Tellurian Trust," he snapped.

Benton could hear the rasping diaphragm bring back Dobson's voice. He was unperturbed, soothing. Pay no attention, he said, it was probably a slip of some clerk. They couldn't do that to us. He would see Ungerhardt in a day or so, and Ungerhardt would fix everything. Acknowledge the messages and send in a schedule. It didn't matter. It would be washed out later.

"All right," said Farentz, before cutting the connection. "I'll have Benton cook up a plausible schedule and send it in. Then we'll forget the whole thing."

"Righto," came Dobson's cheery voice.

Benton went to work on it in high glee. The one he had in mind was not impossible but it was stiff—a program calculated to sweat the champagne from the pampered darlings that made up the monitor's crew. He had no way of knowing whether Bullard's hand was behind those two messages, or what his own role was supposed to be, but to him they brought golden opportunity. And hope.

For Benton knew what Dobson and Farentz did not—the virtual immutability of schedules once submitted. They were routed through many offices and were the bases of much planning. They were tilted into more comprehensive fleet schedules, which were fixed months in advance. Last minute alterations were intolerable. One lived up to his schedule or explained why. By the time Dobson's complaint reached the secretary too many bureaus would already be involved, and omelets are not easily unscrambled. The *Vindictive* was committed to whatever Benton wrote down, and she dared not squeal. Her situation did not bear airing.

Benton sent off Form 1000 with a smile. Once it was in the works there was no stopping what would follow. Drills would have to be held, and he and Purcell, being the only ones who knew how, would be the taskmasters. It was a lovely prospect. Of a sudden service in a retired monitor began to have appeal. Then Benton sobered. The realization smote him that he did not know the first thing about kats, and it was high time he learned.

He took the gleaming corridor that led forward, then an elevator to the topmost through deck. After that it was a case of climbing ladders until he popped up through the hatch in the turret floor.

He was in the cubicle from which the turret officer directed the service of the two mighty projectors. Its bulkheads were a maze of dials and meters and queer antiquated gadgets few of whose uses he knew. On either side stood intricate

switchboards, and beyond those he could see into the turret proper. That large space was packed with towering banks of accumulators, exciters and boosters, and weird-looking massive solenoids of greenish metal. Benton had never seen them but once before—the day he joined the *Vindictive*. He learned then that all that massive equipment was no better than mere sham. The power leads to it had been cut.

He stepped into the turret for a closer look. As he did there was a stir at his feet and two startled skymen sprang to their feet. They had been sprawled out playing acey-deucey.

"Sorry, sir," said one, a stocky man with iron-gray hair and the scars of deep burns on his face, "we never knew an officer to come up here before—"

"That's all right," said Benton. "There has been a change. Beginning tomorrow we start drills. Can you show me around?"

The man smiled. He was Handley, Chief Electronicist, and wore the red and purple medal of the Fourth Battle of the Asteroids, the one in which the *Vindictive*, then queen of the fleet, blasted the Callistan flag into nothingness.

"I fought these guns in my first hitch," he said, "though I was just a lad then, a switch-puller. I remember, though. She's ready to ride if we only had juice and a hundred good men."

"Tell me all about it," said Benton.

He listened. There was nothing wrong with katatrons. Except for their ponderousness and slow rate of fire there was no better weapon. They had become obsolete because the trend had been

to handier, faster acting guns. It took the accumulators minutes to build up the vortices of naked atomic power, but once they were hurled nothing known to man could stand in their path. Between shots the ship was helplessly vulnerable, a fatal disadvantage in a multiple engagement. Advanced thought preferred a continuous blanket of fire, albeit less intense.

"We can drill, yes," said Handley, "but shoot, no. When they installed the Ekstroms they severed the cables and cut the generators over to power them. We can hover or we can shoot. Not both. We'd drop like a stone."

The monitor had been built for tube drive, but tube ships could not hover. In renovating her for her special job, Ekstrom repulsors had been installed, drawing their current from the generators designed to power the kats. Thus she could maintain her position in the stratosphere above Wall Street at the price of offensive power. There was not room for two sets of generators.

"What's wrong with cutting out the repulsors and using the old tubes?" Benton wanted to know.

"Nothing," said the other man, a first class tubeman from his rating badge, "except they've been blanked off to make room for the j.o. mess. They had to put all those ensigns somewhere, so they put them in the rocket feed flat."

"Oh," said Benton. That was a feature he must look into with Purcell. After all, propulsion was Purcell's job. He was the engineer.

When Benton left two hours later he felt considerably cheered. If some drastic changes could be made, the ship could

be brought back to something like fighting trim. The crux of the problem was not that. It was personnel. Instead of the normal complement of a thousand men and half a hundred officers, the proportions were reversed, and few of the officers had ever soiled a hand or done work more vigorous than lifting a highball. From that angle the prospects of converting the monitor to a fighting ship were not bright. Lots of pressure would have to be applied from somewhere, and he knew it would not come from Dobson. Benton bemoaned his own low rank. Despite the opening the two messages seemed to afford, he felt powerless to make the most of it. The powers of obstruction were too great

He found a council of war going on in a corner of the wardroom. Captain Dobson, big and hearty and every inch a financier, had come up to straighten out "this foolishness." Farentz was pawing through volumes of regulations, hunting for loopholes through which to crawl. Van Draem, annoyed at being sent for, sulked nearby. The secretary, it developed, had regretfully told them he had done all he could for them. He promised they would continue to do duty as sentinel ship for the Bourse and not be sent to the front, but to arbitrarily excuse them from routine drill would be embarrassing to him.

Dobson took it sourly. It meant he would have to relinquish his money-broking and give full time to his command. In the same manner it would hit many of his associates.

"What is the least number of men you can make a showing with, Benton?" he demanded. "It appears we will have to go through with this farce."

"Battle drill is an all-hands evolution, sir," said Benton

quietly. "I have already made out the station bill. Unfortunately, having so many ... uh, untrained officers, and so few competent men, I have taken the liberty of reversing their roles. The officers will man the guns, the veteran petty officers direct."

"That's outrageous," declared Van Draem.

They also thought it outrageous when Benton suggested sending out a general recall. There were not bunks enough to bed all the officers nominally attached. They wouldn't understand what recall meant.

"Use MP's," said Benton, "and when your excess officers come aboard they can double up. Later, when we get the old tubes uncorked and ready for firing, the ones who live in the feed flat will have to double up again."

"We'll make no alterations," said Dobson flatly.

"You're the skipper," said Benton, shrugging. "At your direction I filed a firing schedule. Somebody will have to think up some good answers as to why we can't carry it out."

Dobson grunted, and looked hopefully at Farentz.

"When you've got no case," said the lawyer, "the next best thing is delay. I haven't read all this stuff, but tomorrow I ought to find something."

"Good," said Dobson, and rose. That was that. Now he could go down to his bank again. Blundering bureaucrats! Paper warfare was a game two could play at!

A machine does what it is designed to do. A little overload does not stall it. Let the grist run even and the pressure remains the same. Let a stubborn lump jam the rolls, the pressure rises.

Lieutenant Commander Carr was a determined young man who had a desk in Operations. To him *Vindictive* was just a name, one of the eight hundred odd ships that came under his supervision. No one had given him special instructions concerning her; no one had to. The routine of preparing vessels for battle had been crystallized generations before him. There were certain things required to be done and in certain specified ways and at such and such times. His job was to see that they were. It was as simple as that.

"What an outfit!" he muttered, glaring at the letter on his blotter.

"Now what?" asked McGinty, his deskmate.

"This old crock of a monitor they dug up to stand guard over the Bourse. Militarily she's a gag, but somebody over in SPAST evidently didn't know that. They classed her as a cruiser and have got her down for target practice. What's hard about that I don't know, but it seems to have upset them."

"Yeh?"

"First off they said it violated the safety precautions to fire

kats that hadn't been used for years, and protested being included in the rules until they were dismantled and proved again. Well, Captain Shipstead appointed a board of inspection and ran tests on 'em. Said they were O.K. Then they complained they couldn't cruise for lack of motive power and that it was unsafe to fire the kats so close to a city. Atomic Engineering sent down a man and fixed 'em up on that. Tore out a lot of gingerbread fancy officers' quarters and uncovered a flock of old rocket tubes. Didja ever bump off in one of those space trackers? Boy, I did, on my first training cruise. They're *rugged*.

"Anyhow, between SPAST and ATENG they convinced 'em they could shoot and they could mote, so their next holler was that they were on fixed post and couldn't desert it to go out on the range. That squawk came to me. They had it backed up with a solemn declaration signed by about ten thousand brokers that if the Bourse went unguarded the worst panic in history would develop. It stumped me at first, as no real warships could be spared. Then I discovered that all they do is lie there and log passing ships. So I sent them and the brokers a message saying that adequate relief would be furnished at the proper time. Any tug will do the trick."

"That should have held 'em," remarked McGinty.

"You don't know that crowd," snapped Carr. "I'm beginning to think they are a lot of slackers or something. They're afraid to shoot. Well, they're *going* to shoot, and clear out by Mars if I can find a target vessel out there. Listen to this concoction of some sky-lawyer."

"Your attention is respectfully called to Article 724, Instructions for Tactical Exercises, which states that no turret crew shall be stationed for drill or action except as prescribed in the appropriate *Drill Manual*. Diligent search on our part has failed to turn up a single copy of any manual relating to the service of Mark XX katatrons—"

McGinty grinned.

"They've got something there. Those babies are obsolete as the dodo. I wouldn't know what to do with a pair of 'em myself. They used to backfire, you know, and wipe out whole ship's companies."

But Carr still glared grimly at the document. To him it was one more alibi, and he didn't care for alibis. He dragged a communicator to him.

"Publications," he said.

No, Publications told him, the Manual of the Katatron had been out of print for several decades. Had he tried the Library?

No, Library said, they had available only current material. Who cared a hang about katatrons anyway? But maybe Archives could dig up something.

"Archives? Ops speaking, Carr. Have you anything on katatrons? Yes—k-a-t-a-t-r-o-n-s—a sort of atomic bomb projector ... used to put 'em on monitors. What, only one and that can't go out? Rot! ... send me up a hundred certified photostats."

He shut off the communicator.

"That ought to hold 'em," he said between his teeth, "I'll send 'em ninety-nine and keep one for personal boning. Then I'll take a run down and check 'em against the book. They asked for it. Those lads are going to shoot or my name's not Jimmy Carr."

A day came when the little skycutter *Gnat* came up and hove to five miles off. She was equipped with a two-way stratophone, a one-inch Angborg blitzer, and manned by eight husky guardsmen. That was the *Vindictive's* temporary relief, and Dobson gazed upon the little can sourly. A pressboat came up and circled the pair while grinning omnivox commentators made ironic notes. The status of the *Vindictive* had come to be an open secret, and there were signs that her immunity to the perils of war were near their end.

During the four hectic months that preceded that day, Benton and Purcell often had reason to regret the change they had first hailed with delight. Various bureaus of the Department hammered them from the beginning with queries and tracers. Tart inspectors came and went. The pressure on them was relentless, and the more Dobson and Farentz squirmed, the more severe it became.

The problem of the two regulars was man power. Numbers they had, but the quality was negligible. Because the ship's complement was hopelessly padded with supernumeraries, drills were run in three and four sections, night and day. Benton

and Purcell would hit their bunks exhausted, buoyed up only by the grim satisfaction of having run the soft playboys ragged another day.

But there were surprising by-products. Benton discovered that his first judgment had been over-harsh. Several hundred of the brokers, forced by the grueling schedule to remain on board and work, severed their last business ties and put in for front-line duty. As one of them put it, if they had to be full time in the war they might as well do it up brown. Astonishingly, a letter of commendation came along, praising the *Vindictive* for its success in training men. There were others, such as Reggy Torrington, who, having worked for the first time, suddenly discovered it could be fun. They became interested and looked forward to the day when they could see the results of the weeks of grinding drill. But there were still the Van Draems, the group of snobs who resented everything that was done. Those Benton drove the hardest.

Then four great tugs came and locked tractors on. They towed the clumsy monitor far out beyond the orbit of the Moon, then kicked her off into space with a mighty heave. Her momentum would carry her the ten million miles to the practice area, and on the way she could try out her renovated tubes without fear of a misfire and falling out of control on the city.

Benton and Torrington were crouched over a curious device in the turret booth. It was a miniature version of the Battle Integrator, a series of transparent concentric spheres cunningly illuminated by fingers of light from a projector in its nucleus. Benton indicated a crawling pink dot.

"That's us," he said. "When we get to point A Purcell blasts off with everything he has and from there to B we accelerate full power. By the time we get to B you should have recovered from the acceleration shock and manned the thermoscope. The target will be somewhere in the zone CQTV. This curve shows its heat characteristics. The minute you pick it up, cut in the tracker and put on your alert light. Get it?"

"You bet," said Torrington. "Then when do we sock it?"

"As soon as we are in comfortable range. I'll do that. Meantime I have to give a hand with the astragating. Dobson simply can't learn."

In conn the captain and Farentz studied the black visiplate studded with stars. Both wore full spacesuits, and both were uneasy.

"I don't like this, Farentz," said Dobson, "it's murder."

"I did the best I could," said Farentz, sullenly. "But when you're up against a stupid bureaucracy—"

"We weren't so bright ourselves," muttered Dobson. "This old hulk is a deathtrap."

Unnoticed and not understood, little green lights had been popping out on the indicator board. Purcell was reporting his tubes as they were ready. Dobson ended his remark with a careless gesture, the back of his hand struck a stud. Instantly the

lights went out as with a shattering roar twelve huge tubes aft exploded into action. The vessel leaped forward with a spine-wrenching lurch, Dobson and Farentz reeled across the room, smashing into the control panel. Gouts of wicked electric fire spat, and something in the upper corner burst with an ear-rending shriek, then broke into lazy flame.

"This is it," moaned Dobson.

"What's this?" asked Benton sternly, staggering in. He felt for the auxiliary lighting switch and snapped it on. Then he swiftly set the disturbed panel to rights and grabbed a fire extinguisher. Putting out the fires was but the work of a moment, after which Benton faced the cowering captain and exec. "When you don't know what to do," he said, "do nothing. What are those spacesuits for?"

"We may have to abandon ship," said Farentz, sheepishly. "If there's a backfire—"

"If there's a backfire, there won't be any ship to abandon or anybody left to do the abandoning," said Benton coldly. "You had better call yourselves sick like Van Draem has done and go to your rooms. I'll handle things."

He strode out of conn and down the passage toward the motor room. The premature blasting off could easily have done damage. Purcell hadn't realized the dangers of throwing control to incompetents.

As Benton went aft he noted with growing apprehension the weaving of the old hull. Paint and metal polish had conspired to conceal the monitor's defects. Now, as the heavy tubes thudded

out of synchronism, vibrations wracked the ship. Rust was a poor structural binder. A bulkhead split with the noise of a cannon, a minor cable parted with a flash of blue fire. Four overhead lights went out. Benton quickened his step.

"Alert your damage control parties," he warned Purcell hastily, as soon as he found him. "There will be plenty of fireworks when the kats let go, if we don't have 'em sooner. I'll be in conn; Dobson and Farentz are there, but in a blue funk. Our only hope for a good showing on the range is that Reggy will remember all I told him."

"The kid's all right," admitted Purcell. But he looked worried. One tube flickered and went out, then relit with a crash that jarred. The entire motor room was a confused mess. Monstrous cables festooned the now by-passed Ekstroms, since the ship was driving ahead under real power, carrying the powerful generator currents over to the first-stage accumulators of the katatrons. The wild disorder of the makeshift changeback offended Purcell's engineering eye, but the jury rig was the only one possible. Only by taking the Ekstrom repulsors out of the ship altogether could the motor room be restored to its former trimness.

A gong began sounding. That meant Reggy had found the target.

"I've got to run," yelled Benton, and darted back toward conn. As he dashed through the corridor past Van Draem's room, he glimpsed that worthy's shaky form. He was pale and scared all the way through as overhead ducts and pipelines rattled in their hangers. He was doing his best with fumbling fingers to climb

into a spacesuit.

"The yellow rat," thought Benton, but he did not pause. A steady hand would have to be at the controls when the kats went off. And it was well he foresaw that, for when he reached conn the place was empty. Dobson had already fled.

Benton's hands flew as he rectified the set-up, then he growled savagely on noticing that somehow the telecontrol had been activated. He ripped the connection loose and saw that he was safely back on local. Then the turret line crackled.

"Coming on, coming on," chanted Torrington's talker. "Ten seconds to go. Stand-by. Five seconds to go ... four ... three ... two ... one—"

No machine can do everything. A mechanism can only deal with the material fed it. But if it is cleverly designed it will reject that portion unsuitable for the finished product.

Excerpt from log of Observing Officer Langhorne in target control ship *Alferatz*:

1036: SST *Vindictive* coming on range, wobbling badly. Appears to be having trouble keeping tubes firing evenly.

1045: Ship appears to be under better control since it

manages to stick fairly close to base course. Probably will complete firing as per schedule as target now should be within detector range.

1108: There appears to have been an accident on the monitor. An escape boat has just shoved off and blasted away. Boat very badly handled, operator probably being injured.

1117: Halo now visible about discharge knobs of monitor's katatrons, indicating discharge imminent.

1118: *Vindictive* fires both kats.

1123: Both bolts hit, target vessel demolished. Am sending well-done, despite poor approach.

1136: Can't understand what is going on on board *Vindictive*. Has there been a mutiny? There was a boat left the ship just before the turret fired. Now there are eight more boats streaming in the monitor's wake. Yet the vessel goes on under full tube blast.

1140: Something is radically wrong. *Vindictive* bucking in fashion impossible to account for, jumping in great oscillations at right angles to its trajectory.

1147: *Vindictive* disappears!

A later entry:

1758: Last of *Vindictive*' boats recovered. On board were the captain, executive, gunnery officer and numerous junior officers, all in advanced state of shock. Surgeon diagnoses reaction as acute fear, but stories told so far incoherent.

1930: Pattern of story of survivors now emerges. It appears that ship began to disintegrate upon initial firing of tubes, whereupon captain and executive abandoned without waiting to ascertain cause of or extent of damage or passing the order along. They were accompanied only by the gunnery officer, Van Draem, who states that he was on the sick list and knows nothing about the disaster. Occupants of the other boats seem to have stuck to the ship longer, saying they saw nothing amiss until the turret blast. At that time the ship was plunged into total darkness and was a hell of hissing gases, spouting water lines, and tangled steel. Electric fires broke out all over at once, and it was by its light that the last survivors unloosed the remaining boats and escaped. According to them there were a number of men and officers still on board at the time of the ultimate disaster, one Lieutenant Benton being senior. Nothing is known of their fate. It is noteworthy, however that no enlisted men escaped, and few of the more junior officers. It is hoped that the hulk of the shattered *Vindictive* be found—if it exists anywhere—so that a complete investigation can be made, as this is undoubtedly a unique disaster.

2015: Complete report sent SPAST and acknowledgment received. Directed to place all survivors under arrest and charge with poltroonery. Then search hyperspace for monitor.

Benton did his best to hang on to the periscope. Reggy Torrington's closing of the firing circuits had been timed to perfection; Benton wanted to see the result. It was not possible. The frightful jar that accompanied it was more than he could withstand, and he was hurled from his saddle. Then there was utter blackness and the fiendish crackling of millions of internal discharges. They were harmless—the *Manual* had warned against them—a mere adjustment of stray static, but apt to be disconcerting. Yet even as he pulled himself erect again Benton knew there were more things wrong with the ship than that. She was writhing and groaning far worse than before, and with it came the nerve rasping noise of high pressure air lines ruptured and water mains broken. Being already on emergency lighting and that now gone, he had to stagger aft as best he could by the glimmering aftermath of myriad short-circuits. He stopped on the way to try several communicators, but it was not until he reached the fourth one that he found one that worked. Reggy's voice answered wavering with excitement, but under control.

"We hit, we hit!" he yelled gleefully. "What a splash of fire! It was beautiful."

"Swell," commended Benton, remembering it was due. But that was ancient history now. "How are things where you are?"

"Not too good," said Reggy. "Fire all over the place ... no lights for a minute ... pandemonium generally. But the boys are going at it now. We'll be O.K. in a little bit."

"Stick to it, big boy," said Benton, heaving a sigh of relief. At least he could forget the turret. Things about him were otherwise. While he was talking a big blaze burst out and the

flames from it were licking down the passage. The damage-control party fighting it were licked. They fled screaming, tossing their tools away, and at the moment Benton did not dare tear himself away from the communicator. When he could be dashed after them, cursing them and ordering them to stand and regain their nerve. But they beat him to the boats, and when he reached the cradles he saw that all the other boats were missing. That meant that if they went away but half loaded a good third of the crew had already gone.

He shook his fist at the departing streaks of light, then turned back to the inferno within. The going was far harder now, for the ship was bucking like a broncho, making it all but impossible to proceed without acquiring burns and bruises at every turn. He kicked a limp, waterless fire hose out of his path and picked up one of the discarded extinguishers. With a few squirts from that he shortly had the frightening blaze out. Then, shielding his face against the pungent after fumes of smoldering insulation, he fought his way on toward the tube room. It was at that point that his senses left him. A bright nova seemed to generate itself inside his head, swell into a firebloom of intolerable dimensions, and then abruptly go black, leaving nothing. After that was a featureless eternity.

The time Benton was out was actually less than five minutes. He came to of himself, sat up and blinked. Conditions about him, if anything, seemed more normal. Some of the lights were back on and the ship had steadied again to normal pulsation, not the wild antics before total chaos took over. Benton clambered to his feet and went on to the motor room. He found it a hive of activity with Purcell flying about issuing hoarse orders.

"Oh, hello," grinned Purcell, seeing him. "I was about to send out a search party for you. Thought you might still be out from the jolt."

"I'll say it was a jolt," said Benton. "What happened?"

For answer Purcell pointed at the tangle of cables embracing the dead Ekstrom.

"Something we didn't figure on, since no sane person ever tried the hookup before. Regenerative effect, I suppose. Those first fires and such that we had were natural enough, the age of the old bucket considered and the rough firing we did down here. It was the current running through those leads to the kats. They built up a strong variable field about the Ekstroms and tickled 'em into putting out a kick even though they weren't getting any current directly. That explains the rough stuff between the first blast off and Reggy's pushing the turret button. What happened right after that was due to the backlash from the kats, which we knew about and were prepared for. What was bad for us was that the communicators were all shot for awhile and Reggy couldn't get through to me. I didn't know the target had gone bye-bye and was feeding in another charge. It was just about ripe for letting go when Reggy said the show was over as far as they were concerned up there, so I cut the switch. Well—"

"Well?"

"There was a lot of back surging, I guess, along those cables, and the Eks went crazy. Kicked us around at about umpty gravs, and then started to melt. We all went blotto for a second or two, but we snapped out of it in time to take charge again. I though

something out of the way might happen, so when I pulled the switch I yelled 'low bridge'. We were all set here, so didn't get bunged up like you must have."

Before Benton could say anything to that the communicator from the turret was calling. He snapped into the line and picked up Reggy's voice.

"Say," demanded Reggy, "do you know where we are? About forty million miles straight up toward Polaris, and going like a bat out of Himmlerland. You'd better use your influence with Purcy to reverse course or we'll be clear out of the system in no time."

"O.K.," said Benton, well satisfied. Reggy had turned out to be a pretty good skate.

"I'm already bucking the momentum," said Purcell, who had overheard. "In four hours we'll be on the way back. After all we've taken I hesitate to pile on more G. By the way, any casualties?"

"Uh, huh," grunted Benton. "Our three brasshats and a hundred or so of lesser talent. Took to the boats right off."

"Good riddance," remarked Purcell, indifferently. "Couldn't take it, eh? Well, we had too many hands anyway. Give me seasoned hands, like these here," and waved comprehensively at his grimy and sweating black gang. The nearest pair looked up and grinned, but did not stop working. One was "Pikky," until lately a famous crooner and generally despised by the he-man breed. Benton almost failed to recognize the other. It was Arthur Ungerhardt, son of the Minister of Finance.

"Nice work, all around," congratulated Benton. He had to go back to conn and complete the reorganization of the ship. He should send off several messages, too. That is, if the communications shack was still intact.

It is a mistake to think that faulty products should invariably be scrapped. Culls may be reworked and put back into the mill with profit. Severe testing has revealed that much rejected material eventually meets all specifications.

There were five assorted admirals, two commodores and a captain in the group.

"But who would have thought they would try to sneak in raiders that way?" growled one. They were looking at the big Battle Integrator whirling and sparkling in Action Hall, not a hundred yards from where Bullard's quiet office was.

"The unexpected, you know—" put in the captain. "Luckily we had scouts out."

"Yah," spat the admiral. "Boys to do a man's job. Six *Vixens*, and along come four maulers. All right. The Scouts disintegrated two, but now there are two left and no *Vixens*. What's to stop 'em from coming right on in? There's nothing heavy enough this side of Mars, and that's five days off using everything."

They stared silently at the tell-tale ball of mist. High up toward its pole eight dull red marks were dying out, remnants of

the blasted ships. The ships were gone, but the after-radiation lingered. Inside them and several degrees down two silvery blobs were crawling slowly. A pale thread of violet light throbbled in the fog, and on it the two blobs lay like pearls on a silken thread. The violet line was their computed trajectory. Its lower terminus was the Moon, Tycho Crater, in which sat the great Defense Building.

"What the—?" murmured a commodore. A pinkish streak of light appeared like a short-tailed comet, out of the nowhere, slowed, brightened, and then condensed to a definite point of glittering light. Instantly the computers in distant rooms noted it, and with flying fingers punched its observed co-ordinates into their machines. A second later another violet thread appeared—the mysterious pink body's course. It lacked little of intersecting that of the two maulers.

"There just can't be any cruisers way up there," said a bewildered vice admiral. He was the Operational Director of the cruiser force and knew.

A loud-speaker began to blare.

"The ship just appearing in Sector L-56 Pius 9 Zone is the ex-monitor *Vindictive*, engaged in target practice. She was propelled there as the result of a mysterious accident. Believed to be damaged and only partly manned. When last seen katatrons were still in working condition, but there are no experienced officers on board, her captain and others having abandoned her —"

"Great balls of fire," ejaculated the commodore. "There goes

our hope—"

"She's going in," said the vice admiral grimly, "She'd better be good. Here, messenger—"

He bit the summons in two, frowned, then strode toward a booth.

"I remember now," he muttered. "She has one of those telecontrols. I'll work her myself."

The elegant young dandy who had been so effective in challenging vessels approaching the Bourse was not in the communications shack. His spacesuit was not there either. He had gone with the other cravens. Benton seated himself and stuck in a jack. He called Operations and began a report of what had occurred.

"Top priority," broke in a voice, and Ops faded. "*Vindictive?* Cut your telecontrol in on this wave length. We're taking over from here. Are your kats still working? Very well, listen. Start building a charge and stand by for action. Two enemy maulers in your vicinity. They must be destroyed regardless of cost. Got that? Very well, give over and I'll guide you."

"We can't, sir," lied Benton. "A fire in conn destroyed it. Give me the dope and I'll take her there by hand."

There was nothing wrong with the tele, but everything was wrong with trying to explain. The teles would control the tubes,

to be sure, but no one knew what the Ekstroms would do after another dose of induction and wobbling fields. Benton and Purcell's own knowledge was imperfect, but they had at least weathered one taste of it. Therefore in that respect they were one up on the admiral, though it would be tactless to say so. Admirals in a hurry were not prone to discuss things.

"What's that?" snapped the admiral, then grumblingly gave the course and co-ordinates.

Benton plotted swiftly, and barked orders to the tube room and turret. Gleeful voices answered. They had been through the worst now—the unknown. Anything that might happen hereafter they could take.

"Take your time," warned Benton. "They've already met opposition and are wary. That means that they are spread out, looking for more. With any kind of luck we can bop 'em off in succession."

"Watch it!" yelled Reggy. "I've already got one in the 'scope. Cheerio!"

Benton took the precaution to strap himself to the saddle that time, and swallow an anagrav tablet. He hoped he wouldn't go out at all between salvos.

It was well that he had, for as the needles crawled across his indicators the *Vindictive* went back to her bronco tricks. It was sickening. Benton's fingers danced over the studs, adjusting the blast of this tube and that, strictly according to feel. Purcell had agreed to let him worry about equalization; he would keep them firing. Then he heard Reggy's happy "Coming on—stand-by!"

the last seconds of counting, and the awful crackling as the static filled the ship in the wake of the parting atom bombs.

"Got him," Reggy reported jubilantly, three seconds later, and Benton dived hard. A cluster of greenish fireballs was growing in the screen—slow but deadly projectiles launched by the defunct raider before he was hit. They were coming faster now, as their rocket drives built up.

"Cut kats," he yelled into Purcell's line.

It had worked once. Maybe it would again, despite the partial melting of the repulsors. It did. In no time flat the *Vindictive* was somewhere else, her crew reeling and groggy. Benton pulled himself out of an incipient blackout. He opened full the Luna wave.

"One down," he reported succinctly, "but where are we now?"

"Holy Comets," came an astonished voice from far away Action Hail. "We thought you went together. You disappeared at the same time ... hold on ... we see you now ... you're over in L-31 and a Zone closer to us. How in thunder did you—"

"Never mind that," replied Benton crisply. "Have your experts slip me the geodesics to the next intersection. We don't know where we are or what we're making, but from wherever it is we can do five gravs—eight, if necessary."

"Attaboy!" came back the admiral's voice. "Hang on—I'll have it in a jiff."

Circumstances were merciful. Only four gravs were required, the Eks having lost some of their kick.

"We can't pull that one any more," Purcell reported mournfully on the ship interphone. "The Eks have folded."

"We won't need to," said Benton, cheerily. "There's only one more."

"Oh, that," sniffed Purcell. "I was thinking of landing when we get back. It won't be tidy."

"Last target coming up," sang out Reggy Torrington. "Wing shot, or aimed."

"Aimed, you fool," growled Benton. "Who do you think you are?"

"The best kat gunner in any man's Patrol Force."

"Next to Handley," reminded Benton, with a chuckle, "all you do is pick 'em out for him."

Shortly after that they were on their way home, the only vestige of the fourth raider a fast thinning cloud of cooling vapor behind them.

The great machine shudders and grumbles momentarily as it bites into a bit of obdurate matter, then whirs on. Its wheels go round and round, and the light glints from the teeth of silent running gears, But it is not a simple machine. Cams

introduce variations.

The *Vindictive* lay in the main repair dock on Luna. Her strangely mixed company stood in ordered ranks on the floor of the crater, dressed in such motley of uniform and dungaree as survived the interior holocaust. A party of departmental bigwigs had just gone through, reviewing them. They were heroes, was the consensus.

Benton and Purcell had to follow the inspecting party into the battered hulk of the ship. The secretary was of the party, as was the chief of spatial strategy, the director of operations, the vice admiral in charge of cruisers, and others. They were amazed at what they saw. Ships of that era either went out in a blaze of shame or glory or survived intact. Here was one that had won a battle against odds without a scratch, yet was all but a wreck inside. The commander of the cruiser force fingered the tele-control in conn. It was in perfect working order. He had been cheated of credit for the victory.

"You had better be glad," remarked Bullard, softly, reading his thought. "That boy does better when you give him his head." He coughed. "With reasonable restrictions, of course."

The board of electronic engineers came up from the tube room. They had completed their inspection and had held a powwow.

"That hit-and-vanish technic is hot stuff, Mr. Benton, even if a little daring," said their spokesman. "How did you come to think of it?"

"I didn't," said Benton, crisply. "It happened, that was all."

"Well," said the gruff old admiral who handled Ops, "at least you had the brains to use it once you saw how it was done."

"Mm-m-m, tough on the ship, though," grumbled another brass-hat. He was chief naval constructor and was going to have to foot the bills.

"Not necessarily," objected the principal electronicist. "The stunt was improvised. Now, if we redesigned the ship for it—"

Benton and Purcell listened respectfully in the background. Now that pretty speeches had been made to them and medals hung about their necks they were ignored. The Powers that Be had noted the incident of the *Vindictive's* fight, dealt out the punishment and rewards that were due, and promptly consigned it to history. Now they were looking ahead.

"Tear out the tubes entirely, I say," the electronicist continued, "and put in high-power propulsors of the Rodriguez type, with a bank of modified Ekstroms located so that the ... the uh, *Benton* effect, for we may as well call it that ... can be had in any degree of intensity desired. Then—"

The discussion went on. The hull was to be strengthened by the addition of new structural members; in the light of later advances, most of the bugs could be ironed out of the kats. When the old *Vindictive* took the void again her original builders would never know her.

Then the formalities were over, leave papers handed out, and the men dismissed. The officers strolled across the crater floor

to the clubhouse where lunch awaited. Old Admiral Bullard fell in beside young Benton. As they walked and throughout luncheon he was in a reminiscent mood, chatting about the old days in the *Pollux*.

"Opportunity," he observed, toying with a tidbit and not looking at Benton at all, "is largely what you make it. Young officers come to me from time to time complaining of disagreeable duty. But I make it a rule to never accede to their requests."

"Oh, yes, sir, I know," protested Benton, "but after all—"

"I still say," said the grand admiral calmly, "what I said. The day you called on me some time back I told you I had nothing to do with personnel. In that instance it was not merely a polite excuse. In view of the very peculiar circumstances I was tempted to make an exception. As it turns out it was well I didn't try to."

"Oh, yes sir, and that is what I want to—" Benton attempted eagerly to say. He owed Bullard thanks for something, though for the life of him he did not know just what.

"As I was saying," said Bullard quietly, overriding the interruption, "it was well I did not try. Today I proved it. For the first time I spoke to the secretary about you. He told me plainly that he wanted no suggestions from me. In short, your request has been duly conveyed—and turned down. Here it is officially."

He handed Benton a sheet of paper, and then lit a cigar. On the paper were these words:

From: The Secretary of Defense,

To: Lieutenant Commander Roy Benton,

Subject: Orders.

1. Upon completion of repairs to the super-monitor *Vindictive* you are ordered on board and in command, this assignment to be effective for the duration of the war.

THE END

[The end of *The Bureaucrat* by Malcolm Jameson]