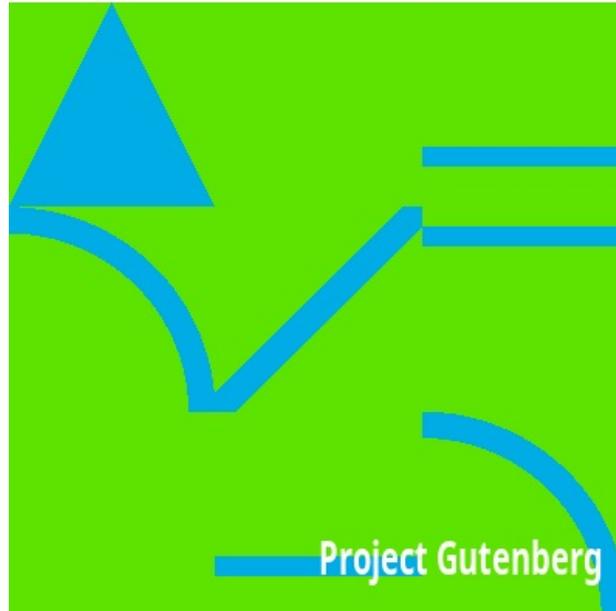

A Fine Fix

Ray C. Noll



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A FINE FIX

BY R. C. NOLL

Generally speaking, human beings are fine buck-passers—but there's one circumstance under which they refuse to pass on responsibility. If the other fellow says "Your method won't solve the problem!"—then they get mad!

Illustrated by van Dongen

The leader climbed sharply in a bank to the left, and the two others followed close behind. Their jet streams cut off at very near the same time. Before their speed slowed to stalling, the rotors unfolded from the canopy hump and beat the air viciously, the steam wisping back in brief fingers.

Under power again, they dipped playfully in tightening circles toward the plot-mottled earth. The fields expanded beneath them, and the leader brought up and hovered over a farm road whose dust already stirred in the disturbed air.

They settled as one in the rolling dust clouds from which emerged a covered figure who had driven the battered pickup truck to meet them.

"Y'sure got back in a rush," he addressed the major, who was just jumping from the plastiglas cabin.

The major nodded and put his attention on seeing that the general descended safely. He then indicated the farmer.

"He's the one," the major said.

The general grunted socially.

Taking the opening, the farmer said, "Out there in the wheat, general." His tone carried eager importance. "My kid saw the light come down this morning feedin' the chickens. I felt the ground jump, too. Called the sheriff, first off."

"All right, you were a hero," said the general shortly. "Now, Grant, will you take me to it? I can't mess around here all day."

The party of six men, two of them technicians, waded into the field from the road. The farmer remained to watch, frowning.

When they had progressed well into the wheat, he shouted after them ruefully, "And watch where you're steppin', too!"

The group paused on the rim of newly gouged earth, clods and dirt that had splashed from the center of the crater. It was nearly four feet deep. The man the major had left on guard had uncovered more of the blackened object, which lay three-quarters exposed and showed a warped but cylindrical shape.

"Let's have a counter on it," the general ordered.

A technician slid into the crater and swept the metal with his instrument. The needle swung far over and stuck.

To the other technician the general said, "Get a chunk for verification of the alloy." He kicked a small avalanche of dirt down the crater side and turned back to the road, adding, "Although I don't know why the formality. Even a cadet could see that's an atomjet reactor, beat up as it is."

The major absorbed the jibe without comeback. An hour ago he had informed the general of his indecision over the object's identity, though he had suspected it to be the reactor.

"We may find more when we get it examined in the shop," the general mused, swishing by the wheat. "But at least we know they do come down some place, and it wasn't flash fusion. On this one, anyway."

"What do you think about instituting a search of this vicinity for other parts, general?"

The officer growled negatively. "Obviously, the reactor was the only part not vaporized in the fall—because of its construction."

"That's assuming the ship entered the atmosphere at operational velocity and not less than free fall," the major qualified.

"How can anyone assume free fall? Way outside probability."

"Yes, sir, but there are degrees of velocity involved. He could have used reverse thrust and entered at a relatively slow speed."

"All right, all right—let's say possible, then. Pull off your search if you want to. I'm in this thing so deep now, I'll try anything to get going. I've got Congress ready to investigate, and some senator yesterday put pressure on to cancel the United Nuclear contract. I'll try anything at this point, Grant!"

The big man's voice had risen to anger, but Major Grant Reis had not missed the vocal breaking in the last syllables.

"I'm First Lieutenant Ashley and I've an appointment to see General Morrison."

The adjutant said, "Sorry, but you'll have to wait a little longer. The general's unexpectedly busy."

"My appointment was over an hour ago."

"Another half-hour and you can go in."

"Another half-hour and I'll go."

"It's your bar."

The lieutenant plopped back into a chair just as Grant strode swiftly past the adjutant's desk from the private office.

"Major," the adjutant asked, "how long is the general going to be tied up? He won't let me in the conference and the lieutenant here is supposed to see him."

Grant paused at the opposite door and pointing two thumb-and-forefinger guns at his head exploded them. The adjutant groaned understandingly. Even the first lieutenant caught on.

"Major, it's pretty important," the waiting officer said, standing again. Grant shifted his attention.

"Look, lieutenant—" Grant bottled the sarcasm behind his suddenly lax mouth. He saw a first lieutenant's uniform, but it bulged aesthetically; and he saw a first lieutenant's cap and bar, but it sat rakishly on puffed-up brown curls.

"If you'll just look at these papers, major, you'll understand. I stratoed in from the Pentagon this morning," she said crisply.

Though it was Grant's turn to say something, he found too much of his concentration on her challenging brown eyes and the efficient down-sweep of her half-pouting mouth, plus a nub of a nose that pointed proudly upwards with the tilt of her head. In a temporary defensive maneuver, Grant took the papers handed him.

The borders were marked CONFIDENTIAL and the attached signatures would have impressed even the general. The subject—he might have expected—ATOMJET PATROL LOSSES.

"Er ... look, lieutenant— What was it?" Grant glanced down at the papers.

"First Lieutenant Bridget Ashley."

"Look, Lieutenant Ashley, the general's been getting nothing but troubles all day. For your sake and his sake, I suggest you come back tomorrow, huh?" Grant handed back the papers and put a hand on her elbow, but she jerked back.

"Major, I've been given a great deal of responsibility in this assignment," she flared, "and it's important for me to get work started at once. I was led to understand these patrol losses constituted a fairly urgent matter."

Grant glanced ominously toward the general's door. "Lieutenant, I'm trying to explain to you that it's in your best interests to take this up with him tomorrow. I'm one of his aides and I know him. I realize you're authorized to see him today, but—"

"Then I'll wait." She reseated herself and emphatically crossed her legs—a motion not escaping Grant's notice.

The adjutant and Grant mutually shrugged at each other, and Grant headed outside, saying over his shoulder, "I'll be back in a minute."

As it developed, it was far more than a minute; but whatever it was, when Grant returned she was gone. The major looked at the adjutant, and the adjutant indicated the general's door with an apprehensive nod. Grant bit his lip and entered the private office.

He had expected to hear the general's bass raging, but through the inner door came the strident tones of the lieutenant's modulating contralto. He had expected to see the general towering over the girl's shrinking figure, but as he entered she was bent earnestly in the middle, and the top of her torso inclined toward General Morrison, who had tilted as far back as his swivel chair would permit.

"... So, if you haven't isolated any mechanical causation, how can you be sure it's mechanical?" she was laying it on. "And if you're not sure it's mechanical, how can you suggest there's no possibility of psychological causation? The authorities that sent me here have not only considered the possibility, they feel it's quite probable. All I am requesting, sir, is immediate implementation of my authority so your investigation can be broadened. It's really to your benefit that—"

Grant said, "Lieutenant Ashley."

"... My work be started at once so as to catch up on what findings you have obtained in the—"

Grant shouted, "Lieutenant Ashley!"

"... Investigation so far in the mechanical aspects. It's not unlikely that a combining factor, both psychological and mechanical—"

Grant yelled, "LIEUTENANT ASHLEY!!!"

"Yes, sir, major."

"Would you please wait in the outer office for just a moment?"

"But—"

"For just a moment, lieutenant."

"Yes, sir."

Grant waited until the door closed before he tried communication with the general. The officer still teetered in his chair, his eyes bulging from his reddened face.

"They sent me a shape," he sputtered. "That I could take. Shapes I don't mind, even with authority. But this one— You know where she's from, Grant?"

Grant sighed hopelessly.

"She's from syk," the general was beginning to roar, "with a blank check of authority from Washington. She stood there and called the losses pilot-error. My pilots, Grant, the ones I trained!"

"Just a possibility, she meant," soothed Grant.

"Possibility, hell! With that attitude around Mojave we'll never get anywhere in this investigation." He untilted with a crash. "I want her kept away from me, do you hear? Give her anything she wants—but appointments with me. I've got United Nuclear here for stress tests, coolant analyses, radiation metering in the morning just as a start, and I'm not going to have that shape around fusing up the works."

"I'll see what I can do, sir."

"You're right you will. I'm putting Colonel Sorenson in as G-2, and you're going to be the new Syk Coördinator for the duration of this investigation!"

"The what?"

"You heard me."

"It couldn't be that bad, general," Grant grumbled.

"It is."

"Baby-sitting."

The general stood up from his desk. "No, you'll relay any data she may turn up to me, and you'll see she gets what supplies and personnel she may need. Look, Washington thinks we need her, so I take orders. And so do you, Grant. I'll have a special order out this afternoon."

"Yes, sir," Grant saluted and wheeled, grinding his molars.

With dubious explanations, Grant managed to steer Lieutenant Ashley toward the Officers' Club. What excuses he gave her evidently had some effect; after the first fifty yards across the drill ground she steered easily, though still under vocal protest.

A drink, and Grant felt he could face the future. They sat in a plastiweave booth, one against the far wall that overlooked through a curved window the blasting circle.

So wrapped up with his own feelings, Grant had been unaware of his companion's. Her face had paled, and she stirred her drink absently. The reflections in her eyes were over-bright with moisture.

Offered Grant: "The general has a lot on his mind."

"Yeah," she choked.

"The losses have upset him pretty bad."

"I notice. Me, too."

"Take a drink."

She sipped one CC and said, "And syk upsets him."

Grant smiled, "And shapes."

"And I suppose the rank of first lieutenant makes him nervous."

"No," Grant chuckled, "he can take or leave that. It's majors that get him."

She smiled vaguely, so Grant followed up with: "What's your background?"

"Psychometrics. Got a doctorate in it. I thought it might be valuable to the Air Force—at one time." She sipped two CCs.

"I've a little syk background," Grant said. She looked up in sudden interest. "Started to major in it until I ran up against some of the profs. If this is what syk produces, I decided, it's not for me. Changed to engineering then. Unfortunately, the general knows about my record."

"How did he take it out on you, parade duty?"

"Worse. He made me an aide."

The girl leaned on an elbow and regarded him with her chin in her hand. "You bring his slippers?"

"As G-2, I did up until quarter of an hour ago. I've been promoted. Meet the Base Mojave Syk Coördinator."

Putting her nose in her drink, she giggled softly. "What is it he wants coördinated, the syk or me?"

"You're on bearing," he laughed. "My name's Grant."

His hand went across the table, opened, and waited.

"Bridget," she said, and her hand fell into his in a handshake which lingered slightly.

At Grant's insistence they jeep-toured the base. To his surprise Bridget took interest in the installations, but asked most of her questions around the atomjet hangars.

"I've never seen one close," she hinted.

Grant flashed his Security card at the guards and they went in. She strolled about the tapering, snub-winged craft, apparently inspecting it closely. Grant's thought was that she felt she had to dramatize understanding something about Air Force rocketry.

After a short silence Bridget asked, "What is the compensating factor for the reactor's being placed off the center of stability?"

Grant blinked. "What's that again?"

She swung a pointed finger at the ship. "Naturally," she interrupted, "the nose will float downward in the canal, hoisting the hot tubes out of the liquid at the end of the glide-ins. But you've got pilot, power plant, and wings frontside. How can you affect glide-ins at surface air density without nosing in?"

The major decided she must have been reading the latest confidential files. High-viscosity liquid landing canals constituted a subject recent enough to be Security and important enough not to be bandied about outside engineering and Base Mojave.

"Well, you see," Grant cleared his throat, "there're the fuel tanks along the back of the blast chamber, partly lead—"

"The tanks usually are nearly empty for glide-ins," she reminded.

Grant frowned. "Yes, usually empty, but still a weight factor. Then there's the automatic wing stabilizer that adjusts to the air speed and density and acts to pull up the nose—"

"O.K.," she interrupted. "Now, would you lift me through the canopy, please? I'd like to sit inside a minute."

"That's out," he said. "Only pilots and technicians."

"All right, if you won't, I'll get up myself." She marched over to the hangar wall and pulled over boarding steps, which were braced on three pivotal tires.

"Bridget, Security says pilots and mechanics."

"And you're forgetting why I'm here, and besides that you're supposed to coordinate. Right now you're uncoordinating."

Before Grant's eyes flashed the memory of her orders with the signatures at the bottom. She was already climbing the steps.

"Just don't touch anything, that's all," he conciliated, following her up. Her seams were straight, he noted.

Bridget thudded into the narrow pilot's seat and wiggled herself into a comfortable position.

"Awful crowded," she smiled up at Grant.

"I hope you tore your nylons," he grouched.

"Now, if you'll just explain these gadgets," she said, moving her hand over the panel embedded with digit-rimmed dials.

"Hands off, please."

"By your reaction, I would say you don't know what some of them are," she counter-fired, and tossed her protruding bunch of curls.

Grant took the bait. He leaned into the canopy and with an over-stiffened index finger pointed forcefully at each gauge. For more than a quarter-hour this went on, with Bridget pitching questions—most of which he juggled.

She seemed to show more interest in the radar screen, the navigational equipment, and the communications system. About these, she milked Grant's available knowledge until he felt like reaching down and throwing open the reactor valve and fuel switch.

"Lieutenant, if you don't mind, my back is paralyzed. Let's go back to the club and I'll answer anything you want."

"Just one more," she coaxed. "This crosshair sight with the little black circle in the middle. How does that work again?"

Grant straightened up and carefully massaged the small of his back. "It's for precise manual navigation if you need it. You sit up straight and sight through it."

"And what do you sight at?"

"A star, of course."

"Put it in the little black circle?"

"An A for you. Then you snap in Automatic Navigational and you're in business. Or you can

navigate manually by using Gyroscopic Navigational if you want."

"I'm ready to get out now." Bridget lifted her hands where Grant stood on the platform of the boarding device.

Back or no back, Grant couldn't resist the opportunity. He pulled her by the hands to where she was leaning out the opened canopy, then he stooped and grabbed her under the arms and swung her up. For a moment her soft hair brushed his ear, and a light scent from her neck suggested he keep her pliant form close to him a little longer than necessary.

He planted her next to the steps, and she muttered an uninspired thank you. But halfway down, she halted and turned.

"It's much easier asking me out dancing, Grant," she smiled impishly, and clacked across the hangar floor toward the jeep.

By the next morning arrangements for a small staff and office space had swiftly gone through. Working through lunch, Bridget had the office set up and the staff briefed and researching when Grant returned from dining with the general.

"You're just in time," she said, looking up from an already cluttered desk. "I'm ready now to scan through any G-2 you have on atomjet operation in your Mojave files."

Grant bristled. "These files are under the general's nose, and I don't think he'd appreciate—" He broke off when he observed Bridget tapping her pencil and frowning at him impatiently.

With a degree of diplomacy he had to admire, Grant lifted the non-technical files from the general's office and furtively smuggled them out in his brief case.

"Don't take all day," he warned, handing them to Bridget. "Part of my job is keeping the general neutral about you, and not against."

Bridget jumped up and drew another chair up to her desk. "How about scanning with me? That'll get the files back faster. Here, take these on pilot training."

The files repulsed him less than Bridget attracted him, and he sat down promptly. "And what do I look for, psychologically significant portions, is that it?"

"Even psychologically insignificant portions, major, if you please."

Grant began to read. As he scanned the copies of directives, reports, operations logs, and procedures the process became automatic, and part of his consciousness turned contemplative.

Three months ago he would have considered the situation in which he now found himself a future development out of the question. Mojave had brimmed with optimism and pride and accomplishment and eagerness. Base Mojave loomed vital in national defense, constituted a main element of national scientific pride.

From the dusty desert stretches the sprawling, efficient base had taken shape while United Nuclear had yet to assemble an atomjet. The schedules came out perfectly, and the first single-manned fusion-propulsed rocketplane thundered off the corporation proving grounds and glided into Base Mojave as planned. Designed for patrol of the mesosphere, the ships were to have gained for the West control of near-Earth space, besides affording superior observation posts for Eastern developments and activity of a space nature.

Training of the pilots had lasted thirty weeks and went by without a casualty or serious damage. Testing and re-testing of the electronics brought out no flaws. Stress and thermal analyses held up under all conditions imposed.

The losses began after the third week of patrol. UNR-6 failed to return to base—with no hint of the cause, with no communication from the pilot. That one was hushed up by the base PR officer, but news of the second reached the press. During the fifth week, UNR-2 never returned for its glide-in, and, of course, the first loss came out at that time, too.

General Morrison worked with the pilots and engineers steadily on the problem with apparent good results—for a month. Then UNR-9 vanished.

Lately the orders had been for patrol over the States, and it was presumed UNR-9 would have made an appearance somewhere had it been in trouble. That's why the Dakota farmer's report had been investigated so swiftly.

As of now, the situation had become one patrol a day with reluctant pilots, Congress sending a

committee to the base, a taxpayers' injunction against the Air Force rocketplane operation, and United Nuclear men experimenting hourly with robot-piloted atomjets at all altitudes below four hundred miles.

Plus the syk research, naturally.

Bridget's ash tray spilled over with right-angled cigarette butts, half-burned. Grant studied her as she read through the files intently although her eyes rolled his way briefly on occasion. She faced him with an unexpected snap of the head.

"Well?"

"Just looking," Grant explained.

"Then just look for a pilot's manual. It's been mentioned and I haven't seen one around. Would you mind?"

Grant opened his mouth to inform her a pilot's manual for the atomjet was classified secret, but caught himself before he could verbalize the protest. He shrugged and planned more strategy for invading the general's files.

The only things he could be grateful for so far were Bridget's beauty and the fact the staff had not realized he was her adjutant.

The Mayo psychiatrist and the Yale psychologist had been in conference with Bridget for almost an hour. She had been giving them preliminary findings and the results of tests and interviews with the base pilots.

When they finally broke up, Bridget approached Grant with a there's-something-I-want-from-you look. Grant nearly had a chance to offer lunch before she suggested it.

What she wanted from him came out over their aerated sherbet pie. By the time she finished, Grant's dessert was beginning to taste like vitaminized space rations.

"Impossible," he said, dabbing at sherbet spots on his trousers. "The general would react faster than to a red alert."

"Your concern may be the general's reactions, but mine's not," Bridget snapped. "I just want an objective engineering answer, yes or no."

Grant threw up his hands. "O.K., O.K. With a live pilot, yes, you can get a TV transmitter in an atomjet with some doing. You'd have to jerk out the extra oxygen space and—"

"Wonderful! When can you have it for me?"

"Bridget, what I'm getting at, the general will take this as a slap at him and his pilots. We've had TV transmission from robotized atomjets dozens of times—"

"With no results."

"With no results," Grant admitted, "but that doesn't mean that with a pilot you'll necessarily get any, either."

"No, but why hasn't someone tried?" Bridget waited for him to answer a decent two seconds and then added, "The general, naturally."

They left the base lunchroom in silence, Bridget pouting a lip-edge more than Grant. Before entering the office, Grant brought up a rebuttal.

"Another thing, no pilot is going to push up under those conditions, with you down there hoping something will happen."

Bridget had her hand on the door, but instead of opening it, paused. "The pilot would have to trust me." Her eyes darkened, widened, split Grant emotionally down the middle. He could understand, for an instant when he let himself, how a man could be inveigled to do anything for a woman.

"Yeah," he said. "A pilot like that might be hard to find. I'll see what I can do."

As he walked toward the hangars, he heard the office door close softly behind him.

At the engineering conference after supper Grant had never seen General Morrison looking quite that old. The man was sustaining an overload of responsibility, and probably self-imposed guilt on top of it.

The mechanical engineers made their report, followed by the electronic engineers, followed by the physicist—all negative. But each group had a suspicion that another had overlooked something. Before it regressed to a high-school debate, the general bellowed the conference to order.

Grant was surprised at the twinge of emotion he experienced when he realized the general was not going to ask for a report from syk. Why should Grant care, anyway? The position meant nothing to him, Syk Coördinator.

It meant something to Bridget, though.

That General Morrison had not even checked for syk findings annoyed Grant, perhaps. Under the circumstances he was justified: nothing had yet come out, nothing that Bridget had told Grant, anyway. The general could not be aware of this. He assumed it. Maybe that's what upset Grant.

"Then there's this De-Meteor," the general was saying. "I've always been suspicious of that gadget."

An electronics man spoke up. "A Clary man checked them all, even used instrument flight to be certain. I was with him and counter-checked the radar high-speed scanners, the computers, and the course-alteration mechanism. I was convinced myself it would steer the ship out of any situation involving the approach of one or two penetrating meteors."

General Morrison turned to the spatialogist. "What about the incidence of penetrating meteors in the mesosphere?"

"In average fall," the man replied, "fairly low."

"And the probability of encountering three at once along a given atomjet trajectory?"

"From what limited experiments we have made, the odds would be astronomical, I'd say."

The general snorted. "Too great to account for three ships, anyway, is that it?" He soothed his forehead with his big hand. "All right, let's make another check starting tomorrow morning. More robot-flight tests. Let's have ships outside the mesosphere operation range. And I want reports on anything that looks like anything, understand?"

The group emitted a low groan. This was the fourth comprehensive check—grueling, close, meticulous, nerve-racking work.

From the rear came the voice of a courageous civilian mechanical engineer, "What about a check on the pilots?"

The sudden silence was like an electrical field. The base commander continued to shuffle up his notes and papers, but his neck crimsoned.

He's not going to hear it, Grant thought.

"Conference dismissed!" the general ordered.

Three-four-five rings, and Bridget answered. The first word was a yawned "Lieutenant" and the next was an exhaled "Ashley."

"Sorry to get you up, Bridget. This is Grant. Can you come down to Hangar Four?"

"What time is it?" she asked thickly.

"Three-fifteen. Will you come down here?"

"Unchaperoned?"

"That's not the point. A surprise. What we talked about the other day."

Bridget's interest picked up. "What we talked about? But I'll have to dress and fix my face—"

"Put on a robe and slippers. It's a warm morning. I've got it fixed with the O.D. Now, will you come on down?"

She paused. "You've convinced me."

In a few minutes Grant heard her slippers shuffling over the concrete. She arrived in a brilliant blue nylon robe, with white fluffy slippers and traces of a lighter blue nightgown underneath. The

hangar brightness brought a frown to her eyes, which she shielded with a hand cupped to her brow. A creature as entrancing as that, Grant decided, should now recite prose poetry in contralto tones to make his ideal complete.

"Well?" she croaked, a sleepy frog in her throat. "So I'm here."

The last mechanic was picking up his tools and was about ready to leave. Otherwise, they were alone, except for the guard at the hangar entrance.

"Up on the platform," said Grant, unlocking the canopy of UNR-12. He busied himself adjusting the guiding tension.

He heard the slippers, shuffling and gritting, climb the loading device and stop next to him. He heard the gasp as she saw the pilot compartment's freshly built-in TV transmitter and lens. When he felt the pull on his arm, he chose to notice her.

"Thanks, Grant. I thought for a while—"

"It's ready for tomorrow if you want it," Grant mentioned casually.

Bridget's fists clenched and her eyes brightened. "Wow," she observed. "Then you've got a pilot?"

Grinning sourly, Grant said, "As if you don't know who."

Her eyes showed concern. "What do you mean?"

"I mean things have worked out creamy as you planned."

"Grant, I don't understand."

"Now, don't tell me you didn't know I could push up one of these things." He patted the side of the atomjet.

"You, a pilot? Grant. I didn't know."

"Let's say it's been convenient for you, anyway."

They had walked outside, Bridget trying to find Grant's gaze, which he put onto a distant ridge of hills rising dimly against the desert starscape.

Bridget said seriously, "You think I've been enticing you into the pilot job, is that it?"

Grant's glance fell to hers. "It looked that way to me. All the general's staff have to fly 'em, I thought you knew that. I don't patrol, of course."

They neared her quarters, and the shadow of the building that spilled over them was deep.

"I didn't know, Grant, believe me." Her voice carried earnestness.

"You don't have to prove it," Grant said huskily.

He had caught her hand, and then her arm slid softly around his neck. Her kiss was meant as brief, but he persuaded her differently. They clung together silently until the barracks guard had spun an about-face and headed back their way.

"Please, Grant, get someone else to go up," she whispered.

"You said you wanted a pilot who trusted you," reminded Grant. "Now, get to bed before I gig you for being out of uniform. See me tomorrow on TV."

The miles altimeter needle swept steadily and was about to pass the 300 division. Star-sprinkled space-darkness lay ahead by now, but when he looked to the side the Earth's surface reflected the sunlight dazzlingly.

It wasn't that he felt self-consciousness over the lens in front of him, or over the one showing him in profile, and the one just over his shoulder viewing the instrument panel. Nor was it based on his not pushing up in over a month. He traced it probably to the uncertainty of his position.

His position was uncertain, because Bridget could easily be right. Actually, considering the lack of one lead in the other avenues of the investigation, chances were good something was happening to pilots and could happen to him.

That was not what bothered him: not that something might occur, but *what* might occur. Fighting unknowns for Grant carried no interest.

"I'm over 300," he transmitted. "Now what?"

Bridget's voice arrived with an ionospheric waver. "Level at 375. Please remember, you're trying to simulate patrol conditions. Don't transmit unless it's your report period or something goes wrong."

"Like what, lieutenant?"

"If you knew all the psychological quirks possible, you'd avoid them, major. And if you're still worried, I've taken adequate precautions. There's a staff of twenty-five persons here with instruments on you. By the way, your picture is coming over horribly."

"Try my profile. I've heard it's better."

"And please replace your galvanometric and respiratory clamps. We're getting no register here."

"They're too uncomfortable."

"Major, let me remind you this flight is costing the taxpayers plenty, hasn't General Morrison's clearance, and may have to be flown again unless you cooperate fully." Grant smiled at the lens. He could visualize her curls whipping around.

"Now, please cooperate and replace the clamps, and try to simulate patrol conditions. I will call you from time to time for further instructions. Ashley at Mojave—out."

Grant returned, "Reis over Mojave—nuts."

After parodying annoyance at the lens, he dutifully replaced the chest and palm clamps and settled down to the tedium of patrol.

Behind him, tons of pressure thundered silently out in controlled gaseous fusion, hurled him starward on a pillar of energy. He had already broken his vertical ascent and was slanting toward the latitude Bridget requested. The Pacific rolled up under the atomjet's polished nose, which sparkled with myriads of brighter star reflections. Then he recalled he couldn't play over the ocean and veered slowly northward, up the coast to the telltale configuration of Puget Sound.

Over the eastern lakes he cut fusion and watched on the altimeter dial the battle between gravity and inertia. Near the Mississippi delta he was wrenched in a sharp maneuver as the De-Meteor suddenly took over. He was fortunate to see the streaking missile glow brightly and flare out of existence in the thin regions of atmosphere miles beneath him.

More than three hours of patrol, and no word from Mojave. Obediently, Grant had not called in. He set course for Mojave and was nearly ready to transmit when a bark of static filled the pressurized control bubble. Disappointed, Grant heard a male voice over the speaker.

"High altitude weather observation overdue. UNR-12, please report synoptics in quadrants."

They really want simulation, Grant grumbled mentally. "Southwest quadrant, southeast quadrant clear except for banner-clouding higher ranges. Northwest, scattered alto-cumulus, looks like the onset of a warm front, with the northeast quadrant moderate-high cirrus. And let me talk to Br ... to Lieutenant Ashley, please."

A pause. "Ashley, Mojave."

"How's my picture now?"

"Your vertical is off, and you flutter. Major, the first three hours have been without direction from the base. For the next two, we're going to ask you to perform certain patrol tasks, perhaps repeat them. The process may not prove especially enjoyable. Your close cooperation will be appreciated."

"If this is all stuff we went through in training—" Grant sputtered.

"Some of it may be," Bridget's voice. "The fact it's distasteful may make it the more significant. Are you ready to cooperate?"

Grant nodded at the lens and screwed up his face in an exaggerated frown.

Bridget's thoroughness called for admiration. She had him at the end of a string, activating him from a plot taken directly from the pilot's manual. He would cooperate, but he was not enthusiastic.

As the exercises progressed, Grant detected subtle variations Bridget had added to the basic

maneuvers. On the tight starboard circle, for instance, she had him keep his eyes on Earth, making him slightly dizzy.

Then she requested a free-fall drop from a stall with the provision he this time place his attention on the instrument panel—"with no peeking outside." He complied, watching the altimeter trace forty miles toward the basement, and experienced effects no different than usual.

After a while, he came to consider it a game and might have gained amusement from it, were it not for the tiredness creeping in behind his eyes and the fact two dozen technicians somewhere down there were hoping to trip a fatal, hidden synapse.

"How much more of this?" Grant transmitted finally.

"Getting tired?" Bridget replied, and paused for an answer.

"Let's say I don't feel like six sets of tennis."

"A few more, major, and we'll authorize your glide-in." If there was disappointment in her voice, it did not manifest itself. "Your next exercise is manual navigation with Jupiter as your fix."

Grant took down the figures she gave in acute disinterest. Boredom had settled heavily over his outlook on the operation. No longer did it matter that his facial reactions were being televised to the syk-happy probers; and it made no difference to him any more that his every breath, swallow, heart beat, tension, and sweat-secretion was magnified by inky needles along moving rolls of paper.

His exercise target was a southwestern New Mexico town, and he swung back from the Gulf area and coaxed the responsive craft until the planet gleamed brightly in the crosshairs of the navigational sight. That put him four degrees off the horizontal, he noted, but Jupiter was setting; he adjusted his velocity to maintain the planet's relative skyward position in the west.

In some irritation he stepped up the thrust. This one could easily take too long. The faint hum of the power plant provided music as the bright point of light danced slightly from the sight's center.

The realization came that he had jumped convulsively. Grant was puzzled that he was not aware what had happened. Some sort of reflex? But reflex from what? Tingling coursed its way up his left leg and he rubbed his thigh.

When he put his attention on the sight again, the planet had slipped out. In fact, it was nowhere in the immediate starscape ahead of him.

His quick glance at the basement showed first that a twilight shadow was moving in from the north— From the north? It had to be the east! And how come so soon?

Small panic twisted his diaphragm when he viewed below the unfamiliar topography and increasing cloudiness. And when he saw by his watch it was nearly three—

The radio had started to transmit. He swallowed a lump of fear and prepared some kind of an answer. "... If you hear me. Please indicate if you hear me, Grant."

He nodded at the lens.

"Would you like a pilot to help you orient from here?"

Grant felt sheepish, but the panic still remained. He was now aware his alertness was not up to par, so he nodded again. But he was feeling better by the minute.

Back on course under one of the pilot's directions, Grant soon took over.

"Skip that exercise, Grant, and glide in," Bridget sent. "Feel up to it, now?"

"Yeah, but what's it all about? I must've passed out, but damned if I know what for."

Grant heard Bridget's laugh and his morale improved. "You come down and take me to dinner and I'll give you the answer—and what I think may be the answer to all the general's troubles. Right now I've got a report to write so the general can get the word soon—and as painlessly as possible."

Grant pressed the stud to activate the skin coolant system for entrance into the atmosphere. He almost felt like grinning.

Grant at the medical officer's advice took a brief nap, which quickly cleared up his mental fuzziness. As a surprise to Bridget he ordered a rotocab from Barstow, the nearest town, booming since the base had become operative.

In a specialty restaurant over freshly arrived seafood from San Francisco, Grant tried to persuade Bridget to stop teasing him about the navigational foul-up and set him straight. He had put up with it as long as he did only because she had worn an off-shoulder yellow gown, snugly fitted, that made the uniform seem like the design of a Mid-Victorian prude.

Grant, exasperated, brought her teasing up short. "I've been priding myself on keeping up the myth I'm a wide-awake young man and pilot. Never have I passed out before—never. I feel like a washed-out cadet. You've had your fun baiting—now, what made me blank?"

Bridget cringed as he tore a slice of French bread in half with one hostile, meaningful bite.

She waved her cigarette haughtily. "We in psychology have found certain stimuli productive of consistent human response. Especially true in tactile sensation, this, however, is not as true in the auditory and visual."

"You're being technical," Grant interrupted. "Just let me know simple-like, if you don't mind."

"Consequently," she continued, "the problem presented to the investigating psychologist was one of seeking an involuntary response to one or more stimuli, in sequence or grouped. Traditionally —"

"Miss Ashley—" Grant held up the small, square tissue-wrapped box, tied with a bow—"I would like to have you open this tonight, but obviously you're not going to have time what with the thesis, and all." He deliberately put the box back in his coat pocket.

Their eyes held over her swordfish momentarily.

"So, O.K., I looked around for nasty stimuli, that's all," Bridget went on. "There were lots of possibilities, but I sorta picked two or three. Part of our pilot interviews was for getting descriptions from the men on what the conditions up there felt like, sounded like, looked like, smelled like, and so on. Completely individual, mind you. From that we spotted negative elements held in common by them."

Grant reached for her arm and blocked the upward motion of her fish-loaded fork.

"You can eat after," he said.

"I threw the nasty ones at you when you began tiring, because that's when the body's stimulus-response setup starts pulling away from conscious direction. I saved the one I had the hunch on for the last."

"The navigation exercise, you mean? I still don't get what that has to do with my leg cramp."

Bridget laughed. "Oh, that. One of those leads attached to your leg carried a little voltage—just in case you passed out. The benefits of current psychology, you know."

Grant repressed a smile. "Thanks for letting me know what brought me around, but you are still stalling about why I went under."

"You figure it out. What were the stimuli associated with the manual navigation problem?"

"Let's see," he mused. "Tactile: nothing important, just the control levers. Visually, the star field and Jupiter and the crosshairs. Auditorily, the power hum—"

"What stands out?"

"The planet and the hum, I guess."

"And how did the planet appear?" Bridget asked.

"A point of light, you mean?"

"And what does that add up to: a bright concentrated light source on which you fix your attention and a monotonous hum?"

"Not hypnotism!"

Bridget shrugged. "A reasonable facsimile. Especially when you throw mental fatigue in with it."

"But you need a suggestion, I thought—" Grant was amazed.

"Not necessarily," she replied. "You were mentally tired, there was some self-suggestion for sleep. But simply a continued fixation of the eyes in suggestive subjects can be enough. There may be a subconscious association with previous hypnosis, or early states of mental shock. In the highly suggestive, a steady lulling noise can be sufficient in itself. And you were alone, with no one around to snap a finger under your nose. Add it up in your situation, and you blank out."

Grant slapped his forehead. "What did I look like?"

"Not any different than usual," she said, laughing. "You continued to hold the controls, but you stared vacantly and tensed quite a bit. Well, we have the complete recording on your reactions if you want to check. Naturally, you pulled off course, ended up over Mexico, gaining about fifty miles in altitude."

The others, thought Grant, rode until their oxygen gave out or dived through the atmosphere without skin-cooling, or came out of it too late and found— He decided not to think about it.

"But I don't think I'm hypnotic," Grant protested.

"Everyone is hypnotic to a degree. Some are a great deal more than others, and these are the ones that are apparent. Impose the right conditions and a quasi-hypnotic condition could be affected on most anyone."

"But why hasn't this happened elsewhere?"

Bridget took a quick bite of fish before he could stop her. "It has. First documentation I found was in the South Pacific air war in the '40s. One-man escorting fighter planes in several cases slipped out of bomber formations they were following at night and splashed. One of the explanations at their hearings, but never investigated thoroughly, was hypnosis from the single red taillight of the bombers. In one outfit, the losses stopped when the fighters flew up front."

"Not only sharp, but good-looking, too," Grant admired, and began chewing on the other half of his French bread. Then he ceased masticating and mouthed anxiously, "You've told the general this?"

Bridget clapped her hands. "With exquisite pleasure."

"And he—?"

"... Got excited, phoned for engineering to remove navigational sights and suggested I join the staff at the base."

Grant coughed on the bread and hurriedly reached for his water. "He wants you around?"

"Gratitude, I guess, in his own brassy way."

"And you'll stay?"

"If Washington O.K.'s it, and I'm coaxed."

"Then that simplifies the matter," he said and brought out the daintily wrapped tiny gift box. "For you."

Her eyes warmed and smiled as she said, "That's the kind of coaxing a woman wants."

Grant fumed, "Then you know what it is? Extrasensory perception or something psychological?"

Their hands met across the table and lingered.

"Purely an emotional response," said Bridget.

THE END

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