

OPERATION INTERSTELLAR

by GEORGE O.
SMITH



AN ORIGINAL SCIENCE FICTION NOVEL

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By
George O. Smith

Characters and situations in this book are fictional and any similarity to actual persons or places is purely coincidental.

Permission to use some of the refrains from the ballad:

THE CYCLOTRONIST'S NIGHTMARE

by Arthur Roberts

of

The State University of Iowa was graciously granted, and is hereby acknowledged with sincere appreciation.

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CHAPTER 1

Paul Grayson walked the city street slowly. He was sauntering towards the spaceport, but he was in no hurry. He had allowed himself plenty of time to breathe the fresh spring air, to listen to the myriad of sounds made by his fellow men, and to revel in the grand freedom that being out in the open gave him. Soon enough he would be breathing canned air, pungent with the odor of compressor oil and the tang of the greenery used to replenish the oxygen, unable to walk freely more than a few dozen steps, and unable to see what lies beyond his viewports.

Occasionally his eyes looked along the low southern sky towards Alpha Centauri. Proxima, of course, could not be resolved by the naked eye, much less the stinking little overheated mote that rotated about Proxima. Obviously unfit for human life and patently incapable of spawning life of its own, it was Paul Grayson's destination, and would be his home for a few days or a few weeks depending entirely upon whether things went good or bad.

Only during the last four out of two thousand millions of years of its life had this planet been useful. Man needed a place to stand; not to move the earth with Archimedes's lever but to survey the galaxy. Proxima Centauri I was the only planet in the trinary and as bad as it was, it was useful for a space station.

In an hour, Paul Grayson would be locked in a capsule of metal hurling himself through space towards Proxima I. He was looking forward to ten days cooped up in a spacecraft of the type furnished by the Bureau of Astrogation to its engineers which was a far cry from the sumptuous craft run by the Big Brass. His confines would be lined with functional scientific equipment; his air supply would be medically acceptable but aesthetically horrible; and his vision limited to the cabin, for beyond the viewports would be only the formless, endless, abysmal blackness of absolutely nothing while the ship mounted into multiples of the speed of light.

Then days in a building filled to the dome with power equipment and radio

gear; timing mechanism and recorders; and a refrigerator set-up that struggled with the awesome heat poured into Proxima I by its close-by luminary but which succeeded only in lowering the temperature to the point where the potting compound in the transformers did not run out, where the calibrating resistors would not change their values, where the recording machines would still make a record.

And then again more days in the ship before it returned to earth. Call it thirty days and understand why Paul Grayson sauntered along killing time in the fresh air before taking off.

Paul grinned. Four years ago he had arrived a full hour early and wasted the hour in the smelly ship instead of filling his lungs with clean fresh air. Never again. He would arrive a full five minutes before check-in time.

He heard some radio music, its tone stripped of high frequencies from its passage through the slit of a partially-opened window. He sniffed the air and laughed because someone was cooking corned beef and cabbage. Then he was out of the range of the radio music. Paul liked music. He hummed a tune as he walked, and then as the fancy struck him, he started to sing. It was faint singing; it would not have carried more than a few feet, but it sufficed for Paul. It was a refrain from an early atomic-age ballad:

*"Round and round and round go the deuterons
Round and round the magnet swings them
Round and round and round go the deuterons
Smack! In the target goes the ion beam!"*

Paul stopped his song because the interesting click of high heels on the sidewalk pointed to the approach of someone who might view *a cappella* singing as an indication of inebriation.

She was coming towards him, walking on the same side of the sidewalk. Her step was quick and lithe, and the slight breeze outlined her frock against her body, revealing and at the same time concealing just enough to quicken the pulse and awaken the interest. Paul was thirty and unmarried, and experienced enough to catalogue her shrewdly.

No crude attempt at pick-up would work on this woman. She was sure of herself and obviously could not want for admirers. It would take careful strategy over a period of time to get to first base with a woman like her; an

inept campaigner would be called out on strikes. And Paul Grayson had to be on the way to Centauri within the hour, which automatically eliminated the initial step in any plausible scheme to wrangle an introduction.

Paul Grayson grinned ruefully. It seemed to him that when he had hours to spend and nothing to do, the streets were barren of presentable women while the most interesting specimens of womanhood smiled and offered their charms when he was en route towards some schedule that could not be delayed.

This was woman enough to make a man forget his timetables—almost.

She came forward, her face lighted by the street lamp that Paul had just passed. Blue-eyed and fair-skinned, her hurried route was on collision course with his and with a minute shake of his head because he had neither the time nor the inclination to attempt anything as crude as striking up an acquaintance by barring her path, Paul angled his course aside.

She angled too.

"Hello," she said brightly. "I thought you'd be along sooner."

Paul Grayson gulped. Obviously she mistook him for someone else and a faint feeling of jealousy ran through him for the lucky man who owned her affections. The street lamp behind him must have cast heavy shadows across his face making identification difficult. He opened his mouth to explain away the mistake, but the girl came up to him, hardly slackening her pace until the last possible moment. Then instead of speaking, Paul found his parted mouth met by hers. Her lips were warm. Her arms came around him in a quick embrace, and his arms instinctively closed about her waist.

Paul kissed back, cheerfully accepting the pleasure of the error with a sort of devilish glee.

Then he stepped back.

"I'm sorry," he said, "that I am not the guy you thought I was."

She looked up at him with a blink. Her expression changed to surprise, and then her mouth opened in a scream as her eyes flicked away from him and centered over his left shoulder.

Paul started to whirl, but someone dropped the north pole on the back of his

skull. It chilled him completely. Her scream rang in his ears as he fell forward. Vaguely he felt the silk of her dress against his outstretched hands, and then against his cheek just before the sidewalk rose up to grind against his face. Something pulled at his coat.

Then he felt nothing more. Only the frightened scream of the woman that rang in his ears, shrill, angry, fearful, and never ending——

----until Paul realized that the siren wail was not her scream but the ringing of his own ears, and that the girl was sitting a-sprawl on the sidewalk with his head between her thighs. She was rubbing the nape of his neck with her fingertips, quietly erasing the pain bit by bit.

The threshold of ringing in his ears diminished and his field of vision increased as the darting lights went away, and Paul Grayson then could hear the sound of running feet and the babble of voices.

"What happened?"

"This man was clipped by a thug."

"You saw it?" came the voices in a mad garble of scrambled speeches.

"Right in front of my eyes."

The babble broke into many and varied subjects. Curiosity, both morbid and Samaritan; anger both righteous and superficial, but both directed at the things that make such happenings possible; suggestions both sensible and absurd, and offers both welcome and ridiculous.

Paul groaned and tried to lift his hand to the raw spot on his chin where the sidewalk had removed some hide.

The woman looked down at him and smiled in a wan, apprehensive manner. "You're all right?"

Paul struggled to sit up and made it with her help. The wave of pain rose and localized in his head at about forty degrees right latitude. It made him want to carry his head at an angle with his neck ducked down below the level of the knot of pain. Hands helped him to his feet, led him across the sidewalk while he became stronger by the moment.

He shook his head to clear it and winced as the motion caused the knot of pain to vibrate nastily. "What happened?" he asked in a quavering voice. It

sounded like someone else's voice to him, and surprised at the sound of it he repeated the question. It still sounded like someone else's voice and while he was wondering if his voice would sound like that for the rest of his life, the girl explained what had happened.

Paul missed most of it, but then asked another question: "Did you see him?"

"No," she said. Her voice was regretful, yet tinted with a dash of amusement. "He sort of rose out of the shadow behind you—you're a tall man, you know. All I saw was a ragged silhouette. He hit you. You fell. I screamed. He grabbed at your wallet——" Her voice trailed away unhappily.

Paul smiled. "Nothing in it but personal papers all replaceable. Not more than a few dollars. I'd have handed it over rather than get this clip on the skull. Too bad you couldn't see him."

The touch of amusement came again. "I had my eyes closed, sort of."

Paul smiled again. Inwardly he was welcoming the footpad to the contents of his wallet and accepting the bop on the bean as the price to pay for an introduction to the girl.

Someone in the crowd said: "You'd better come inside until you feel all right."

Paul shook his head and was happy to find that the knot inside had diminished to a faint pinpoint. His voice was sounding more like his own, too. "I've got to go," he said.

"But——"

The wail of sirens came and a police car dashed to the curb. It spilled policemen from all doors, who came warily. "What's going on here?" demanded the sergeant.

Paul explained.

"You'd better come to the station and lodge a complaint."

Paul shook his head. "I'm Paul Grayson of the Bureau of Astrogation," he said. "I could prove it but the crook has my identification papers. I'm due to take off for space within——" Paul looked at his watch—"within forty minutes," he finished.

"We'll require a complaint."

"Can't you take it?" pleaded Paul. "Good Lord, man, I can't identify a criminal that clipped me from behind. Hell, the only contact I had with him was hitting the back of my head against his blackjack."

The sergeant looked at the woman. "You can't help?"

"Not much more. He was just a blurred shadow to me, he looked like any other man wearing dark clothing—which can be changed all too easily."

The sergeant went to the police car and spoke to the main office over the radio. He returned in a moment. "The lieutenant says we're to run you over to the spaceport and take depositions en route. That'll save time for you, and it will get the dope for our records that we must have. You too, Miss—?"

"I'm Nora Phillips. I'll go along, of course. Will you have one of your men keep an eye out for a tall man who should have been passing here by now. He's overdue. He will be Tommy Morgan; we had a date but I came out to meet him on his way to my home. Tell him what happened and explain that I'll return home as soon as this matter is taken care of."

The sergeant smiled. "Toby, you take this stand and ask everybody that comes along if he's Mr. Morgan. Then explain."

"Right."

The ride, so far as official information went, was strictly a waste of time. Paul made a mental note of Nora Phillips' address and telephone number and decided that the incident called for good reason to renew the acquaintance. The sergeant made it easy by telling them: "When you return from your trip, Mr. Grayson, I'll ask you to come in to the station and make a formal complaint. You'll be there too, Miss Phillips."

"I'll be glad to help," she told them. Then she turned to Paul. "You're with Astrogation?"

He nodded.

"But why Proxima? I've heard it was a completely useless place."

Paul shook his head. "We want to measure the distance to better accuracy than heliocentric parallax will permit us," he said. "We know the speed of light to a fine decimal, and we can measure time to even a finer degree. So

we started a radio beam towards Centauri four years ago, and it will be arriving in not-too-long a time. Then we'll have the distance to a nice detail of perfection."

Nora thought for a moment. "I suppose you're ultimately aiming at Neosol," she suggested.

"That's the idea."

"But Neosol is a hundred light years away—"

"One hundred and forty-three at the last count," Paul corrected.

"So it will take a hundred and forty—"

"No," he smiled. "Less than three years from now. You see, seven light years is the greatest distance that separates the stars between here and Neosol. We've got a nice network of radio beams criss-crossing the pathway between here and Neosol. Oh," he admitted with a smile, "the triangulation beams will be arriving from now until a hundred years from now, but they're mostly check-beams, and the final beam from Earth to Neoterra will take the full time. But in the meantime we can refine our space charts using the network of beams once they start to arrive. And each time one of the triangulation check-beams gets home, we'll be able to refine the charts even more. But there's no sense in waiting for a century and a half."

The sergeant looked at Paul. "You're certain you can fly with that bump on the head?"

"Sure."

"Why not let someone else take it."

Paul shook his head. "It's my job," he said quickly.

"But there must be someone else that can do it. What if you died?"

"Oh, there are others trained in this sort of job in that case."

"Why not let one of them take it, then?"

Paul shook his head again. "I'm all right," he said. He realized that his insistence was too vigorous and that his reasons were too lame. But he could not let them know why it was so important that Paul Grayson go in person. If Haedaecker got wind of what Paul carried in his spacecraft, there would be

hell to pay. He thought of a plausible excuse. "Most of them aren't on earth right now."

"Couldn't you call one of them?"

Paul smiled ruefully. "They're outside of the solar system."

The sergeant nodded. "The Z-wave can't cross interstellar space," he said. It was a statement thrown in to display his knowledge to the technician from the Bureau of Astrogation, and also a leader for more conversation.

Paul did not bite.

"That's Haedaecker's Theory," added the sergeant. "Isn't it?" he added after another moment of silence.

"Haedaecker's Theory is that the Z-wave propagates only in a region under the influence of solar activity," explained Paul. He looked out of the police car and saw the spaceport only a few moments away. Then he talked volubly to fill in the time so that he could be off without further questioning. Haedaecker had plenty of evidence to support his theory, but they all were missing one point that was as plain as the nose on Haedaecker's face.

"We can talk with ease from the Zero Laboratory on Pluto to the Solar Lab on Mercury, to the boys who are working in the poisonous atmosphere of Jupiter, to the extra-terran paleontologists who are combing Venus," said Paul. "And the Radiation Laboratory sent a gang to try the five planets of Sirius. Again they got the Z-wave working after a bit of fiddling with the tuning. But we've not been able to get so much as a whisper from Sol to Proxima Centauri via Z-wave. What started Haedaecker thinking was the experiment they tried about ten years ago." Paul went on before anybody could interrupt.

"No one can measure the velocity of the Z-wave, you know. So they started a spacecraft running right away from Sol. So long as they were within a fair radius, the Z-wave went both ways easily. But once they went into superdrive and raced away from Sol and got out beyond the orbit of Pluto by quite a bit, they lost contact completely. They made some measurements but these were quite unsuccessful. All we know is that we can use the Z-wave for speech for a long distance beyond the orbit of Pluto, but beyond some distance that might lie between ten times that orbit and—I think they tried it at a light

month—the Z-wave dies out abruptly. It falls off like a cliff, you know. There's no apparent attenuation of the Z-wave so long as it is strong enough to get there. Beyond that, there is not even the whisper of a signal. It's a peculiar thing, but we know very little about the Z-wave, and—"

The driver brought the police car to a screeching halt. "Here you are, folks," he chirped.

Paul got out of the car quickly. "I'll be back," he told the sergeant. "I'll call you." And then to Nora Phillips he added, "I'll call you, too."

"Do," she said pointedly. "I'd like to know more about the Z-wave."

Paul nodded amiably. He did not voice his inner thought: *So would I, Baby!*

CHAPTER 2

The police car U-turned in the broad roadway and headed off to return Nora Phillips to her home and to pick up the officer set to sentry duty. Paul waved them off and then started to walk up the pavement towards the administration building.

He was feeling better. Everything pleased him vastly. The knot inside of his head was gone, he had made the acquaintance of a very delectable armful of femininity, and now he had been chauffeured to the spaceport by none other than the City Police Department, complete with siren.

On his way up the sidewalk, Paul planned the retort perfect. Anticipating some humorous sarcasm on the mode of his arrival, Paul hoped to crush any verbal volley with unanswerable repartee. Usually Paul's fount of boundless wit ran just a trifle slow, following the definition of a bon mot: something you think of on the way home. This time he was going to be prepared.

He swung the door airily and strode in, his tongue poised over a few words of terse wit.

The guard looked at him and swallowed a large lump. "How in hell did you get out?" he gasped.

This was not according to plan; unfortunately, the guard had not read Paul's script, and the prepared answer would not fit the question. "I was never in," said Paul lamely, again wishing he had a tongue full of ready wit instead of fumbling for a prepared speech.

"The hell you weren't."

Paul took it from there, ignoring the fact that the guard had not followed Paul's mental conversation. "That was a car reserved for very important personages," he said. "From now on you can call me Viper."

The guard by-passed this. "But how did you get out?" he asked. His voice was almost a plea. "You didn't pass me."

"Were you guarding the jail too?" chuckled Paul. "Fast man, no?"

"You came in a taxicab the first time."

"Ah yes. But that was years ago before people knew of my brilliance, importance, and high station. Now—"

"Years ago, my eye. Less than fifteen minutes ago—"

"I did not."

"You did."

"Not me." Paul's feeling of airy well-being came down a few thousand feet and mired in a cumulus cloud.

"Look, Grayson, you came in a taxicab and breezed in here about fifteen minutes ago as though you had only a minute to spare."

"You're thinking of someone else."

"Your picture said Paul Grayson, and so did your identification. How else would I be knowing you?"

"You've seen me often enough."

"Maybe. But don't forget that I see a few thousand people every day. And I know you only well enough to know that you do own bona fide credentials. You've got 'em?"

"I—" Paul blinked. A great searing light was starting to cut through the cobwebs of his brain. The airy feeling of well-being dropped below the cumulus cloud and made a one-point landing on strictly solid ground. "Look," he said soberly. "You claim a man came through here a few minutes ago, resembling me?"

"Unless you ain't who you are, he was you."

"He wasn't me. My papers were stolen less than an hour ago. He must have —"

The guard was no imbecile. He turned in a flash and hit a button on the desk beside him. An alarm bell rang in some inner room and four more guards came tumbling out of a doorway, alert and ready for trouble.

"Tommy," snapped the guard at the door, "Go check Paul Grayson's ship, that's number—"

"BurAst 33-P.G.1."

The guard looked at Paul carefully. "You're a dead ringer for the other guy that came through here," he said. "But you happen to know Paul Grayson's BurAst number. Anybody could memorize it."

Paul watched the other guards tumble out of the building and head off across the spaceport on a dead run, drawing pistols as they went. He started to follow them.

The guard barred his way.

"No you don't!"

"But that guy is stealing—"

"Maybe your name is Grayson and maybe the other guy is Grayson. You look alike and he had identification. I don't know Paul Grayson well enough to accept or deny you—or him. But until you show me credentials entitling you to roam this spaceport, you stay outside!"

"But—"

"The boys I sent out there are capable. Don't get in their way. They might shoot the wrong Paul Grayson."

"But—"

"Get your credentials. Get some sort of identification."

Paul looked at the big standard clock on the wall. "But I've got less than eight minutes until take-off time."

"There's always tomorrow. You'll get cleared first or no entry! And that's final."

"Hell's Eternal Bells!" exploded Paul. "The cops that brought me here did so because I was clipped on the bean and robbed."

"It's my job," explained the guard quietly. "I don't want to be any more of a bastard than I have to be. If you're Paul Grayson and the cops know you were robbed, there's the telephone."

Paul grabbed the phone and started to dial, fuming at the delay. First there was a few seconds until the dial tone came, then Paul dialed the outside line. Another few seconds of delay until he could dial the number of the municipal

police department. Then a bored voice asked:

"Police headquarters, who's calling please."

"This is Paul Grayson at the Municipal Spaceport."

"What's the trouble out there?"

"A crook stole my identification."

"We'll send a man out to investigate."

"No!" yelled Paul to prevent the telephone operator from cutting off the line on the assumption that the call was closed. "You don't understand. I'm supposed to take off in—ah—seven minutes."

"We can't get a man there that quickly. You'll have to wait."

"Look," said Paul hurriedly, "there's a squad car that just dropped me here. I was clipped on Talman Avenue and they went there to investigate, they brought me here. Why not call them and ask them to come back and explain to the guards here what happened?"

"I'll check that and take action," promised the voice in a completely bored tone.

Paul fumed.

There was the sound of a shot outside, followed instantly by the shrill, whining song of a ricochet, probably a glance from the hard metal flank of a parked spacecraft.

The telephone went dead and a second later came the dial tone again. Paul hung it up reluctantly.

And that made it worse. Other hands were not as imbued with the importance of the project. To other hands it was a routine bit of trouble, not the matter of life and death that it was to Paul Grayson; yet he to whom this thing was vastly important must sit with folded hands while men handled the matter in ponderous routine.

The clock continued to turn inexorably. Paul's mathematically-inclined mind went to work; it was less than two minutes since the police car left. Give them a minute to check up, and a minute to make sure, then a minute to call the car. That was three of the precious seven minutes gone to hell. If it took

them as long to return as it took them to get where they now were, throw another two minutes down the drain and that left two minutes in which to let the sergeant explain to the guard, clear Paul Grayson on a pro tem basis, get him across the spaceport to his ship, in, up, and away.

He groaned.

He wished frantically for some means of knowing what was going on; what measures were being made in his behalf. He wanted desperately to listen to the radio in the police car. He wanted to get on the radio himself and roar out explanations, to exhort them to greater effort—

The siren wail of the police car cut into his thoughts and Paul raced to the door to fling it open. The car slid to the curb and the siren whined down the scale as the driver turned it off. They got out of the car and came up the walk briskly.

"Hurry!" he called.

He cast a glance over his shoulder at the standard clock. He had three minutes.

"Tell 'em who I am!" he exploded breathlessly.

The sergeant blinked. "But I don't know who you are."

"But I've told you."

"Hell," grunted the guard. "You've told me, too." To the sergeant, the guard said: "Do you know anything about all this?"

"We got a call that this man had been clipped and robbed. He was." The sergeant looked at Nora Phillips. "Can you identify this man?"

Nora bit her lip. "He's Paul Grayson."

The guard speared Nora with a cold look. "Do you know that or is it just what he said?"

"Why I've—"

"She's never met him otherwise," put in the sergeant.

"That's true, but I think—"

"Thinking ain't good enough."

Nora looked at Paul. "Haven't you anything to show?"

Paul shook his head. "Nothing that would cut any ice. Belt buckle with initial G. A few laundry marks and cleaners' marks. A checkbook in my hip pocket but no name printed in it. I might check the balance against the bank, but that would be tomorrow morning. We might call Doctor Haedaecker, but by the time we arrived on some means of personal identification, take-off time would be gone and past."

Paul paused, breathless, his whole body poised tense and his head bent to listen. There came the patter of feet outside.

The standard clock was swinging towards the hour, two minutes remained, enough if all went quick and well.

One of the guards burst in. He took a quick look around and spotted the police sergeant. "Good," he said, breathing heavily. "We've just shot a man out there. You're needed."

"Was it the man who passed himself off as me?" shouted Paul Grayson.

"As we came up to BurAst 33-P.G.1, this guy jumped from the airlock and started to run. We gave chase and lost him in the dark beyond a group of parked spacecraft. We called for him to halt. We found him again on the far side of the ships and Joe fired a shot.

"It must of missed him because he kept running, and then we all started shooting, losing him behind another ship parked by the fence. You know old Mupol 3316? The way the guts are parked all over the spaceport and left to rust? A derelict if I ever saw one, and after this I'd say it was about time we cleaned up that old wreck—"

"—Please hurry," blurted Paul.

"—we got to the fence where he'd climbed out over some junk stacked behind Mupol 3316. We went after him, and then guess what?"

"What?"

"We found this character flat on his face in the road, as dead a corpse as ever died."

Paul exploded again. "That proves it," he said. "Now—"

The spaceport guard shook his head. This shake was echoed by the sergeant of police.

"But I've work to do—"

The sergeant smiled unhappily. "We've work to do too, son. I'll call you Grayson for the benefit of the doubt. There is not much doubt that something is highly rotten here, but we've got to be certain. There's been one slugging and robbery, the attempted theft of spacecraft, and now a man killed by armed guards in performance of their duty. This is going to require clearing up before we let you go."

"But you know where to find me. I'm due on Proxima Centauri I to check the arrival of the Bureau of Astrogation survey beam. I'm to take off—"

"*IF* you are Paul Grayson."

"If the other guy was Paul Grayson, would he have run from cops?"

The sergeant laughed bitterly. "This may come as a shock to you, son. But you have no idea of how many of our Nicest People, Pillars of Society, and Solid Citizens have secrets in their daily lives that make them shun Law and Order when Law and Order comes toward them with a drawn pistol, a subpoena, or a warrant for arrest."

The loudspeaker came to life at that moment. "BurAst 33-P.G.1 taking off for Proxima Centauri I. Timing signal for synchronization first check ..." the voice died to be replaced by a series of clicks, one second apart.

"That's my notice—"

The guard snapped a switch. "Master Control," he said quietly. "This is Edwards, guard at the main gate, hold the flight."

"Hold the flight?" answered the speaker.

"Hold the flight. We've had trouble here."

"Is that what the shooting was all about?" The timing clicks died in the background. "What's the trouble?"

"We've got two Paul Graysons wanting to take off."

"Tell 'em to draw straws. This is costing money."

"One of them—"

"Goddammit!" yelled Paul, "I'm Paul Grayson and I've—"

"That you'll have to prove, son," said the sergeant.

"—is dead," finished the guard.

"Dead?" gasped the speaker. "Which one?"

"It ain't funny," said the guard seriously. "Just hold the flight."

"Okay, sport. But—"

Paul spoke up, "Can you get the Elecalc free for a course for tomorrow night?"

"Who's that speaking?"

"I'm Paul Grayson."

"The live one, huh?" chuckled the unimpressed voice from the speaker. His bantering tone made Paul want to rip out his larynx with a crooked thumb and shove it down his throat. "Okay. We'll have the electronic calculator figure out a course for Proxima I for tomorrow night. Doubtless *someone* will take the flight."

"Oh damn!" groaned Paul. "Why does this have to happen to me?"

The sergeant smiled. "If this were the first attempt to steal a spacecraft, I'd be surprised."

The guard shook his head. "It's more than that," he added sagely. "If the other guy was a thief bent on swiping a BurAst ship, he could have gone off in ten minutes before the second Paul Grayson arrived. He didn't. He was waiting for the take-off signal; and if he were a crook, he hoped to fill in the real Paul Grayson's place. If he was the real Grayson, we've killed a frightened Bureau man, and this bird here—"

Paul looked at the standard clock. It was now moving past the precise second marked for take-off. He sighed resignedly and relaxed. "For the moment we'll assume that I am Paul Grayson," he said quietly. "So soon as we can find someone to corroborate me, the second part of your supposition will have no grounds."

The sergeant shook his head. "I think we'd all best head for the station and wait this thing out."

Paul gulped. "You're going to jug me?"

"Both of you."

"But you can't arrest me—"

"Five will get you eight," chuckled the sergeant.

Nora Phillips came forward until she stood between Paul and the sergeant. "Why am I being arrested?" she demanded.

The sergeant smiled affably. "No one is being arrested."

"Why am I being detained, held, or otherwise prevented from enjoying my rights of freedom?" she snapped.

Paul shrugged. "I've missed my take-off," he said. "I'll have to wait until tomorrow anyway. And I can get identification in an hour or so without any trouble. In fact, I'll gladly go along with you if you'll permit me the telephone. They can bring my stuff down there and we can settle this quickly. But there is no reason to hold Miss Phillips."

The sergeant turned to the woman and bowed deferentially. "Forgive a harried policeman his habits," he said quietly. "As a shoe salesman will mentally catalog the shoes of the people sitting opposite to him on the street car, and a physician will mentally diagnose the ills of his fellow-spectators at a baseball game, a policeman habitually views the acts of his contemporaries with one eye toward their motives."

"Meaning what?" demanded Paul Grayson.

The policeman faced Paul and said with a level voice: "So far as every bit of evidence goes, you are Paul Grayson. You behave as a man might behave when placed in the position you appear to be in. On the other hand, if you were a smart man, you would behave as you are now behaving even though you had reasons most dire to execute as soon as you leave the watchful eye of law and order. This is a bit too trite. A stolen wallet containing only a few bucks and a whale of a lot of identification, complete with a witness to the crime, makes fine story material to use in establishing a false identity. Motive can come later—if any. If you are Paul Grayson, I will make abject apology. If your tale is not true, there will be some tall explaining to make."

"How about Miss Phillips' boy friend?"