

A Short Story

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CHARLES L. FONTENAY



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TINY WINDOWS

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When murder occurs on a spaceship,
the number of suspects is at an absolute
minimum—and Lefler was that minimum!

The centerdeck chronometer said 1840 hours.

That startled Lefler into full wakefulness. He was forty minutes overdue in relieving Makki in the control room.

That wasn't like Makki, he thought as he pulled on his coveralls hastily. Makki was as punctual—and as thorough—as the maze of machinery whose destiny he guided. He was as cold as that machinery, too, when others made a mistake. It made him an efficient spaceship captain and a disliked man.

Lefler shook his head to clear it of dream-haunted memories. He had awakened from a nightmare in which, somewhere, there was angry shouting, to find himself floating midway from floor to ceiling of the centerdeck of the Marsward IV. Somehow, his retaining straps had become unbuckled, letting him float free of his bunk in his sleep.

Not pausing to fold his bunk back against the curving hull, Lefler made his way briskly up the companionway, through the empty and darkened astrostation deck and into the control room.

"Makki," he called to the figure reclining in the control chair. "Makki, I'm due to relieve you. You're forty minutes overtime."

There was no answer. Floating up to the control chair, Lefler recoiled, bouncing painfully off the automatic pilot.

Makki was dead. Death had robbed his wide eyes of their dark scorn and smoothed the bitter lines of his heavy face. His coveralls were charred around the heat-beam burn in his chest.

The heat-gun bumped against Lefler's shoulder and drifted away at an angle across the gravityless control room. Lefler stared after it in horror.

Licking dry lips, he punched the communicator button.

"Blue alert!" he croaked into the microphone. "All hands to control room. Blue alert!"

Anchoring himself to the automatic pilot, he studied Makki's body as dispassionately as he could. The captain was still strapped in the cushioned chair. Oddly, he was wearing gloves.

The log-tape was in the recorder beside the control chair. Clipped to a metal leaf on the stanchion beside the chair was Makki's notepad. Scrawled on it in the captain's handwriting was the notation: "73rd day. Earth transit."

"What's up, Lefler?" asked a voice behind him. Lefler turned to face Taat, the ship's doctor. Taat, a plump, graying man, was wiping his hands on the white smock he wore.

Lefler moved aside, letting Taat see Makki's body. Taat's eyes widened momentarily, then narrowed with a professional gleam. He stepped quickly to Makki's side, made as if to pick up the dead captain's wrist, then turned back to Lefler with a fatalistic flick of his hands.

"What was it, Lefler?" he asked in a low voice. "A fight?"

"I don't know," said Lefler. "I found him that way."

Taat raised his eyebrows.

"Robwood?" he asked softly.

Robwood's head poked up through the companionway, and he floated into the control room. There was a streak of grease across the engineer's thin face.

"Great space!" exclaimed Robwood at once. "What happened to Makki?"

"Obviously, he's been shot," said Lefler in an even voice. "Any idea who did it, Robwood?"

"Wait a minute," objected Taat mildly. "That sounds like you are accusing Robwood, Lefler."

"I'm not," said Lefler hastily. "I'm not leaving you out, Taat. But there are only the three of us. One of you must have killed him."

"Great space, you don't think that I—" began Robwood.

"Just to get the record straight, Lefler," interrupted Taat, "let's put it this way: one of the three of us must have killed him."

It was not only Lefler's duty watch; as astrogator, he became acting captain as a result of Makki's death. Moving to the side of the dead Makki, he turned the ship's radio transmitter toward distant Earth and pressed the sending key.

"Marsward IV to White Sands," he called. "Marsward IV to White Sands."

It would be several minutes before a reply could reach them.

Taat, on the other side of the control chair, was examining Makki's corpse. Robwood stood peering over his shoulder.

Lefler waited to see which one would comment first on the fact that Makki was wearing gloves. Neither appeared to notice it.

But the gloves put a thought into Lefler's own mind. Fingerprints!

He looked around the control room and found the heat-gun, bumping against the celestial camera. He pushed himself across the room, pulling a handkerchief from the back pocket of his coveralls as he did so. He wrapped the heat-gun in the handkerchief, stuck it in a drawer beneath one of the control panels, locked the drawer and put the key in his pocket.

The loudspeaker buzzed.

"Marsward IV, this is Capetown," said a slightly wavery voice. "We're relaying you to White Sands. Go ahead, please."

Lefler picked up the mike.

"Marsward IV to White Sands," he said. "This is Lefler, astrogator. Makki, captain, shot to death under unknown circumstances. I am assuming command. Instructions, please."

Taat turned away from Makki's body.

"He's been dead about thirty minutes." Taat looked at the control room chronometer. It said 1906 hours. "I'm going to list the time in the death certificate as 1830."

"You can tell?" asked Robwood in astonishment.

"By the eyes," said Taat.

"Wait a minute," said Lefler. "It was only 1840 when I started up here. You mean he'd been dead only ten minutes then? He was already forty minutes overdue waking me for my duty watch."

"Could be ten or fifteen minutes either way," conceded Taat. "If he was late, don't forget that we don't know what happened up here."

"One of us does," reminded Lefler grimly.

"Capetown to Marsward IV," said the loudspeaker. "Relaying instructions from White Sands. Lefler's temporary command of ship confirmed. All personnel will be booked on suspicion of murder and mutiny on arrival at Marsport. Captain Makki's body will be preserved and brought down at Marsport. Each crew member will dictate a statement on the circumstances of Captain Makki's death and an outline of his past association with Captain Makki, separately, on this beam for relay to Marsport."

The three looked at each other.

"That's that," said Lefler. "Robwood, if you and Taat will take Makki's body away and secure it outside the airlock, I'll get the ship's records up to date."

Taat unbuckled Makki's body from the control chair. It did not change its slightly bent position as it drifted slowly upward.

"Why do you reckon he's wearing gloves, Lefler?" Taat asked curiously.

"I wondered when one of you fellows was going to say something about that!" burst out Robwood, a curious break in his voice. "All of us have been glaring at each other, suspecting each other, when Makki could have committed suicide!"

"Makki?" retorted Lefler dryly. "I doubt it."

Pushing Makki's body down the hatch toward the airlock at the other side of the personnel sphere would have been an easy task for one man, but Lefler wanted Taat and Robwood to watch each other. He didn't want an "accidental" push to send the prime bit of evidence drifting away into space. When they had disappeared down the hatch with the corpse, he eased himself into the control chair and played back the log from the end of Robwood's last shift at 1000 hours.

Makki had recorded the usual observations of the solar, stellar and planetary positions when he went on duty. There was nothing else on the tape.

Lefler stared gloomily at the silent log-recorder. It seemed incredible to him that never again, except on tape, would he hear Makki's harsh, sardonic

voice. The almost inaudible hum of machinery deep in the ship only emphasized the oppressive stillness of space outside its thin walls.

With a sigh, he picked up the log-recorder microphone and pulled the star sextant down to eye level. He would record the bare facts of Makki's death after the initial position observations.

"Marsward IV, bound Marsport from White Sands," he recited in a monotone. "Earth-time, October 29, 2048, 1931 hours. Lefler reporting for duty and assuming command as per conversation with White Sands, to be recorded this date."

He squinted into the sextant.

"Positions: Sun-Mars, 24°28'42". Sun-Earth—"

He broke off. Where was Earth? Then he remembered.

"Damn!" he muttered. "The transit! A murder sure messes up the records around here."

The Earth transit was an event of considerable importance to an astrologer on a hop between Earth and Mars. Marsbound it began on the 73rd day out, Earthbound on the 187th day. Timing it, spaceship observers not only checked the accuracy of the ship's orbit, but also contributed data to the mass of knowledge available on the movements of Earth and Mars.

Lefler found the black disc of Earth in the smoked glass that automatically fell across the sextant lens when it swept by the sun. He checked the angle between the black spot and the leading edge of the solar disc.

"Earth transit already under way," he said into the mike. "Angle with leading edge, two minutes, forty seconds...."

He went around the sky, recording planetary and key stellar positions. He had just finished and switched the tape of his conversation with Earth to record in the log when Taat and Robwood returned.

"Makki's body will keep out there as well as in a refrigerator," said Taat with evident satisfaction. "Robwood tied the airlock into the alarm system so nobody can go out and cut the body free without arousing the others."

"You're both mighty cooperative for one of you to be a murderer," remarked Lefler.

"Maybe neither of us is," said Robwood. "As far as I'm concerned, you may be the man."

"Or, as Robwood suggested earlier, Makki may have shot himself," added Taat.

"Robwood, you and I are going to have to do twelve-hour watches from here to Mars, since Taat doesn't know how to operate the controls," said Lefler. "I'll stay on duty till 0600, and you'd better get some sleep after you've radioed your statement to White Sands."

"Okay," said Robwood. "But are we still going to record star positions in the log every eight hours, or just every twelve hours now?"

"Twelve, I think. But the Earth transit's on right now, and until Terra swings across that half a degree of the sun's face, we'd better take readings on that every four hours, anyhow."

"Well, that's just for a little more than two days," said Robwood. "Look, Lefler, I'm overdue on my sleeping time anyway, so how about letting me make my statement on ... on Makki first?"

"Blast away," said Lefler. "The mike's yours. We'll leave the control room so you'll feel freer to talk."

Lefler munched thoughtfully on a hot sandwich. Across the control room, in the astrogator's chair, Taat sucked at a bulb of coffee.

"Nice of you to fix up this lunch, Taat," said Lefler. "I'm not tied strictly to the control room during my watch, you know. But little things like this relax the tension."

"Yes, it's a peculiar situation, Lefler," said Taat in a tone that indicated he had been thinking about it. "Psychologically, I mean. Now if there were only the two of us, and Makki drifting out there dead, both of us would know who shot him. With three of us, it's different.

"You and I are sitting here talking as though neither of us killed Makki. Maybe you hadn't thought of it, but that means that tacitly, for now, we're assuming Robwood killed him. But, for all I know, you did. And, if you didn't, for all you know, I did."

"Until we find out, I have to suspect you both," said Lefler flatly.

"I could say the same thing," murmured Taat. "But one of us may be lying."

"Of course, Makki could have shot himself, as Robwood suggested," said Lefler. "If he had relaxed his grip on the heat-gun after pressing the trigger, it would have drifted up away from him. There were the gloves, you know."

"Why wouldn't Makki want his fingerprints on the gun if he were committing suicide?" objected Taat. "I'll concede that Makki had strong sadistic tendencies, but my guess is that the murderer put those gloves on him just to raise the possibility of suicide."

Taat finished his coffee and left the control room. Lefler washed down the last bit of his sandwich with his own coffee and called White Sands on the radio. When he received an acknowledgment after the inevitable delay, he began to dictate his statement.

Lefler told of waking from his sleep period and finding himself forty minutes late for his watch. He described his discovery of Makki's body, what followed, and everything he could remember of what Taat and Robwood had said when they came to the control room.

"Makki was thoroughly detested by every member of the crew," Lefler related. "He did not fraternize and no one wanted to fraternize with him, because he was treacherous. In the midst of an apparently friendly conversation, he would suddenly unveil his authority with some biting and belittling remark. He never let anyone forget he was captain.

"Robwood was afraid of him and hated him intensely. Robwood had told me privately he intended to ask for a transfer to another ship after this hop to Mars. Makki held Robwood in considerable scorn because Robwood is a timid man, and a slow thinker outside his own field of engineering. Makki made no effort to conceal that scorn.

"Taat was as contemptuous of Makki as Makki was of Robwood. Makki was ruthless with any open attempt to question his judgment, but Taat could do it with a raised eyebrow, his tone of voice or a well-chosen phrase. Makki sensed this, and alternated between treating Taat as more of an equal than either Robwood or me and 'riding' Taat harder than anyone else.

"Robwood and Taat have been aboard with us for the last five hops, but I've been with Makki since both of us graduated from the Space Academy. We were boys together, but I have never liked Makki. He always had too little respect for human dignity. He was a good space captain because he was a genius with such impersonal things as machinery and astrogation, and I have

never known him to slip up on a record or let a ship get a single second off course. But mankind is better off without him."

Lefler signed off and laid the microphone down. He realized suddenly that he was perspiring and his hands were trembling. The statement had been a major emotional strain.

Unstrapping himself from the control chair, he floated down past the astrogation deck and looked in on the centerdeck. Both Taat and Robwood were strapped to their bunks, apparently asleep.

Satisfied, Lefler returned to the control room. He wanted to listen, without embarrassing interruptions, to Taat's and Robwood's statements as he transferred them from the radio recording tape to the ship's log.

The tapes rolled on the two connected machines, the log tape slowly, the radio tape at a faster clip. A loudspeaker was plugged into the radio-tape machine. Lefler kept it turned low, though the centerdeck was two decks down.

"I woke Makki at 0930 hours." It was Robwood's low voice on the tape. "He relieved me right at 1000 hours. I went down to the centerdeck and had a late lunch. Lefler strapped himself in for his sleeping period while I was eating. Taat ate lunch with me, and then we played cards for about an hour. We do that almost every day when Taat's sleeping periods are on the same schedule as mine. He changes his, because he's a psychologist and wants to watch all the crew members.

"I check the rocket engines and the fuel tanks every twenty-five days. When the Earth transit is coming up, I always do it two days ahead of time in case there are any corrections to be made in the ship's orbit. I got into a spacesuit and spent the rest of my free period outside the personnel sphere doing that. I took a break for supper, I'd say about 1600 hours, and went back to my inspection. Taat ate with me and Lefler was asleep. Makki didn't eat with us. He did sometimes, but not often. He usually wanted to eat alone. With the Earth transit about due, I figured he'd already eaten and gone back to the control room.

"I was late for my sleeping period, but I wanted to finish my inspection. I had just gotten back through the airlock and was taking my spacesuit off when I heard Lefler call from the control room. He and Taat were both there when I got there.

"I didn't like Makki, but neither did Taat and Lefler. I suppose it'll come out, so I might as well tell about it. Makki broke up my engagement with a girl back on Earth several years ago. I wasn't going to sign on for the Mars hop because I was going to get married. Makki couldn't find an engineer to replace me, and he smooth-talked her out of it. He told me about it a long time afterward and laughed at me. I haven't ever seen her again.

"Lefler and Taat are both decent fellows and I don't think either one of them killed Makki. I think he shot himself. He ought to have!"

Robwood's final words were spoken in an outburst of concentrated bitterness. Lefler stared thoughtfully at the unwinding tapes as he waited for Taat's report to tune in. He hadn't known that about Robwood's fiancée, but it was the sort of thing Makki wouldn't hesitate to do.

"The last time I saw Makki," came Taat's calm, controlled voice from the loudspeaker, "was 1615 hours. He had just finished lunch and was going back to the control room when I came onto the centerdeck from the storage deck below. Robwood came up from below a couple of minutes later and we ate supper together.

"Robwood and I usually play a round of cards after supper when we're on the same schedule, but he was busy and I was in the middle of an experiment in the lab I have set up on the storage deck. We went down to the storage deck together. He went on below to the airlock and I started the moving picture camera again on my experiment.

"I didn't go up again until Lefler sounded the alarm. He was alone with Makki in the control room when I got there, and Makki was dead.

"I must admit it is my personal feeling that whichever of my colleagues killed Makki is a benefactor to the human race, and I hope he escapes punishment. I did not know Makki before Robwood and I signed up together on the Marsward IV five voyages ago. I made the mistake of entering into a business transaction with him on our first Mars trip. He needed my capital and we became partners in purchasing a block of stock in a private dome enterprise. He accused me several times afterward of cheating him, but he handled the dividends and I think he was cheating me.

"As a psychologist, I would say that Lefler is more likely to have killed Makki coldly and deliberately, but Robwood is more likely to have killed him in the heat of an argument."

Taat's voice stopped. Lefler turned off the machines and disconnected them.

An argument. He had heard shouting in his dreams. Was that what had awakened him?

He tried to bring the dream into focus. It barely eluded him. All he could remember was that it was something about Makki.

Both Taat and Robwood were up by 0400 hours. They brought their breakfasts to the control room, along with coffee for Lefler.

It was a pleasant meal for the three of them. No one really seemed to care that one of the others was a murderer, Lefler thought. They talked and acted more like companions in crime—or like the murderer was none of them, but someone lurking somewhere else in the ship.

He wished he did not feel impelled to find out, if he could, who killed Makki. But he knew that Taat would be trying to find out, too—if Taat hadn't done it—because Taat was a psychologist and would look at it as a scientific problem. Robwood was the only one who might be temperamentally inclined to let the solution wait until they reached Mars.

When Robwood took over duty watch at 0600 hours, Lefler found Taat listening to a tape on criminal psychology on the centerdeck.

"Taat, didn't I hear you say you were working on some sort of an experiment on the storage deck while Makki was on watch yesterday?" asked Lefler.

Taat switched off the player.

"That's what I was doing," he said carefully, "but I don't remember saying anything about it."

"I listened to the reports you and Robwood made while I was recording them in the log," admitted Lefler. "I was interested in your estimate of Robwood's and my comparative abilities to commit murder."

Taat removed his spectacles, polished them and put them in his breast pocket before answering.

"I'm not surprised that you listened, Lefler—whether you're guilty or innocent," said Taat. "You probably noted that I mentioned I was recording my experiments on film. If you'll go below with me, I'd like for you to see that film."

Together, they pulled themselves down to the storage deck. Over near the main electrical switchboard, Robwood had torn out three empty spacesuit lockers and built a compact laboratory for Taat. A dozen white mice and some hamsters floated in cages attached to the wall.

For Taat's convenience, Robwood had moved the storage deck chronometer from the other side of the deck to the lab. It read 0607.

Taat unrolled a screen against one of the spacesuit lockers, attached the film roll to the projector, darkened the deck and began the showing.

The film began on Taat's face, blurred and enormously enlarged, as he switched on the camera. Taat stepped backward until he was in focus, and picked up the microphone that tied into the sound track.

"This is an experiment with white mice in a maze under conditions of zero gravity," said the Taat on the screen. Stepping aside, he waved a hand at a wire contraption on a table. "I have here a three-dimensional maze. The chronometer is visible above it, so we can check the reaction time."

Lefler noted the chronometer reading. It was 1500. In the "day" square just below its center was the figure 73.

Lefler checked the chronometer in the picture as the film ran on. There was an announced break between 1612 and 1654. Other than that, it ran continuously to 1851, when his own voice sounded faintly, calling, "Blue alert! All hands to control room. Blue alert!" At that, Taat's startled face loomed up again before the lens and the film stopped abruptly.

Throughout the approximately three hours, Taat was always in the camera's view, running his mice through the maze and explaining his methods.

"What was that forty-minute break, Taat?" asked Lefler when Taat switched the lights on once again.

"Supper," said Taat. "Robwood and I ate together, and came back down from the centerdeck together. I saw Makki leave the centerdeck when I went up, but Robwood got there a minute or two later and I don't think he saw Makki."

"You seem to have established a pretty good alibi," said Lefler slowly. "How about Robwood?"

"Lefler, for your sake, I hate to say this. The only time Robwood was above the storage deck from the time I started this film was when we had supper together. I'd have seen him if he'd passed through, and the only way he could have gotten into the control room would have been through one of the ports."

"He couldn't, without breaking it and setting off an alarm," said Lefler. "Are you trying to tell me you think I killed Makki, Taat?"

"I was here," said Taat, waving his hand at the projector. "I was between Robwood and the control room all the time. You're the only one who could have gotten there without my seeing you, Lefler, and I found you alone with him fifteen minutes after he died."

"You're sure about that fifteen minutes?"

"Within a pretty narrow range. The dilation of the pupils is an accurate gauge. I don't say you killed him, Lefler. I hope they rule it was suicide."

Silently, Lefler went back to the centerdeck, undressed and strapped himself into his bunk. He found it hard to get to sleep. Something was nagging at the back of his mind. He hoped he wouldn't dream of Makki again.

When Lefler assumed his duty watch at 1800, he asked Robwood to stay in the control room with him for a talk. Robwood strapped himself in the astrogator's chair and waited while Lefler made the position readings. Then Lefler swung his chair around to face Robwood.

"I want to check some things with you, Robwood," he said. "I've listened to your report and Taat's and I've seen a film of Taat's that seems to give you both an alibi. After Makki relieved you and you ate lunch, was supertime the only time you came back into the personnel sphere?"

"That's right," said Robwood. "Taat and I played cards a while after lunch, but I think you were awake then."

"How long did your supper period last?"

"Oh, half an hour. Maybe a little longer. You were asleep and snoring."

Lefler shook his head savagely.

"Robwood, I'm afraid you're going to have to take over the ship. I want you to put me in irons and turn me over for Makki's murder when we get to Marsport."

Robwood started so violently he almost broke his retaining straps. He stared at Lefler for a full thirty seconds before he found his voice.

"You're not serious!" he exclaimed. There was a pleading note to his tone. "Lefler, you didn't shoot him, did you?"

"I must have, Robwood. But not consciously. I've been able at last to remember a nightmare I had just before I found Makki's body.

"Makki and I were boys together, and he was just as mean and evil then as he was when he grew up. I was dreaming about the time Makki smashed my toy electric train and laughed about it. I tried to kill him then. I beat him with the semaphore and cut his face all up before he knocked me down and kicked me half senseless. I lived through that experience again in my dream.

"My bunk straps were loose when I woke up. I must have acted that dream out in a semi-conscious state. I must have gone up to the control room, tackled Makki and finally shot him."

"That's the silliest thing I ever heard of," retorted Robwood.

"It must be true, Robwood. Neither you nor Taat could have killed him, and Taat's got the film to prove it."

Robwood unstrapped himself and pushed himself to the companionway with some determination.

"Well, I'm not going to take over the ship and I'm not going to put you in irons," he said spiritedly. "I couldn't handle the ship on a twenty-four-hour basis for the next hundred and eighty-six days, and I'd rather think Makki killed himself."

He paused at the top of the companionway.

"Don't forget," he said. "The Earth transit ought to be at midpoint in a couple of hours."

Then he disappeared below.

Lefler took the magnetized pencil from the memorandum pad and wrote a reminder: "E.T. midpoint. Should check 28:16:54."

Lefler leaned back gloomily in the control chair. Had he killed Makki? It seemed the only way it could have happened, unless Makki had, indeed, committed suicide. And he just didn't think Makki had.

The chronometer said 1839. Exactly twenty-four hours ago, he had awakened from a nightmare and had come up to find Makki dead in this same chair. It seemed a century.

He glanced idly back at the memorandum pad. 28:15:64. He'd have to make an entry in the log in a little under two hours. How could he check accurately when the time of entry into transit was estimated?

Twenty-four plus two. Twenty-six.

He sat bolt upright, straining at his straps. He snapped down the communicator button.

"Robwood, come back up here!" he bellowed.

Unbuckling himself hastily, Lefler headed across the room toward the heat-gun rack.

Taat was playing solitaire, waiting patiently for Robwood, when Lefler and Robwood came down to the centerdeck together.

Lefler pointed a heat-gun at Taat.

"Go below and get the irons, Robwood," he said. "Taat, I'm sorry, but I'm arresting you for the murder of Makki."

Taat raised an eyebrow and continued shuffling cards.

"I don't think you want to do anything like that, Robwood," he said mildly. "Do you?"

Robwood hesitated and cast an anxious glance at him, but turned and headed for the companionway to the storage deck.

"You've convinced him, have you, Lefler?" said Taat. "I didn't believe you were guilty, but this makes me think you are."

Lefler said nothing, but held the gun steadily on Taat. Taat appeared relaxed, but Lefler sensed a tension in him.

"What makes you think I did it, Lefler?" sparred Taat. The light glinted from his spectacles as he turned his eyes from Lefler's face to watch the shuffling cards.

"Two things," said Lefler. "If I'd killed him in a half-asleep daze, I wouldn't have put gloves on him to make it look like suicide. Second, your film started at 1500—a strangely precise hour—and Makki was killed before then."

"The first point is good psychology," conceded Taat. "Since Robwood couldn't have done it, I'll admit it looks like suicide. But your second point doesn't hold water. Medical examination is accurate almost to a fine point on the time of death so soon afterward."

"Medical evidence may not lie, but the examiner can, Taat," said Lefler.

The clank of the chains resounded up the companionway. Robwood was coming back. The spring in Taat uncoiled.

With a single sweep, he hurled the deck of cards at Lefler's head and surged upward. Lefler lost his balance and fell sidewise as he dodged the improvised missile. But even as he lost his equilibrium, he pressed the trigger of the heat-gun and brought it downward in a fast chop.

The straps that held Taat to his chair were his doom. The searing beam swept across them, freeing him but at the same time blasting a six-inch swath across his stomach. Taat screamed hoarsely as the beam swung past him and burned along the floor of the centerdeck.

Lefler regained his balance and floated to Taat's side, pushing aside the cards that drifted in a swirling cloud about the room. Robwood appeared from below, the manacles in his hands.

"Your third point wins the day," gasped Taat, his hands writhing over his mangled abdomen. "I won't last long, but if you'll get me to the control room I'll radio a confession that'll clear you and Robwood completely."

"Help me get him to a bunk, Robwood," ordered Lefler, grasping Taat by the arms. "Taat, you'll have to tell us what to do for you."

"No use," groaned Taat. He managed a ghastly smile. "I unbuckled your bunk straps to throw you off course, Lefler, but I don't want you to think I was trying to blame it on you. I was trying to make it look like Makki killed himself."

"But why, Taat?"

"It wasn't just that Makki cheated me," replied Taat with some difficulty. "I'd saved several thousand dollars to build a little clinic in Mars City—something I've dreamed of all my life. That's why I let Makki talk me into investing—I needed just a little more. But the business was almost worthless. He stole most of my money. I was arguing with him about it in the control room, when he drew the gun and threatened to kill me. He was strapped down. I wrestled with him, and he was killed in the scuffle. That's it."

They maneuvered Taat into a bunk and tried to arrange the straps to avoid the gaping wound in his stomach. Taat raised his hand weakly and removed his spectacles. He blinked up at Lefler.

"I didn't think you knew enough about medicine to tell how long a man had been dead," he said.

"I don't," said Lefler. "But you set the time of Makki's death at 1830 hours. You said you could tell.

"The Earth transit started at 1612, Taat. I've known Makki all my life. If he'd been alive then, he'd have recorded it in the log. And he didn't.

"I just figured the only man who had any reason to lie deliberately about the time of Makki's death was the man who shot him."

Lefler looked at the centerdeck chronometer. It was 2025.

"Do what you can for him, then bring him up to the radio, Robwood," he said. "I've got to get up to the control room and record the midpoint of the Earth transit."

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charles L. Fontenay (July 17, 1917 - June 27, 2007) was an American science fiction writer who made significant contributions to the genre during the mid-20th century. Born in Arkansas, Fontenay began his writing career in the 1950s and quickly became a notable figure in the science fiction community.

Fontenay's works often explored futuristic and speculative themes, including space exploration, interstellar conflict, and the societal impact of advanced technologies. His writing style combined imaginative storytelling with a focus on scientific concepts, creating narratives that captivated readers.

Some of Fontenay's notable works include "The Zero Stone," a novel that blends elements of science fiction and fantasy, and "Rebels of the Red Planet," a space adventure that reflects the themes prevalent in the Golden Age of science fiction.

While not as widely recognized as some of his contemporaries, Charles L. Fontenay's contributions to the genre showcase the diversity of ideas within mid-20th-century science fiction literature. His imaginative storytelling and exploration of futuristic concepts continue to be appreciated by fans of the genre.



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