



## Death Wish, by Robert Sheckley

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Death Wish

By NED LANG

Illustrated by WEISS

Compared with a spaceship in distress, going to hell in a handbasket is roomy and slow!

The space freighter *Queen Dierdre* was a great, squat, pockmarked vessel of the Earth-Mars run and she never gave anyone a bit of trouble. That should have been sufficient warning to Mr. Watkins, her engineer. Watkins was fond of saying that there are two kinds of equipment--the kind that fails bit by bit, and the kind that fails all at once.

Watkins was short and red-faced, magnificently mustached, and always a little out of breath. With a cigar in his hand, over a glass of beer, he talked most cynically about his ship, in the immemorial fashion of engineers. But in reality, Watkins was foolishly infatuated with *Dierdre*, idealized her, humanized her, and couldn't conceive of anything serious ever happening.

On this particular run, *Dierdre* soared away from Terra at the proper speed; Mr. Watkins signaled that fuel was being consumed at the proper rate; and Captain Somers cut the engines at the proper moment indicated by Mr. Rajcik, the navigator.

As soon as Point Able had been reached and the engines stopped, Somers frowned and studied his complex control board. He was a thin and meticulous man, and he operated his ship with mechanical perfection. He was well liked in the front offices of Mikkelsen Space Lines, where Old Man Mikkelsen pointed to Captain Somers' reports as models of neatness and efficiency. On Mars, he stayed at the Officers' Club, eschewing the stews and dives of Marsport. On Earth, he lived in a little Vermont cottage and enjoyed the quiet companionship of two cats, a Japanese houseboy, and a wife.

\* \* \* \* \*

His instructions read true. And yet he sensed something wrong. Somers knew every creak, rattle and groan that *Dierdre* was capable of making. During blastoff, he had heard something *different*. In space, something different had to be wrong.

"Mr. Rajcik," he said, turning to his navigator, "would you check the cargo? I believe something may have shifted."

"You bet," Rajcik said cheerfully. He was an almost offensively handsome young man with black wavy hair, blasé blue eyes and a cleft chin. Despite his appearance, Rajcik was thoroughly qualified for his position. But he was only one of fifty thousand thoroughly qualified men who lusted for a berth on one of the fourteen spaceships in existence. Only Stephen Rajcik had had the foresight, appearance and fortitude to court and wed Helga, Old Man Mikkelsen's eldest daughter.

Rajcik went aft to the cargo hold. *Dierdre* was carrying transistors this time, and microfilm books, platinum filaments, salamis, and other items that could not as yet be produced on Mars. But the bulk of her space was taken by the immense Fahrensen Computer.

Rajcik checked the positioning lines on the monster, examined the stays and turnbuckles that held it in place, and returned to the cabin.

"All in order, Boss," he reported to Captain Somers, with the smile that only an employer's son-in-law can both manage and afford.

"Mr. Watkins, do you read anything?"

Watkins was at his own instrument panel. "Not a thing, sir. I'll vouch for every bit of equipment in *Dierdre*."

"Very well. How long before we reach Point Baker?"

"Three minutes, Chief," Rajcik said.

"Good."

The spaceship hung in the void, all sensation of speed lost for lack of a reference point. Beyond the portholes was darkness, the true color of the Universe, perforated by the brilliant lost points of the stars.

Captain Somers turned away from the disturbing reminder of his extreme finitude and wondered if he could land *Dierdre* without shifting the computer. It was by far the largest, heaviest and most delicate piece of equipment ever transported in space.

He worried about that machine. Its value ran into the billions of dollars, for Mars Colony had ordered the best possible, a machine whose utility would offset the immense transportation charge across space. As a result, the Fahrensen Computer was perhaps the most complex and advanced machine ever built by Man.

"Ten seconds to Point Baker," Rajcik announced.

"Very well." Somers readied himself at the control board.

"Four--three--two--one--fire!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Somers activated the engines. Acceleration pressed the three men back into their couches, and more acceleration, and--shockingly--still more acceleration.

"The fuel!" Watkins yelled, watching his indicators spinning.

"The course!" Rajcik gasped, fighting for breath.

Captain Somers cut the engine switch. The engines continued firing, pressing the men deeper into their couches. The cabin lights flickered, went out, came on again.

And still the acceleration mounted and *Dierdre's* engines howled in agony, thrusting the ship forward. Somers raised one leaden hand and inched it toward the emergency cut-off switch. With a fantastic expenditure of energy, he reached the switch, depressed it.

The engines stopped with dramatic suddenness, while tortured metal creaked and groaned. The lights flickered rapidly, as though *Dierdre* were blinking in pain. They steadied and then there was silence.

Watkins hurried to the engine room. He returned morosely.

"Of all the damn things," he muttered.

"What was it?" Captain Somers asked.

"Main firing circuit. It fused on us." He shook his head. "Metal fatigue, I'd say. It must have been flawed for years."

"When was it last checked out?"

"Well, it's a sealed unit. Supposed to outlast the ship. Absolutely foolproof, unless--"

"Unless it's flawed."

"Don't blame it on me! Those circuits are supposed to be X-rayed, heat-treated, fluoroscoped--you just can't trust machinery!"

At last Watkins believed that engineering axiom.

"How are we on fuel?" Captain Somers asked.

"Not enough left to push a kiddy car down Main Street," Watkins said gloomily. "If I could get my hands on that factory inspector ..."

Captain Somers turned to Rajcik, who was seated at the navigator's desk, hunched over his charts. "How does this affect our course?"

Rajcik finished the computation he was working on and gnawed thoughtfully at his pencil.

"It kills us. We're going to cross the orbit of Mars before Mars gets there."

"How long before?"

"Too long. Captain, we're flying out of the Solar System like the proverbial bat out of hell."

\* \* \* \* \*

Rajcik smiled, a courageous, devil-may-care smile which Watkins found singularly inappropriate.

"Damn it, man," he roared, "don't just leave it there. We've got a little fuel left. We can turn her, can't we? You *are* a navigator, aren't you?"

"I am," Rajcik said icily. "And if I computed my courses the way you maintain your engines, we'd be plowing through Australia now."

"Why, you little company toady! At least I got my job legitimately, not by marrying--"

"That's enough!" Captain Somers cut in.

Watkins, his face a mottled red, his mustache bristling, looked like a walrus about to charge. And Rajcik, eyes glittering, was waiting hopefully.

"No more of this," Somers said. "I give the orders here."

"Then give some!" Watkins snapped. "Tell him to plot a return curve. This is life or death!"

"All the more reason for remaining cool. Mr. Rajcik, can you plot such a course?"

"First thing I tried," Rajcik said. "Not a chance, on the fuel we have left. We can turn a degree or two, but it won't help."

Watkins said, "Of course it will! We'll curve back into the Solar System!"

"Sure, but the best curve we can make will take a few thousand years for us to complete."

"Perhaps a landfall on some other planet--Neptune, Uranus--"

Rajcik shook his head. "Even if an outer planet were in the right place at the right time, we'd need fuel--a lot of fuel--to get into a braking orbit. And if we could, who'd come get us? No ship has gone past Mars yet."

"At least we'd have a chance," Watkins said.

"Maybe," Rajcik agreed indifferently. "But we can't swing it. I'm afraid you'll have to kiss the Solar System good-bye."

Captain Somers wiped his forehead and tried to think of a plan. He found it difficult to concentrate. There was too great a discrepancy between his knowledge of the situation and its appearance. He knew--intellectually--that his ship was traveling out of the Solar System at a tremendous rate of speed. But in appearance they were stationary, hung in the abyss, three men trapped in a small, hot room, breathing the smell of hot metal and perspiration.

"What shall we do, Captain?" Watkins asked.

\* \* \* \* \*

Somers frowned at the engineer. Did the man expect him to pull a solution out of the air? How was he even supposed to concentrate on the problem? He had to slow the ship, turn it. But his senses told him that the ship was not moving. How, then, could speed constitute a problem?

He couldn't help but feel that the real problem was to get away from these high-strung, squabbling men, to escape from this hot, smelly little room.

"Captain! You must have some idea!"

Somers tried to shake his feeling of unreality. The problem, the real problem, he told himself, was how to stop the ship.

He looked around the fixed cabin and out the porthole at the unmoving stars. *We are moving very rapidly*, he thought, unconvinced.

Rajcik said disgustedly, "Our noble captain can't face the situation."

"Of course I can," Somers objected, feeling very light-headed and unreal. "I can pilot any course you lay down. That's my only real responsibility. Plot us a course to Mars!"

"Sure!" Rajcik said, laughing. "I can! I will! Engineer, I'm going to need plenty of fuel for this course--about ten tons! See that I get it!"

"Right you are," said Watkins. "Captain, I'd like to put in a requisition for ten tons of fuel."

"Requisition granted," Somers said. "All right, gentlemen, responsibility is inevitably circular. Let's get a grip on ourselves. Mr. Rajcik, suppose you radio Mars."

When contact had been established, Somers took the microphone and stated their situation. The company official at the other end seemed to have trouble grasping it.

"But can't you turn the ship?" he asked bewilderedly. "Any kind of an orbit--"

"No. I've just explained that."

"Then what do you propose to do, Captain?"

"That's exactly what I'm asking you."

There was a babble of voices from the loudspeaker, punctuated by bursts of static. The lights flickered and reception began to fade. Rajcik, working frantically, managed to re-establish the contact.

"Captain," the official on Mars said, "we can't think of a thing. If you could swing into any sort of an orbit--"

"I can't!"

"Under the circumstances, you have the right to try anything at all. Anything, Captain!"

Somers groaned. "Listen, I can think of just one thing. We could bail out in spacesuits as near Mars as possible. Link ourselves together, take the portable transmitter. It wouldn't give much of a signal, but you'd know our approximate position. Everything would have to be figured pretty closely--those suits just carry twelve hours' air--but it's a chance."

\* \* \* \* \*

There was a confusion of voices from the other end. Then the official said, "I'm sorry, Captain."

"What? I'm telling you it's our one chance!"

"Captain, the only ship on Mars now is the *Diana*. Her engines are being overhauled."

"How long before she can be spaceborne?"

"Three weeks, at least. And a ship from Earth would take too long. Captain, I wish we could think of something. About the only thing we can suggest--"

The reception suddenly failed again.

Rajcik cursed frustratedly as he worked over the radio. Watkins gnawed at his mustache. Somers glanced out a porthole and looked hurriedly away, for the stars, their destination, were impossibly distant.

They heard static again, faintly now.

"I can't get much more," Rajcik said. "This damned reception.... What could they have been suggesting?"

"Whatever it was," said Watkins, "they didn't think it would work."

"What the hell does that matter?" Rajcik asked, annoyed. "It'd give us something to do."

They heard the official's voice, a whisper across space.

"Can you hear ... Suggest ..."

At full amplification, the voice faded, then returned. "Can only suggest ... most unlikely ... but try ... calculator ... try ..."

[Illustration]

The voice was gone. And then even the static was gone.

"That does it," Rajcik said. "The calculator? Did he mean the Fahrensen Computer in our hold?"

"I see what he meant," said Captain Somers. "The Fahrensen is a very advanced job. No one knows the limits of its potential. He suggests we present our problem to it."

"That's ridiculous," Watkins snorted. "This problem has no solution."

"It doesn't seem to," Somers agreed. "But the big computers have solved other apparently impossible problems. We can't lose anything by trying."

"No," said Rajcik, "as long as we don't pin any hopes on it."

"That's right. We don't dare hope. Mr. Watkins, I believe this is your department."

"Oh, what's the use?" Watkins asked. "You say don't hope--but both of you are hoping anyhow! You think the big electronic god is going to save your lives. Well, it's not!"

"We have to try," Somers told him.

"We don't! I wouldn't give it the satisfaction of turning us down!"

\* \* \* \* \*

They stared at him in vacant astonishment.

"Now you're implying that machines think," said Rajcik.

"Of course I am," Watkins said. "Because they do! No, I'm not out of my head. Any engineer will tell you that a complex machine has a personality all its own. Do you know what that personality is like? Cold, withdrawn, uncaring, unfeeling. A machine's only purpose is to frustrate desire and produce two problems for every one it solves. And do you know why a machine feels this way?"

"You're hysterical," Somers told him.

"I am not. A machine feels this way because it *knows* it is an unnatural creation in nature's domain. Therefore it wishes to reach entropy and cease--a mechanical death wish."

"I've never heard such gibberish in my life," Somers said. "Are you going to hook up that computer?"

"Of course. I'm a human. I keep trying. I just wanted you to understand *fully* that there is no hope." He went to the cargo hold.

After he had gone, Rajcik grinned and shook his head. "We'd better watch him."

"He'll be all right," Somers said.

"Maybe, maybe not." Rajcik pursed his lips thoughtfully. "He's blaming the situation on a machine personality now, trying to absolve himself of guilt. And it *is* his fault that we're in this spot. An engineer is responsible for all equipment."

"I don't believe you can put the blame on him so dogmatically," Somers replied.

"Sure I can," Rajcik said. "I personally don't care, though. This is as good a way to die as any other and better than most."

Captain Somers wiped perspiration from his face. Again the notion came to him that the problem--the *real* problem--was to find a way out of this hot, smelly, motionless little box.

Rajcik said, "Death in space is an appealing idea, in certain ways. Imagine an entire spaceship for your tomb! And you have a variety of ways of actually dying. Thirst and starvation I rule out as unimaginative. But there are possibilities in heat, cold, implosion, explosion--"

"This is pretty morbid," Somers said.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I'm a pretty morbid fellow," Rajcik said carelessly. "But at least I'm not blaming inanimate objects, the way Watkins is. Or permitting myself the luxury of shock, like you." He studied Somers' face. "This is your first real emergency, isn't it, Captain?"

"I suppose so," Somers answered vaguely.

"And you're responding to it like a stunned ox," Rajcik said. "Wake up, Captain! If you can't live with joy, at least try to extract some pleasure from your dying."

"Shut up," Somers said, with no heat. "Why don't you read a book or something?"

"I've read all the books on board. I have nothing to distract me except an analysis of your character."

Watkins returned to the cabin. "Well, I've activated your big electronic god. Would anyone care to make a burned offering in front of it?"

"Have you given it the problem?"

"Not yet. I decided to confer with the high priest. What shall I request of the demon, sir?"

"Give it all the data you can," Somers said. "Fuel, oxygen, water, food--that sort of thing. Then tell it we want to return to Earth. Alive," he added.



"It'll love that," Watkins said. "It'll get such pleasure out of rejecting our problem as unsolvable. Or better yet--insufficient data. In that way, it can hint that a solution is possible, but just outside our reach. It can keep us hoping."

Somers and Rajcik followed him to the cargo hold. The computer, activated now, hummed softly. Lights flashed swiftly over its panels, blue and white and red.

Watkins punched buttons and turned dials for fifteen minutes, then moved back.

"Watch for the red light on top," he said. "That means the problem is rejected."

"Don't say it," Rajcik warned quickly.

Watkins laughed. "Superstitious little fellow, aren't you?"

"But not incompetent," Rajcik said, smiling.

"Can't you two quit it?" Somers demanded, and both men turned startledly to face him.

"Behold!" Rajcik said. "The sleeper has awakened."

"After a fashion," said Watkins, snickering.

Somers suddenly felt that if death or rescue did not come quickly, they would kill each other, or drive each other crazy.

"Look!" Rajcik said.

\* \* \* \* \*

A light on the computer's panel was flashing green.

"Must be a mistake," said Watkins. "Green means the problem is solvable within the conditions set down."

"Solvable!" Rajcik said.

"But it's impossible," Watkins argued. "It's fooling us, leading us on--"

"Don't be superstitious," Rajcik mocked. "How soon do we get the solution?"

"It's coming now." Watkins pointed to a paper tape inching out of a slot in the machine's face. "But there must be something wrong!"

They watched as, millimeter by millimeter, the tape crept out. The computer hummed, its lights flashing green. Then the hum stopped. The green lights blazed once more and faded.

"What happened?" Rajcik wanted to know.

"It's finished," Watkins said.

"Pick it up! Read it!"

"You read it. You won't get *me* to play its game."

Rajcik laughed nervously and rubbed his hands together, but didn't move. Both men turned to Somers.

"Captain, it's your responsibility."

"Go ahead, Captain!"

Somers looked with loathing at his engineer and navigator. *His* responsibility, everything was *his* responsibility. Would they never leave him alone?

He went up to the machine, pulled the tape free, read it with slow deliberation.

"What does it say, sir?" Rajcik asked.

"Is it--possible?" Watkins urged.

"Oh, yes," Somers said. "It's possible." He laughed and looked around at the hot, smelly, low-ceilinged little room with its locked doors and windows.

"What is it?" Rajcik shouted.

\* \* \* \* \*

Somers said, "You figured a few thousand years to return to the Solar System, Rajcik? Well, the computer agrees with you. Twenty-three hundred years, to be precise. Therefore, it has given us a suitable longevity serum."

"Twenty-three hundred years," Rajcik mumbled. "I suppose we hibernate or something of the sort."

"Not at all," Somers said calmly. "As a matter of fact, this serum does away quite nicely with the need for sleep. We stay awake and watch each other."

The three men looked at one another and at the sickeningly familiar room smelling of metal and perspiration, its sealed doors and windows that stared at an unchanging spectacle of stars.

Watkins said, "Yes, that's the sort of thing it would do."

--NED LANG

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Transcriber's Note:

This etext was produced from *Galaxy Science Fiction* June 1956. Extensive research did not uncover any evidence that the U.S. copyright on this publication was renewed. Minor spelling and typographical errors have been corrected without note.

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