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Murray Leinster

INVADERS OF SPACE



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CHAPTER ONE

OUTSIDE the control building, the spaceport lights seemed to rival the stars in number, and to outshine them in brightness. There was a good two square miles of black tarmac to be seen from the office window, reflecting the lights in wavery streaks of brightness. But there was no activity anywhere. Horn, who had no business being in the control room of the spaceport, listened to a faint buzzing, moaning sound that came out of a loudspeaker overhead. It came from a space tramp, the *Theban*, coming down out of the night on emergency-landing status.

The landing-grid operator, whose proper empire this control room was, leaned back in a tilting chair and negligently watched certain dials and a screen on which a single blurry bright speck showed. The speck was the *Theban*, not yet sighted, but on the way to be brought to ground in the Formalhaut spaceport. The buzzing, moaning sound was not a comfortable one to hear.

"That's a nasty sort of noise," Horn commented. "The engines that are making it could conk out any second. Lucky they got this far."

The operator nodded and said negligently, "I'll get 'em down." His manner was one of total leisure and indifference, but he kept the dials on the wall before him under constant watch. Once he reached over and adjusted some control. The buzzing moan grew louder. With the increased volume, other noises could be heard behind it. The buzzing came from a pick-up microphone in the ship's control room somewhere out in space. Sounds of movement could be heard: a growling voice; another voice, answering truculently. The growling voice swore.

"*Calling ground!*" it rasped a moment later. "*Calling ground! Where's your beam? Do you want us banging around up here for ever? Where's your beam?*"

The operator said without haste. "You're heading right into it. But you're low and in the planet's shadow. If you weren't in such a hurry -"

The growling voice rasped, "*But we are in a hurry! How about that repair job we need?*"

"I told you," said the grid operator, "there's nothing doing in the repair shop until morning local time. You might as well have gone in orbit to wait. I told you that, too!"

The voice from space swore virulently. The operator said, "You're just touching our force beam now. Hold fast. I'm going to have to kill your lateral velocity and you're so low you may feel it."

The growling voice from the loudspeaker bellowed an order, away from the microphone. The unseen ship, still far out of atmosphere, floated into the invisible, intangible force beam of the landing grid. Dials and indicators in the control office, aground, showed that the landing grid's power was flowing swiftly out to make a field of almost solid density as the original

beam was pierced by the ship still high up and deep in the black shadow of the planet Formalhaut III.

The ship became fixed in the fields of force. The grid operator sat leisurely erect. The process of landing a ship from this point on was almost automatic. He adjusted a turn knob and watched for the results. They were, of course, that the grid's force fields tightened gradually. The *Theban* - still invisible in the night - became anchored in the immaterial beam. Then the operator touched the braking button and the hovering ship checked. It had almost had velocity enough for an orbit. To bring it down and land it in one piece, it had to be slowed to the speed of the planet's rotation at the latitude of the spaceport.

The buzzing from the loudspeaker grew violently louder. There were crashes. Loose objects in the ship's control room slid and banged to the floor, drawn there by the ship's artificial gravity field.

The grid operator snapped, "Are you crazy? Cut your drive !"

More crashes. Then the buzzing ceased. When a ship is grasped by a landing grid's fields, it cuts its own drive and is drawn down to the spaceport by the grid. Landing grids were invented, at first, because they had to be made if space travel were to become practical. It required more fuel for a ship to climb up into space against gravity than to journey halfway across the galaxy. It required as much more to land safely. So landing grids were devised, using ground-supplied power to lift and land starships. That simple fact tripled the cargo they could carry.

Then the grids were developed past that simple usefulness. It appeared that they could draw power from the ionized upper layers of a planet's atmosphere. They could provide for most - or all - of a planet's energy requirements. And then it became obvious that they were very useful because when they brought a ship down they placed it neatly in position opposite the passenger ramp or the warehouse where passengers or cargo should be landed or taken aboard.

"I think," said Horn, "that up there in that ship they're a little bit panicky. Considering the noises their engines were making, they've reason to be. They've been waiting for the engines to blow any second. It took nerve to turn them off. They might not turn on again."

The grid operator said disgustedly, "There's something wrong with them, calling for an emergency landing and yelling they've got to have emergency repairs! They ordered me to get a repair crew ready to get them back aloft again in hours. Try to get union mechanics out of bed for a special job, just on a tramp skipper's say-so!"

Horn shook his head. "They won't get off in hours, maybe days. That's an old-style Riccardo drive, and the noise means it's about to lie down and die. I didn't know any of those old ships were still in service. I'd hate to guess how old it is."

He could have looked up the descending ship in the *Spacecraft Register* and found out all about her, even including her present very dubious reputation. But he wasn't interested enough to do so.

He'd stopped by the spaceport to ask if there were news about the liner *Danae*, en route to Formalhaut now. He knew there could be no news, of course. The *Danae* was somewhere in the ship lanes leading from Canna II to Formalhaut III. There was a girl on board the *Danae*. She was on the way to this planet. When she arrived, she and Horn were to be married. So Horn was jumpy and unreasonably worried, and hungry for news that simply couldn't be had.

A voice barked abruptly from the speaker, originating in the space tramp now descending.

"Look here!" it said furiously, "if we can't get an emergency repair job, cancel this landing! Push us out, and we'll go somewhere else. We're in a hurry!"

The grid operator looked annoyedly at Horn, to call attention to the unreasonable demand. Horn shrugged. The operator said, "You asked for emergency landing. You're getting it. Regulations say an emergency landing, once begun, has to be completed, and the ship must be surveyed before it's lifted off again." He added in a chiding tone, "Too many skippers clipped hours off in-port time by claiming emergency. You know that."

The voice from the speaker bellowed profanity. The operator turned down the volume until the voice was a tiny sound, mouthing unspeakable things. He watched his dials. After a long wait he turned on the warning lights outside, and any atmosphere flier in the neighbourhood would be made aware that a ship was coming down from space. Of course at this hour of the night there was no great need for the warning.

"Where'd this *Theban* come from?" asked Horn. The operator shook his head to signify that he didn't know.

"If they came down the ship lane, the *Danae*'ll follow. They'll know if there are any warnings to spacemen out for that lane. It's pretty clear, usually. But I'll ask."

The operator nodded. "Space travel always seems perfectly safe," he, observed, "until you've got somebody travelling. Then you worry."

Horn said restlessly, "Right! The *Danae*'s a good ship. I designed her engines. She's as good a ship as there is. But I have someone aboard her. So naturally -"

He walked uneasily to a window and looked out. It was quiet and still and the innumerable lights of the spaceport - especially the half-mile-high landing grid - looked curiously lonely. But all places look lonely when night falls and there is no activity where everything was hustle and bustle during the day. During daylight there'd be cargo planes landing on and taking off the tarmac outside. There might be a space freighter aground, loading or unloading. Sometimes there'd be a liner on the tarmac inside the grid, putting off mail and passengers' baggage and fast-freight items, doing everything in a great hurry to get back to space and the long ship lanes again.

Horn looked up at the sky. The *Theban* had been locked on to the grid from an unusually low altitude, but it took time to bring her to ground. Horn knew it was very likely the tramp had come down some or all of the route the *Danae* was to traverse. The *Danae* had long since lifted off from Canna II. She'd have headed towards the Inner Rim. At Thotmes she'd have landed and lifted off again to thread her way through the Berylines. That was tricky astrogation, but the ship lane through was well surveyed and beacons. After landing on Wolkim for passengers and freight, she'd turn and come down the Rhymer passage and triumphantly to Formalhaut where Horn was waiting.

She should be safe in all this journeying, and Horn knew it; but he was nevertheless uneasy. It was the sort of unease a man gets when he knows something about space. It was Horn's profession to design space-drive engines. Designed, as such things were, for specific hulls, engines were no longer separate mechanisms but parts of the hull itself. And they were trustworthy. Space travel was recognized as safe. Even large financial institutions entrusted enormous sums in interstellar credit notes to space transportation. Which meant much more safety than passenger traffic required. When ships were trusted to carry money, they had to be safe indeed!

Nowadays ships didn't even carry engineer officers. They carried auxiliary drives instead. There hadn't been an engine failure in a modern ship in scores of years, and anyhow there weren't enough qualified men to ride uselessly through the void, waiting for accidents that didn't happen. So Horn wasn't worried about the *Danae's* drive. He worried about space itself.

Space wasn't empty. Accidents could happen despite totally trustworthy ship engines. The stellar population of the galaxy wasn't only bright and shining suns, warning passing ships of their existence and the planets and meteor streams that might circle them. There were dark stars too, and unfortunately they were much more numerous than bright ones. There were gravitational stresses, where space should be clear. There were dust clouds too small to be detected until a ship was almost upon them. And there were streams of meteorites in motion - it couldn't be said they were in orbit - between wholly separated suns.

So Horn worried. Ships did sometimes vanish in space as they did on planetary seas. Gravitational stresses corresponded to ocean currents throwing well-found ships off course. Minute dust clouds were like hidden rocks or shoals. And meteor streams were like icebergs or derelicts floating awash, into which ships could crash to their destruction. There were still definite dangers in between the stars. But disasters were rare. With surveyed ship lanes and beacons marking them, with patrollings of even the best known for new dangers that might develop, with elaborate systems of warnings to mariners of space - why travel between the stars was no more dangerous than ocean voyages had been back in the days of sailing ships.

But that was enough to make Horn worry, with Ginny on the way to marry him. When he thought of Ginny, his sensations were magnificent. So he worried, absurdly and to no purpose.

The grid operator was sitting upright now. A lot of the job of landing a ship was pure routine, but a careless operator could do plenty of harm. This man, though, was skilled. He did as little as possible, leaving all that he could to the grid itself. Still, there was a certain necessary deftness in the way he let the self-operating devices do the routine part, while he took over and with practised judgment did those parts that required a man's experience.

A great streak of light shot skyward. High, high up, there was a flicker of silvery reflection. It came down and down, enlarged, became an object with the powerful light beam following it. It was a ship. It landed. Then the blindingly bright lights dimmed and went out. The ship was a small, squat, battered tramp ship of space, antiquated in design and firmly fixed upon its landing fins.

An exit port opened. Three men came down the side ladder of the tramp. They reached the tarmac and moved towards the control office. The spaceport light cast a peculiar yellowish glow upon them.

"You're in for an argument," said Horn. "They're coming to insist on immediate repairs. It sounded that way, anyhow."

"So what?" demanded the operator. "Those characters come in from space when it's noon, ship time, but way before dawn at the spaceport here. If they have to wait, they have to wait!"

The three figures trudged towards the grid control office. The operator said, "One of 'em's carrying a walkie-talkie. What's that for?"

"Privacy," said Horn. "Anybody could pick up a ship-to-ground conversation. Maybe this skipper wants to have a very private chat with you. He may offer you a bribe."

The operator grunted. Again there was stillness all about the airport. Innumerable lights shone unwinkingly, their colour and steadiness contrasting with even the brightest of twinkling

stars in the sky overhead. The operator and the guards at the spaceport gate would be the only men on duty anywhere around. Horn was probably the only man inside the spaceport who wasn't there on night watch. He'd stopped to make a necessarily futile query about the *Danae*, because Ginny was aboard her. There was no visible movement anywhere except the three men trudging across the glistening black tarmac in the yellow glow of the spaceport lights.

There was a clicking voice. A recorded voice said, "Log entry?"

The operator said, "Log note: space tramp *Theban* requested emergency landing; reason, engine trouble. Engines apparently over-age and failing. Landed. That's all."

There was another click. The operator had proved himself awake on night watch and the landing of the *Theban* was recorded, with the time. The time the *Theban* was aground would be charged for, of course.

The three trudging figures were very near, below the office. They went out of sight. A buzzer reported them at the ground-floor door. The operator pressed the door-opening button. Footsteps sounded, coming up. A scowling red-haired man in soiled garments entered the office. He carried a walkie-talkie. Two even more soiled men followed him.

"I'm from the *Theban*," said the red-headed man truculently. "We're in a hurry. We need some repairs quick. I came to make a deal. How about some action?"

"Maybe you can get the action, come morning," said the operator, "but not earlier."

The red-headed man said, "We want it now. How much?"

"No deal," said the operator. "It's out of the question. And I can't lift you off again after an emergency landing without a survey of the repairs needed and done. Those are orders."

The red-headed man scowled. He repeated, "How much?"

Horn interposed. "I listened to the communicator while your drive was running. It's an old Riccardo drive, isn't it?"

The red-haired man stared at him coldly. "Yes. Riccardo. Type VI. What of it?"

"It's pretty old," said Horn mildly. "You should have an engineer aboard. When Riccardo drives were in use, every ship carried an engineer."

"We've got an engineer," said the red-headed man angrily. "He's no good. He says we need repairs he can't make."

"Judging by the noise those engines make," said Horn, "he's quite right. My guess would be that your phase separator is about gone. It's a complicated piece of equipment. It would take a very good man to do anything with it. If your engineer won't try to patch it, he's got sense. You'll find that even repair shops would rather work on modern engines. They know them better."

The red-haired man said truculently, "Who're you, you know so much?"

"His name's Horn," explained the operator. "He's a drive designer. He knows his stuff. Best man on this planet on space-drive engines."

"Yeah?" The red-headed man looked at Horn with scornful eyes. "What more d'you know?"

"Judging by the engines' sound," said Horn, "your drive probably started acting up three or four days ago. It made a whining noise. Your engineer may have been able to stop it, but later it started up again. Probably two days ago it got past adjustment and began to buzz. If that's

what happened, it'll never be right until it's had a complete overhaul, and that's no quickie job - even if you can find a repair shop that will try it. You may have trouble on that because Riccardo drives are so far out of date."

The red-haired man said, "Wait a minute." He raised the walkie-talkie to his lips. "Skipper? You heard that?"

Horn raised his eyebrows. The walkie-talkie had been in operation all along. The skipper of the just-landed tramp ship had heard his emissary - presumably his mate - argue with the operator; had heard all the conversation until now. The red-haired man said, "You heard it? What'll I tell him?"

Horn saw the threadlike wire that led to a subminiature earphone in the red-headed man's ear. The *Theban's* mate had been speaking under instructions. Now he got detailed orders.

"Skipper says," he reported to Horn, ignoring the operator, "come take a look at the engines and see if you can patch them up. They acted like you said. You know your stuff. Come take a look at them."

Horn shook his head. "No need. I heard them. You need a complete overhaul."

"How much just to take a look?" demanded the red-haired man. "Five hundred credits?"

Horn said, "I might patch it, but it'd fail again. And a patched job wouldn't pass survey anyhow. You couldn't get lifted off."

The red-haired man said, "A thousand?"

"No," said Horn. "Engines in the state yours are in could go any second, quick patch or no quick patch."

"Two?"

"No!" said Horn. "If the repair shop here needs help, I'll try to give it to them. But you need an overhaul."

"How much?" insisted the red-haired man belligerently.

"I simply won't do it," said Horn. "If you never reached port again, it would be my fault for helping you. I won't do it."

The red-haired man lifted the walkie-talkie again.

"Skipper?" He listened. He nodded. He lowered the instrument and said, "Skipper says skip it. You lose a good package of cash!" He turned towards the door, and then turned back. "Which way's the spaceport gate? Any place open for drinks on this hick planet?"

The grid operator gave him instructions. The red-haired man went out, followed by the two soiled men, who hadn't uttered a word since they entered the office. When they'd gone down the stairs the operator said peevishly, "Crazy! I'd lose my job and you'd lose your designer's licence if we broke regulations like he wants. What do they think we are?"

"Crazy," agreed Horn.

He went again to the window and looked across the tarmac at the just-landed ship. It was battered and antiquated. It might once have been a good ship of its kind, but that was a long time ago. The Riccardo drive had had one advantage in the early days of space travel: it was possible, at enormous cost in fuel, to make a landing and a lift-off where there was no landing grid. There were some legitimate uses for such ships, but not many. Those that survived had

mostly gravitated to very dubious ways. No more Riccardo drives were being made. But the *Theban* had probably seen some remarkable sights, and landed in some remarkable places, in her time. Now, though -

Horn shrugged. Nowadays ships went from scheduled port to scheduled port, and emergency rockets might let a ship down somewhere but would never lift it off again. And all explorations were made by the Space Patrol, and everything was law-abiding and commonplace. But it was curious that the *Theban* was in such urgent haste as to offer to bribe him to try to patch her engines for an illegal lift-off before dawn. It would have been a desperately risky business. For a moment or two Horn tried to guess what sort of emergency would make the *Theban's* skipper willing to take a chance like that. He couldn't think of one.

Then his mind went back to the subject that had occupied it most of the time these past few weeks: the *Danae*, of course, with Ginny on board, on her way to marry him. He turned away from the window.

"Where'd the *Theban* touch ground last?" he asked.

"Maybe Wolkem," the operator told him, "but I can't be sure. They'll report in last port and destination come morning, when the astrogation offices opens and they explain their emergency."

Horn shrugged. He continued to think of Ginny on the *Danae*, rather than the ship just landed.

"Anyhow, there's been no report of any new dangers to space mariners along the ship lane the *Danae's* using. Not at this end, anyhow."

"Not at this end, no," agreed the operator. "Your girl's all right. Quit worrying."

"I should," admitted Horn, "but a man doesn't get married very often. It's natural to worry some."

"You're making an occupation of it," grunted the operator.

Horn grimaced and went out, down the steps and towards the spaceport gate. There were no skimmers to hire, now when there were no ships scheduled to be in port. He had to walk. He might get a cruising night-owl skimmer at the gate to take him home.

All outdoors was still very quiet. There was a glow in the sky off to one side, where a city lay below the horizon. There was a feeling of vast emptiness, which the metal-lace structure of the grid emphasized. The only sound anywhere was the infinitely faint shrilling of insects whose ancestors had been brought from Earth centuries since when a terran ecological system was established here. It was a singular fact that living things from Earth invariably displaced native life systems when introduced on new worlds. There were people who considered this proof that mankind was destined to occupy all the universe, in time yet to come.

But Horn did not meditate on such abstractions. He headed for the spaceport gate, thinking about Ginny. They were peculiarly specific thoughts: the way she looked when she was absorbed in something, and the delight she could show when something pleased her. There were absurd mental pictures, of her making faces back at a child who'd made faces at her, of her playing with a dog. There was no system in the image sequence. He simply thought about Ginny and enormous emotions filled him.

It was a long way to the gate, but he was absorbed. He was almost surprised when the gateway loomed up ahead of him. He fumbled for the pass to be shown to the gate guards. They knew him, but there had to be a record of everyone passing through.

His footsteps echoed under the gate roof. Nobody came to take his pass and put it in the exit-recording machine. It was remarkable! Interstellar freight had to be protected, especially against pilferage. An unguarded spaceport gate was an invitation to theft. Patrons of the dives that clustered outside would react instantly to word that the gate was unattended. One needn't be a fanatic to be disturbed by such a prospect. Horn pushed open the door through which a guard should have come to record his pass. He went inside, and stumbled over something. It was a man, unconscious or dead - one of the guards. He saw another body on the floor.

Then he heard the waspish humming sound of a stun pistol. He felt the intolerable pins-and-needles pricking sensation of a stun-weapon beam. But he heard it and felt it for only the fraction of a second. In that moment, though, he raged. He knew what was happening, and why, and he wanted horribly to kill somebody - preferably a man with red hair and a truculent expression.

He felt himself falling.

Then he felt nothing.

CHAPTER TWO

HE came back to consciousness very gradually. At the beginning it was a dreamy and wholly tranquil sensation. He was aware that he existed, but he had the feeling of a disembodied spirit. His mind worked, but nothing came through his senses for it to work on. He was awake, but without sensory impressions to orient his thoughts. They were confused; not mixed, but dreamlike. He thought with extraordinary vividness but without direction. His mind seemed to go from one thing to another without sequence or purpose. There were flashing pictures, which were memories presenting themselves without arrangement. He smelled things. He saw things. He heard things - all of them totally irrelevant and meaningless. But a part of his mind observed his state. The feeling was like dreaming while knowing that one dreamed.

He vaguely resented the feeling, and he began to oppose it. The ability of his mind to contemplate itself and judge itself - exclusively a talent of the human race - directed the struggle. Horn battled to get his tranquil but kaleidoscopic thoughts under control. He had no distinct purpose, at first. He did not feel that he had a body. He had no immediate experience of possessing arms or legs or eyes or lips. He was a mind in emptiness, and his awareness raced crazily, at first ignoring the struggle of his will to subdue it.

Then he heard something. It was a peculiar jerking pause in a noise he hadn't noticed before. It was as if the noise had almost stopped. But it didn't. It caught and went on again. And then Horn was abruptly and totally awake. He had a body, and cold chills ran down the spine of it. He knew what had happened to him. Part of it he remembered, but the rest he could guess with no trace of uncertainty.

He was in absolute darkness, with the buzzing moan of a failing Riccardo space drive in his ears. He lay upon bales and boxes very indifferently arranged. Something sharp prodded the middle of his back. It would be the corner of a box. There were smells in the air. They were absolutely distinctive. There was the smell of grease and dirt and metal and paint, of shipping cases and wrappings, of things gone putrid and now dried to the point where they were nearly but not quite odourless. And the air had a dead smell. It was tanned air.

The remains of pins-and-needles pricklings were fading away in his legs and arms. He heard, again, the noise whose interruption had wakened him. It was an obsolete space-drive engine in the process of wearing out.

This was the cargo hold of a spaceship. Nowhere else in all the galaxy would there be such abysmal blackness and such a mixture of odours with dead, uncirculated, unfreshened air. He was struggling to rise from among cargo parcels dumped anyhow in the hold. He had been laid on them after being knocked out with a stun pistol in the spaceport gatehouse. The guards there had been either unconscious or dead. He did not remember being brought here, but he knew

he'd been abducted, and he knew by what men from what ship. He also knew the ship was in space, with its drive in a condition to make any man's flesh crawl.

No, he hadn't been abducted. He'd been shanghaied. A man has been shanghaied when he's been kidnapped to be made to work, against his will and at tasks he does not choose. He'd been shanghaied to patch the probably unpatchable engines of the space tramp *Theban*.

And the *Theban* was in space. It wasn't conceivable that the grid had lifted it off, so the tramp had taken off on emergency lift - possible only to Riccardo engines in spacecraft larger than a spaceboat - and now was somewhere beyond the Formalhaut solar system. The chances of a blown drive had been great. The skipper of the *Theban* had risked destruction to get off the ground with such engines.

Horn was in a very nasty fix. His captors had broken a whole group of laws; they couldn't put him ashore without exposing themselves to drastic prison terms. In fact, since it was known that the *Theban* had done what had been done, the ship itself couldn't land anywhere that the news of its irregular behaviour had reached. The patrol was very, very strict about such matters. And besides all that, the ship's engines were in an appalling state. If they blew past cobbling, Horn would die with his abductors when the air gave out.

And Ginny was on the way to Formalhaut to marry him. She'd arrive and find him gone.

He got up, and was dizzy for moments. But then the last prickling traces of the stun pistol's effect went away and he ground his teeth in the blackness. He began to crawl over the bales and boxes of unidentified cargo. The darkness was absolute. The dreary, nerve-racking noise of the wearing-out Riccardo drive came from all sides. Other ship noises came from the fabric of the ship.

Horn crawled, feeling his way, until he came to a metal plate which was the loading hatch in the side of the hold. He began to fumble purposefully to circumnavigate the enclosure which was his prison. He came to a corner and found a door, but it was dogged shut. He pressed his ear against it. It would be impossible to open it from this side, but it opened into the working parts of the ship.

He began to crawl over boxes and bales again, shaking those that could be moved. He found a box in which things shifted with the shaking. He broke the box open. It contained small heavy objects which he identified - guessing - as synthetic-sapphire-lined bearings for some sort of machinery. They'd be worth hundreds of credits apiece because of the beautiful precision of their manufacture. But to Horn they only had the value of being small heavy objects.

He dragged the box to a suitable position, and reassured himself of the position of the door. He sent a small five-pound piece of precision-made equipment crashing against it. It made a most satisfying impact. It echoed and re-echoed through the hold. It would definitely be hearable anywhere on the ship.

A second valuable bearing smashed furiously into the door. Synthetic-sapphire-lined bearings are tough. That, plus their precision, is where their value lies. But to be pitched like a fast baseball into a steel door is an unfair test of toughness. Horn threw another, and another, and another. Each time the noise was like that of an explosion. It was at least as loud as the impact of a sledge-hammer. It would have been noticeable even in a bulk cargo monster of a spaceship. In a ship the size of this, nobody could ignore it.

He had the box practically emptied, so he crawled forward in the blackness and gathered up an armful of the missiles to use over again. He began to throw them once more. Crash! Crash! Crash! Crash!

Someone rapped sharply on the other side of the door. Horn ceased his bombardment. A voice snapped, "What the hell's going on?"

"I want to get out of here," rasped Horn.

A pause; then: "Who the hell are you?" The voice seemed to force a pretence of fury. "A stowaway, eh?"

There was the sound of the door being undogged. The catch loosened. The door opened. The red-headed mate whom Horn had last seen in the spaceport control office appeared. He kicked aside the smashed bearings with a great show of rage.

"Stowaway, eh?" he repeated in a fine tone of menace. "And you want out of here, eh? We'll take care of you!"

Horn had reserved a missile. The light coming through the opened door was not strong, but he could see well enough. There were other figures in the passage outside. He let the five-pound bearing go. If it had hit the mate on the head it would have killed him. If he were hit on the chest, it would have broken his ribs. But it landed in the pit of the mate's stomach, and he folded neatly in the middle and went down, unable even to gasp.

Before the men in the passage could realize what had happened, Horn had pounced on the almost-unconscious mate and found a weapon. It was possibly the same stun pistol that had been used on him. For short ranges, though, a stun pistol is as effective as a blaster, and not nearly as messy.

Horn stood up, the weapon in his hand.

"Back up!" he barked. "I'm talking to your skipper! Move back! Keep ahead of me!"

He marched to the door and through it. The men in the passage had to move fast to keep out of his way. But it was wise to keep them busy thinking about what he might do to them, instead of letting them have time to think of what they could do to him. And besides, there were the engines. No spaceman could ignore the noise they made. It was enough and of just the right kind to provide a full supply of cold chills for the spines of everybody on board the ship.

He swore at the men, crowding them on before him. A steel ladder leading upwards was obviously part of the route to the ship's control room. The retreating, backing men parted and went past it.

"Stay below here!" rasped Horn. "You saw what happened to the mate!"

He went up the ladder with a convincing air of being a man thirsting to get at somebody up above. He went up a level and found himself in the crew's quarters. The next level up would be the galley, the messroom, and the food stores. He saw the galley and the counter where the standard coffee-at-all-hours was served. There was no ship anywhere in the galaxy on which coffee was not available at any time to anybody who wanted it. It was a tradition of space.

The ship's cook was in the galley, gazing at him with open mouth. Horn ignored the man and raced up another companion ladder. Here was the air bank and the air system. The engines' abnormal noise was louder here. The air freshener ran quietly. Horn raced up another ladder still. This was the driveroom, the engineroom of the ship. Horn took a quick, shrewd look about him. The Riccardo drive units were ten times the size of modern engines. They were obviously ancient and remarkably patched.

Horn saw the engineer, a small, scared, wizened man wearing a cap such as liner officers wear. But the gold braid was greenish, and no other part of his attire matched even such shabby

elegance. He looked at Horn with a startled air compounded of astonishment and fright. He needed a shave. He looked as if he had long since lost his pride as well as his competence. Horn guessed instantly that he was one of those pathetic survivors of their own usefulness who can be found clinging desperately to jobs they've lost the ability to fill.

Then Horn reached the control room level of the tramp ship. He went briskly in, his weapon out of sight. The skipper of the *Theban* whirled and stared at him.

Horn said, "I've been trying to figure out how you're going to handle the mess you're in, Captain. It looks like a pretty bad fix. What are your plans for getting out of it?"

The *Theban's* skipper heaved himself up and out of his chair. He stared almost unbelievably at Horn, who did not act as a man just awakened from kidnapping should act. He opened his mouth, but Horn forestalled him.

"I passed through the engineroom," said Horn in a matter-of-fact tone, "and it's a sight to make angels weep. This ship needs a new drive entirely. It's likely to blow on you at any instant. What the devil makes you take chances like this?"

"What - what -" The skipper roared. "Who the hell are you? Where'd you come from? If you're a stowaway -"

"Who the hell are you?" asked Horn distastefully. "The skipper of this junkheap, of course. But what else. You know who I am."

The skipper frowned at Horn. It was practically a grimace, and from a man four inches taller and forty pounds heavier it should have been daunting.

"My name's Larsen," he growled. "And if you're a stowaway, you go out an air lock!"

"But I'm not a stowaway," said Horn irritably, "and you know it as well as I do. Talk sense, man! How do you expect to get out of the fix you're in?"

The droning, buzzing noise of engines that should be shut down and overhauled was interrupted. For half a second the noise stopped. It was like a hiccough in the middle of a groan. Then the unpleasant buzzing went on once more. Horn shook his head. He hated to think of engines, even antiquated ones, being worked past the point where they needed attention. It seemed like cruelty.

The *Theban's* skipper swallowed suddenly. Then he swore. Horn said evenly, "Your engineer's sitting by the engines, waiting for them to crack up. When those little jumps happen, he's been catching the loss-of-cycle hitches. He gets them going again before they can ruin themselves. But he can't keep it up indefinitely!"

Larsen raged, "You go help him! Fix 'em! Get 'em so we can count on 'em!"

"Why?" asked Horn. He made his meaning clear. "What do I get out of it?"

Larsen glowered. He moved slowly and menacingly towards Horn.

"I'm going to knock you around," he announced ferociously, "until you wish you hadn't asked that! And then you'll get at those engines. And you'll fix 'em, because if you don't you go out an air lock. I've put men out of air locks before now. You'll just be the next one!"

Horn looked at him speculatively. He didn't retreat. He didn't cringe. His whole air was that of someone who doesn't exactly grasp what is going on, as Larsen's air was that of a man about to do something he heartily enjoys. He clenched his fists.

Then Horn jumped. He had hit Larsen twice before Larsen realized that anything had begun. He howled with wrath as Horn landed on him a third time; then he charged. His purpose was to get in close, but Horn was already working him over with fists and knees. This was no time for sportsmanship. Larsen was a rough-and-tumble man who outweighed Horn by a good forty pounds. He roared and clinched, and Horn flung the pair of them to the floor and broke the clinch that way. He was up first. This was when he heard the mate dragging himself up the companion ladder, his breathing a discordant honking sound. Horn tried for a knockout on Larsen, who was struggling to rise, but Larsen kicked and Horn's feet went out from under him and he toppled on top of his antagonist.

They were again in a deadly clinch when the mate came staggering and wheezing into the control room. He still gasped and choked, but he saw Horn apparently battling the *Theban's* skipper to the death and in a position of some advantage. He plucked up the stool beside the ship's computer.

He swung it viciously.

His intentions were of the worst, but only minutes since he'd had a five-pound sapphire-lined bearing hit him in the pit of his stomach. It had had most of the effect of a solar plexus wallop. That effect hadn't worn off. He'd climbed the companion ladders with tremendous effort, gasping futilely for breath. The blow was feeble. Moreover, it was ill directed. And a four-legged stool is not an accurate weapon anyhow.

Horn got a glancing blow alongside his skull. The skipper took the rest. Horn got to his feet, panting, and swung with all the strength he could summon. The red-headed mate went down. He wasn't out completely, but he was no longer a dangerous antagonist.

Horn panted and swallowed, and then he went out of the control room. A moment later he put his head back in.

"You two," he said reasonably, "ought to take time to think things over. If you did manage to kill me, how would you keep your engines running? I'm going down to look at them now."

He went down to the next level. The wizened small engineer looked at him somehow desperately. He sat tensely by the cycle separator, which parted the power going to the Riccardo coils into two direct-current pulsatory signals, pulsing exactly one hundred and eighty degrees out of phase with each other. In a brand-new Riccardo drive it was perfectly foolproof and completely dependable. But in use the phasing coils aged, and they did not age exactly alike. There was a point where differential ageing couldn't be compensated for. A ship's engineer wouldn't let them go past that point, in the days when ships carried engineers and Riccardo drives were the best to be had. In those days new coils were put in during overhaul. But there were no longer many places where outmoded drives could be serviced. They were very, very rare indeed.

"How long have you been standing by like this?" asked Horn, professionally.

The ratty little man said, "Thirty-six hours," in a hopeless voice.

"Since before the landing on Formalhaut," observed Horn. "You're pretty tired. All right. I'm relieving you."

"But-but -"

"You'll be missing the cycle breaks presently," said Horn, "because you'll be too tired to catch them. When you miss one, everything will blow. Get up!"

The little man got up, apprehensively. Horn took his place.

"Tell the cook to send me some coffee," he commanded, "and then get some sleep. Not too much! You'll have to take over again."

The engineer shook visibly. He was frightened, but also he was exhausted. He was in a state where he was liable to commit errors from pure fatigue. He said desperately, "But the skipper -"

"The skipper got me on board to tinker with the engines," said Horn. "It's all right. You get the cook to send me some coffee, and get some rest. Then come back."

Trembling, the engineer went away. Then Horn examined the engines. In the process of training to become a designer of space drives, he'd necessarily learned the history of space engines. He'd absorbed the facts of life about earlier varieties, from those primitive rockets with which men accomplished the incredible, to the Dirac drive which carried the first interstellar ship from one solar system to another. And since Riccardo engines had contained the germs of modern drives, Horn had learned their eccentricities in the process of coming to understand current drives which didn't have drawbacks.

He muttered to himself as he inspected the *Theban's* engines. There'd been a complete, functioning Riccardo drive where he'd had his technical training. He could compare this seemingly disintegrating mass of patches on patches with his memory of how such a drive had been in the beginning. He could see what had happened. There'd been a series of owners and engineers of the *Theban*. There were repairs, some done decently and with thoroughness; those were early ones. But there were some that were strictly emergency repairs, never properly replaced by other than emergency materials. They weren't altogether right, and they had side effects producing new emergencies, and these had side effects too. In effect, to Horn the *Theban's* engines looked as if they'd been mended with strings and glue and the mendings were beginning to fall apart.

Swearing to himself, he did a trivial something here and something else there. One unstable patching job became a little more stable. He reworked an especially perilous temporary repair that should have been replaced at the first possible spaceport. There was a place where two wires at some past time had arced and broken, and the severed ends simply twisted together without even a plastic conductor between them. It appeared miraculous that none of these inadequate patchings had failed before now. The *Theban* couldn't have had a real engine overhaul in decades.

Presently the red-haired mate came down the companion ladder from the control room. He saw Horn at the engines, and his jaw dropped. He climbed hastily back up to the control room. Seconds later he reappeared with Larsen, the skipper. Horn nodded absent-mindedly at them. It was the one reaction neither of the two could have imagined beforehand. Horn at the engines could be a guarantee of temporary survival. But on the other hand -

"What're you doing there?" growled Larsen.

"I relieved the engineer," said Horn. "He was about to crack up from lack of sleep."

"Lack of liquor, most likely," growled Larsen. "You've got the engines running right?"

"Listen to them," said Horn gently. "Do they sound right? No. I haven't patched them up. I'm finding out what's wrong with them. And I'm waiting for a deal."

He didn't refer to the combat in the control room. Larsen looked malevolent. The red-haired mate looked vengeful but scared. They were in a situation they hadn't planned. Horn had given

proof that he wasn't an ordinary, terrifyable sort of man. If he could be scared, he might have been browbeaten into obeying orders. But it was explicit in his behaviour that he could not be cowed. He was a prisoner on the *Theban*, but in a sense the *Theban* was at his mercy. He might be forced to make repairs, but only he could tell whether they were repairs or not. The *Theban's* own engineer couldn't tell. So threats to Horn could mean only so much. But if he repaired the engines permanently, his captors would have no reason not to kill him, and motives of prudence to do so. So it wasn't likely he'd get the engines far from the edge of disaster. He had to be placated and kept placated - but he'd know his captors would never quite dare to release him. It wasn't an easily resolvable problem.

Larsen swore.

"What'd d'you mean a deal? What kind of deal?"

"You figure one out," said Horn pleasantly, "and I'll listen to it. You want this scrapheap fixed up. I suppose you've something specific in mind, or you'd have stayed aground on Formalhaut for repairs. But you didn't. I can make these engines stagger along for a strictly limited length of time. So far I haven't done that, and I won't unless I have reason to. I want to get off this ship and you want it in good working order. You figure out a deal that will satisfy both of us, and I'll listen to it."

Larsen's face grew purple. Horn's infuriating assumption that terms must be made with him - and the fact that he had a good argument - reignited his burning fury over the battle in the control room and its unsatisfying conclusion. He took one step towards Horn.

Horn did something Larsen didn't see. The moaning sound of the engines rose in pitch and volume until it was like a shriek. Then Horn made gestures, and seemingly agitated adjustments, while the purplish tint of Larsen's face faded to a sickly pallor. The red-headed mate made an indecisive movement as if about to wring his hands.

Finally Horn appeared to get the cause of the noise in hand. With an air of complete, tense absorption, he shifted controls. The shriek decreased in loudness and then went down in pitch, and presently the sound of the engines was almost what it had been before. But there was a new, warbling, burbling sound added to what had been heard before.

Horn wiped off his forehead as if it were wet with sudden cold sweat. Larsen and the red-haired mate stood frozen in their tracks.

"That," said Horn, "was close! I really think you'd better get this ship aground somewhere and let me do a little real work on those engines. And while you're doing that, you might figure out a deal to justify my helping you."

He nodded, but again seemed to wipe sweat off his face. Then he added, "And you might tell the cook to send me some coffee."

He leaned back in his seat with an air of vigilance, seeming to pay no more attention to the two at the foot of the companion ladder. Instead, he frowningly listened to the slightly changed noise of the engines.

Larsen muttered to the mate, then turned and went back up to the control room. The mate went below to the galley. Horn did not turn his head.

A little later the cook came up with coffee. There was also a plate with food on it. Horn accepted it abstractedly. The cook said uneasily, "That noise just now - what happened?"

"We almost had it," said Horn, "but I caught it in time. These engines are in horrible shape! Running them anywhere except to a repair shop is just plain crazy."

The cook licked his lips. There'd been space travel for a long, long while now, but there were still cases of ships vanishing in space. Between spaceports the distance might be only days of journeying in overdrive, but in miles it was billions or trillions. And a ship which became helpless in space through the failure of its engines couldn't even hope to be found again. Its crew were dead the instant the failure occurred, though they might move about and go mad from despair.

Or they could take to the boats, of course. But that wasn't necessarily much better. Lifeboats didn't carry enough air for space journeys of indefinite length. Or enough fuel, either.

"Do you think you can keep the engines running?" asked the cook uncertainly.

"I can keep them going longer than your engineer can," said Horn. "But how long that will be, or when time will run out, I can't tell you."

The cook shivered. "The skipper's a tough man. When he starts to do something -"

"Keeping these engines going is a tough job," said Horn.

The cook licked his lips. "We're headed for Hermas now. Will we get there?"

Horn grunted. "Hermas? Why? It's only a beacon. There was a manned station on it once, but they pulled the crew off long ago. Why go there?"

The cook watched as Horn sipped his coffee. "We were goin' there before. We landed at Carola, and we was goin' to land on Hermas, but the engines acted up. The engineer said he couldn't fix 'em. The skipper beat the devil outa him when he said we had to go to Formalhaut for repairs. But we went. Then we couldn't get the repairs quick enough, so you got picked up to make 'em. Now we're headin' back. The skipper's in a hurry. He took a chance on you to save time."

Horn stiffened. Carola and Herinas were beacon planets on the ship lane the *Danae* would follow to Formalhaut. Ginny would be on the *Danae*, and he'd be on Hermas when her ship went by. But Larsen was in a furious hurry to get to Hermas by the time the *Danae* did pass by. It could be coincidence, but Horn was suspicious of fate and destiny, which had promised him Ginny to be with for always, and could mock him -

Why should Larsen want the *Theban* at a particular place the *Danae* would pass, at exactly the time the *Danae* should go by? And why had the *Theban* landed on Carola? "What are you going to Hermas for?" demanded Horn. "Or Carola? They're beacons, nothing more. They're uninhabited; there's nothing to go there for. And what's the hurry?"

The cook said uneasily, "The skipper don't do things without a good reason."

He went away, more than a little scared by Horn's refusal to guarantee the engines' indefinite operation. He vanished down the ladder to the air room and the galley below that.

Horn found himself tense all over. He'd been worried about Ginny before he was shanghaied. He'd imagined things happening to the *Danae*, and hence to Ginny, all along the light years of distance between every port and beacon of the ship lanes the *Danae* would follow. Even the fact that he'd been shanghaied had been more enraging because it meant he wouldn't be at the spaceport to meet Ginny. He'd considered his own danger as a possible cause of distress to Ginny. But this suggested that Ginny was in greater danger than himself!

He couldn't be sure of it, of course. It might be pure accident that a skipper who wouldn't stop at kidnapping had plans for which he risked the lives of everybody aboard his ship, and that those plans required him to be at a place at the time Ginny passed by it. It could be coincidence and nothing more. But Horn had even been worrying about the normal risks of interstellar travelling for Ginny. It was inevitable that he would feel a desperate anxiety now.

It was actually something to worry about. The *Danae* would normally break out of overdrive both at Carola and at Hermas. She wouldn't land on either, of course. They were simply the beacons on one of the space lanes that had been surveyed and declared safe for space traffic. There were neither meteor streams nor dust clouds along this path. There were no dark stars to be watched for.

So ships followed those lanes with pious care, painstakingly coming out of overdrive at each beacon to verify that they were on course and - should any new danger have developed - to receive recorded warnings of it. There were beacons on inhabited worlds as well as on planets of no other use to humanity. Each beacon was fuelled for years and steadily sent out signals, by Wrangel waves, which could be picked up by a ship even in overdrive. The *Danae* would depend on such planet falls to be assured of its safety on the way. But the *Theban* -

Larsen had violated spaceport rules in taking off from Formalhaut without clearance. He'd violated other laws by kidnapping Horn. And there were the guards at the gate, and perhaps the grid operator. He'd done these things to be where the *Danae* would pass, at the time when it would come out of overdrive.

Horn's flesh crawled. He was not unduly disturbed by the knowledge that Larsen must plan to kill him rather than let him report his abduction. Temporarily, though, Larsen needed him alive and nursing the engines. But Horn dismissed his own situation because he was frantically absorbed in trying to figure out Larsen's plan as it affected Ginny.

Larsen came down the companion ladder from the control room. He scowled at Horn. "Look here!" he rasped. "You want a deal? Okay, try this. Join up with us in this business I'm working, and there'll be two million credits in it for you. Two million! The rest's for us. You keep the engines going, and you get two million in interstellar credit notes when we're a month's ship run away from Hermas. That's the deal. I'm giving you the engineer's cut. He's no good; he goes out an air lock sooner or later. How about it?"

Horn pretended to think it over. "I'll let you know," he said with some reserve. "Let me find out what shape the engines are in. And I'd better know what the business is."

Larsen clenched and unclenched his hands. "Take it or leave it!" he rasped. "But first figure out what happens if you leave it."

He went up the companion ladder. Horn felt as if he were growing very pale. It wasn't likely that Larsen would keep any bargain with a man he'd shanghaied, and who could make trouble for him if he talked. But the offer was almost mockingly extravagant. In fact, it was incredible. There were many supposedly respectable men who would commit any crime for a lot less than two million credits. And Horn already had an idea that on the *Theban* the price of a murder would be very much less. Very, very much less!

The value of the lives on the *Danae*, including Ginny's wouldn't be much either. Not the way Larsen would look at it.

CHAPTER THREE

It was a three days' run from Formalhaut to Hermas. Horn had been unconscious for the first few hours from a stun pistol bolt received at the spaceport gate. But an hour after recovering consciousness he'd become the unofficial but actual engineer of the *Theban*, and was supposedly considering the former engineer's cut of an undescribed enterprise. It was understood that the small man would go out of an air lock for his incompetence. It was an atmosphere and a set of values Horn wasn't used to. But the *Theban* wasn't used to his way of thinking, either.

He stood watch over the engines. At appropriate intervals the cook brought him food and coffee. When he asked questions he got noncommittal answers. The *Theban* sped towards Hermas on an errand about which Horn could get no definite clues. Other members of the crew dropped by occasionally to talk. They were afraid of Larsen, yet they were oddly proud of being members of his crew. They regarded Horn as a permanently enlisted member of their group.

Some considered that, having been chosen by Larsen, Horn should be filled in on the traditions, manners, and customs of the *Theban*. There was no crime not proudly claimed as part of the legendry of the space tramp, and Horn was expected to admire these practices. But there were one or two crew members who doubted that Horn realized why he must obey Larsen under any imaginable set of circumstances. They explained the monstrous sadistic pleasure Larsen took in brutality. They described in detail the battering any recalcitrant crew member might expect for failure in his duty. None of them quite grasped what Larsen angrily accepted - that the continued running of the *Theban's* engines depended on Horn's good will. He couldn't be driven.

On the second day of the drive towards Hermas, the engineer reappeared with a ghastly hangover. He jittered over the state of the engines. He was shocked that they were neither better nor worse than they had been. He searched desperately for changes in the multitude of emergency repair jobs by which the drive had been kept running until now. He found some, but they were unimportant. He thought there were others, but he could not be sure.

His eyes red-rimmed and his hands shaking, he said fearfully, "You - you didn't find the engines' trouble, did you?"

"I didn't need to," said Horn. "I knew the trouble before you landed on Formalhaut. Your phase separator is shot."

"But what'll you do?"

"That depends," said Horn. "Larsen's made me an offer of your cut of the job on hand if I keep the engines going through whatever's done and for a month's getaway run afterward."

The engineer had looked frightened before; now he seemed to shrivel. He gazed at Horn in terror. "Wha - what did you tell him?"

"I stalled," said Horn. "I don't know what I'm supposed to help get done. Nobody seems willing to tell me."

The smaller man's face worked. "They can't. Larsen's a - a very smart man. He doesn't let anybody know what's doing until everybody's up to his neck in it and can't back out. Larsen's been running the *Theban* for a long time. He's done things -"

"So I gather," said Horn dryly. "If a fraction of what I've been told could be proved on him, they'd have to hang him every morning for ten years running to even the account."

"He's - he's a tough man," said the small man, shivering. "I've known him to beat a man to death -"

The engine noise changed subtly. He gasped. Horn made a minute adjustment and the noise went back to its former buzzing, moaning, occasionally bubbling sound. The engineer stared, trying to see what Horn had done.

"These engines," said Horn matter-of-factly, "are a mess of halfway repairing of worn-out parts. I'm going to fix some of them when we get aground. Some, not all! And I'll add a little gimmick or two so that any time I'm absent from the engine room for a full twenty-four hours the engines will blow permanently. That's for my own safety. If you find something like that," he added pleasantly, "I warn you you'll have to know just the right way to disconnect it. Meddling will make the engines blow immediately."

The engineer licked his lips. "You don't trust me. Or anybody." He paused. Then he said in a trembling voice, "I - I need a drink."

Horn nodded. The engineer went unsteadily away. His whole career was epitomized in the few minutes of talk with Horn. He could be terrified, and he knew it, but he tried to escape the knowledge. He'd escaped temporarily when Horn took over the engines, but by the time he came back Horn had been offered his job on the *Theban*. Yet he knew too much to be allowed to go ashore. He'd heard his death sentence - not pronounced by Horn, but implied by what had happened. So he'd try to escape that knowledge. But the escape would be temporary too.

Horn clamped his teeth. Other members of the crew would not talk about the purpose of the *Theban*. If the engineer was right, they couldn't. Only Larsen knew what was happening now. Horn wanted to find out, but he knew only that the *Theban* would be at Hermas when the *Danae* passed by.

Ginny was on the *Danae*. She should be perfectly safe. The *Theban's* business with the intercluster liner was past imagining. Piracy was too absurd to be credited. The *Danae* would come out of overdrive near Hermas, to be sure. But "near" was a relative term. Nobody could guess within a million miles where she'd break out into normal space. She'd stray out of overdrive just long enough to verify her course and position. That might take one minute, or two. Then she'd go back into overdrive and hurtle on to Formalhaut.

This was standard astrogation. There could be no trickery involved. In overdrive the liner could not conceivably be attacked. Nothing could be done, either, in the minute or two she'd be out of overdrive for her course-and-position check. If Larsen's plan involved the *Danae*, emptiness was still so vast that the *Theban* couldn't hope to get even a glimpse of the liner before it was gone again, in perfect safety.

Horn left the engineroom to drink coffee with the crew. They were not a happy group. Space drives, even outdated Riccardo engines, should be perfectly silent. These engines were noisy, ominously so. They were louder, now, than at the beginning, which indicated that whatever was wrong was getting worse. Also it had changed from the original nagging hum to a buzzing, burbling whine. And since Horn had been aboard a bubbling component had been added.

Every man who drank coffee wanted to ask about the engines. Horn told them, with precision. The phase separator was in bad shape. The Riccardo coils had aged past accurate adjustment. There was corrosion in the drive plates so that they ran hot and produced thermals which ultimately would coincide. He preferred, said Horn, not to think what would happen then. Besides, there were some circuits that simply ought to be replaced. If one knew everything that was wrong, it was possible to humour the engines a little. But there might be deficiencies he hadn't found out yet. The ship's engines needed a complete overhaul.

Each of his statements was strictly accurate, in case one of the crew members had picked up a few shreds of engineroom information. The men he talked to grew fidgety and tense, and listened fearfully to the engines. They imagined changes in the sound. Horn built up their apprehensions to the point where panic was not too far away. But there was no hint of protest by the men to Larsen.

On the second day of the run towards Hermas, the engines stopped abruptly, without warning. There were no lights. There was no gravity. The air-freshening system stopped. The ship lay dead in space - normal space - but it was not even possible to see the stars, because naturally all outside observations were made with scanners.

There was panic. Larsen raged. He was a bellowing voice in blackness, until Horn snapped icily for somebody to bring cargo lights. Men struck lights, and other men cursed them for using up the air with flames. But somebody found a cargo light, used for occasional errands in the holds. Then the cook held the light while Horn adjusted this control and that, appearing to try one expedient after another.

All the crew gathered. Wide, terrified eyes seemed to glitter in the cold white light of the cargo lamp. Larsen bellowed furiously that Horn didn't know what he was doing, and they should bring the engineer.

They brought him - weightless, waving his hands feebly, dead drunk and incapable of any purposeful action.

Larsen would have killed him, except that Horn said in an indifferent tone, "Stand back, now. I'm going to start the engines."

They flapped and pushed and struggled in the total absence of weight. They cast distorted shadows against the engineroom walls and the absurdly huge drive engines of the *Theban*. When the last of them had a hand hold, Horn threw a switch.

The engines began to run again. The sound which had been nerve-racking and horrifying because it could stop at any instant began again. There was light. There was gravity. There was the sound of the air freshener at work again. And the crew of the *Theban* could have wept with relief.

When the ship's company had gone away, still shivering because of their taste of doom, Horn surveyed in his own mind the result of turning off the engines. He'd done it deliberately, to impress upon Larsen and the others that their lives depended on him. He'd hoped to gain a certain status by being the ultimate and only hope of the *Theban's* crew.

He had proved he was necessary, but more - much more - would need to be done before Horn would be obeyed against the orders of Larsen. And he didn't think he'd have time to build up the frantic dependence upon himself that might be needed.

Grimly, he recognized that the best he could do, if there were some extraordinary scheme afoot for the seizure of the *Danae*, would be to destroy the *Theban's* engines actually, instead of merely turning them off. Then he'd die with the *Theban's* crew. But it might be necessary.

The *Theban* bored on again through space. Larsen stayed in the control room or in his cabin adjoining it. Crewmen, coming apprehensively to ask Horn how the engines seemed to be doing, gave increasing signs of uneasiness about something other than the engines. Larsen sometimes went into black moods when he shut himself up for days on end and then came out halfway a maniac, looking for trouble. He invariably found it. The man on whom he loosed his fury was not to be envied.

The engineer would most likely be the one he'd pick on this time, though. His incompetence was such that, if the *Theban* had stayed dependent on him, it would now be a dark and helpless derelict, without gravity or lights or even a working air system to prevent the stifling of all on board. They'd have had to take to the lifeboats, if those were in condition to be used. But Horn had his doubts about them.

In the rest of the run to Hermas, the engines themselves made one demonstration of their insufficiency. Quite without any preliminary sign, the buzzing and humming and burbling of the engines gave place to a high pitched, whistling shriek. Horn wasn't in the engineroom at the time, but in seconds he was swarming over the drive, stopping it - except for the auxiliary apparatus - just before a newly formed blister on a main drive condenser plate could short that condenser and set every element in the drive blowing out in sequence.

It took four hours to disassemble the condenser and scrape every plate and get the ship back in overdrive again. Then Larsen came growling to him.

"I don't like you," he said ferociously. "I think you faked that breakdown!"

Horn stared at him. It was ironic; the engines were in bad shape, but this was the only actual breakdown that had happened since he'd been aboard.

"But," growled Larsen savagely, "you do know your stuff. So I'm changing that deal I offered you. I'll make a better one. Plenty better! You're working with me from now on. You don't have to fake any more. I'll tell you presently what the deal is. But no more fakes!"

Horn opened his mouth to speak, then closed it. He shrugged his shoulders. Larsen was practically beside himself, and it was no time to make bargains or refuse them. Larsen was obviously in the state of mind which terrified his crewmen. He was ready to do murder, out of some inner need for the monstrous. At such a time he might lose all sanity and kill anybody, including Horn. And Horn needed to stay alive a while yet, until after the *Danae* had passed Hermas and was on the way to Formalhaut.

But if threats from Larsen resulted in an end of troubles with the engines, Horn would lose what ascendancy he had over the rest of the ship's company. It wasn't much, but he might need it. So he made one last demonstration to certify that the engines' failures and eccentricities were not of his devising, but that he could control them as nobody else could.

The *Theban* came out of overdrive for landing. The sun around which Hermas revolved was within a reasonable distance. Hermas itself was in plain view. And then a gravelly, grumbling,

grating sound came from the engines. It sounded as if good-sized pebbles were being ground to powder between toothed rollers.

Crewmen came climbing agitatedly to see if Horn considered their situation hopeless. He sat by the engines, undisturbed. Larsen appeared, ready to rage.

"What the hell's that?" he demanded.

"Nothing to worry about," said Horn, tranquilly. "It'll stop by itself. I know what it is."

He did nothing whatever, and presently the noise did stop. And from that time on the members of the *Theban's* crew regarded him with an uneasy confidence. The engines still made noises. This was the only ship in all the galaxy in which a space crew accepted alarming noises from the engine room as an almost normal part of their lives. But if anything happened to Horn they'd panic immediately.

The *Theban* made for Hermas. It was actually Hermas II, but there were no occupied worlds in its solar system. Gradually the inadequate world grew large and its alternating spots of green and brown vegetation organized themselves into continents and islands. Marshy seas could be detected, and the cloud masses took on the look of familiar weather patterns. At the time of the *Theban's* approach the beacon happened to be near the sunrise line, and by the time they touched ground it was mid-morning.

The ship settled to the wide expanse of cleared soil around the beacon. The beacon itself was a standard, fluorescent-plastic, highly visible cone, fuelled for years to come and safe against all possible varieties of climate and weather. The landing place was large and barren; it had been sprayed to prevent anything growing there. But there were infinitesimal, lacy, red-brown plants that had adapted to the poisonous spray and grew triumphantly to a height of not less than two inches.

There were buildings, too. Hermas had been a manned space station once. It still rated - as did all beacons - as a commerce refuge, and though the structures that once had housed a staff of observers were now battered and crumbling, the cache of stored food and the underground tank of emergency lifeboat fuel were intact and plainly marked. If a ship had to be abandoned and its crew had to take to the lifeboats, and if they could make their way to a beacon planet, they'd find food to sustain them and fuel with which to attempt a further journey.

Horn inspected this part of Hermas from the exit port. Larsen tapped his shoulder. Crew members stood behind him, some carrying tools.

"You!" said Larsen coldly. "The ship's running all right for now. Come ashore and get some fresh air."

Horn had taken certain precautions. He didn't think Larsen would risk a lift-off without him aboard, but he'd taken measures anyhow. The *Theban* couldn't lift off to carry out any enterprise whatever without Horn's assistance.

"This is a vacation?" asked Horn mildly.

"Call it that!" rasped Larsen. "Sure, call it that. There'll be some fun!"

Larsen's idea of fun might be eccentric, but Horn went outside. The look of this world was unfamiliar. There were, of course, the acres of deliberately barren ground around the beacon. The vegetation beyond that space might be called forest and brushwood. Some of it was green, and some of it the reddish-brown of some ornamental plants on Formalhaut. The crumbling buildings which had housed a lonely crew of Space Patrol personnel now looked utterly bleak

and deserted. The lurid, fluorescent-plastic cone of the beacon itself did not look like anything anybody could make use of. Horn saw the beacon's transmitter cage, sending Wrangel waves tirelessly and monotonously to the limit of its range. For probably the millionth time, it sent its identification signal out to space.

"*Hermas beacon. Hermas beacon. Co-ordinates -*" It gave its own galactic position. "*Unmanned refuge. Beacon only. Hermas beacon.*"

That signal had tripped the relay which brought the *Theban* out of overdrive, in this particular case for a landing no ship ordinarily passing by would think of. It was not audible except to a Wrangel-wave receiver, of course, and Horn heard no sounds except wind and the rustling of the highly peculiar foliage of the larger plants. They would be called trees only because of their size. Except for their height and grouping, nobody would ever think of them as forests.

Larsen led what appeared to be a working party away from the ship, over to the abandoned structures. Horn had no reason to join them. He sat down and considered his surroundings and his situation. He was grimly apprehensive, but of what he could not imagine. On his own account he had no immediate worries, though later he might have plenty. But he had a stun pistol neither Larsen nor the mate had tried to recover. So long as he kept the engines running, they'd be wary of interfering with him. But he had no illusions of safety.

Larsen, of course, would keep to his offered bargain only so long as he had to. Much was now self-evident about the *Theban*. The tramp ship could have no legitimate errand in view. She could not land at any official spaceport. No ship with engines sounding like the *Theban's* would ever be lifted off by a landing grid. Only desperate men would entrust their lives to such a scrap heap anyhow. If the *Theban* landed anywhere under pretence of normal commerce, the Space Patrol would investigate her. And the *Theban* couldn't take investigation.

But Horn did not think too much about his own prospects. He was savagely prepared to do any conceivable thing to ensure Ginny's safety. If he could keep the *Theban* aground until the *Danae* was safely past this beacon, he could then devote all his thought and energy to arranging his own situation in such a way that he could rejoin Ginny on Formalhaut. But first he must keep the *Theban* from carrying out her as yet unknown but certainly undesirable intentions, which most likely concerned the *Danae*.

He heard crashings, and saw the working party from the *Theban* busy at something. Axes were swinging. Horn stared and then was incredulous. The fluorescent-covered storage pit of supplies for shipwrecked space mariners was being broken open. It didn't have to be smashed; any man could open it. But it was being hacked to bits.

Men jumped down into the underground cache. Axes rose and fell again. They were chopping at the contents of the emergency-stores shelter, ruining the preserved foodstuffs. They were exposing them to the air, to moulds, to putrefactive bacteria, to decay, to spoliation, to destruction. There was no imaginable value in the action. It was pure wanton crime committed against any starving spaceboat fugitives who might come to ground on Hermas to restock their boat for a hazardous attempt to reach Formalhaut in one direction, or the beacon Carola in the other.

There was a whimper behind him. The engineer said, "Are they - looking this way?" The voice was nerve-racked. It showed trembling terror. "Are they - can I - get away?"

Without turning his head, Horn said evenly, "They're destroying the emergency food stores. They seem to be enjoying themselves. I don't see anybody looking this way."

There was a rustling sound. Horn did not turn to look. The rustling went in panicky haste around to the other side of the grounded ship. It went away, racing for the tall vegetation on beyond. Horn heard a faint clanking noise. The engineer was in such terror of Larsen that he'd fled the ship and marooned himself on an uninhabited planet which nobody would have reason to visit except once in a decade or so to refuel its beacon. But the clanking said that he'd carried with him bottles of the stuff he counted on to make life endurable. He hadn't carried food; it was unlikely he'd carried weapons. But he couldn't have carried many bottles, either, knowing the need to run and run until he was past the fear of being overtaken.

Horn stood up and moved away from the ship. It had been accepted by the crew that Larsen would commit enormities upon the engineer, when he came out of his cabin after days of black brooding and in a mood to commit murder. If the engineer preferred flight, it was not Horn's affair. He was coldly determined upon one point only - to defeat whatever might be the enterprise Larsen had in mind against the *Danae*.

He strolled over to the beacon cone, not wanting to watch the destruction of food put ashore for castaways. There were two men digging, close to the cone. They nodded to him.

"What goes on?" he asked in a carefully unemotional tone.

"The skipper's orders. Here we are!"

A tool had found a tank, buried three feet down. They cleared a space on it, then got out of the hole. The man who had spoken swung an axe and flinched as he struck. There was a loud hissing sound and the intolerable reek of ship fuel. A fluid bubbled up out of the hole the axe had made. Boiling furiously, it filled the air with a whitish vapour. Ship fuel was normally a gas, made liquid by pressure of an atmosphere or two. It dissolved in the fuel cells of a ship or lifeboat and produced electricity by a complicated displacement degradation reaction which yielded energy and ultimately a waxy substance that floated on fuel cell surfaces. The gas enabled a ship to carry more energy than any other non-nuclear system of energy supply, and it could be reconstituted - by surplus electric power drawn down by a landing grid from the sky. It was one of the reasons modern ships did not need to carry engineers to oversee power production as well as space engines.

Horn said nothing. It was too late. The destruction of food left for possible survivors of a shipwreck was an accomplished fact. It was senseless, purposeless crime against total strangers. Now the fuel stored for such survivors was destroyed, too. That made even less sense.

Larsen called. The two crewmen moved towards him, and Horn followed more slowly. He tried to fit this senselessness into some sort of pattern which justified Larsen's risking his own life and that of all his crew in the crazy, battered *Theban*; which justified the kidnapping of Horn himself; and which involved a rendezvous with the liner *Danae*.

"Now," said Larsen zestfully, "now we'll have some fun! Go get him!"

Three men made for the ship. They didn't seem eager, but they went. And Horn knew what they went for. Larsen had slipped his belt from about his waist. It had a heavy buckle which he whipped back and forth. Grinning, he turned to Horn, but there was no amusement in his eyes. They were blank and black and expressionless.

"You'll enjoy this!" said Larsen in a tone that was somehow horribly anticipative. "He's supposed to be an engineer, but he let the engines go. He was drunk when they started to blow. We'd all be dead if we had to depend on him!" He grinned again, but it was a grimace. He was deliberately allowing himself to become filled with murderous rage, and the jerking of the

heavy belt buckle at the end of its strap grew savage and abrupt. "I don't let men in my crew get slack. When they let their work go, I let them know it! I - let - them - know - it! He'll know, when I'm through with him!"

One of the three men who'd gone to the ship appeared in the entrance port. He called. Horn caught words;

"... not here ... run off..."

Larsen swore. Then he ordered, "Go get him! Track him down! Get him!"

He did not raise his voice, but his tone was deadly. Horn carefully and unobtrusively made sure he had the stun pistol where he could draw it easily. He watched the other crew members move to obey, and considered what might happen next. It was obviously Larsen's intention to flog the engineer as ship captains back in the age of sail, half a thousand years ago, used to do. But Larsen didn't look like a man preparing even zestfully to enforce discipline. He looked like a man lustfully anticipating murder.

Horn shook with sudden fury. His overwhelming obligation was to Ginny on the *Danae*, and he must not do anything that would place her in danger. But there are some things no man can stand by and watch.

He heard shouting behind the screen of tall growths, and wondered sardonically if men who pretended to search were actually warning the fugitive to hide. But the engineer could not have fled very far, especially if he'd burdened himself with too many of the bottles that helped him to forget, temporarily, what he'd become.

Then there were louder shouts. Men appeared at the edge of the semi-jungle. The *Theban's* red-haired mate called triumphantly. He'd found the engineer, squatted in thick foliage, trying desperately to become unconscious before he was found. His only operating instinct seemed to be flight from the terrors of his situation, rather than from the situation itself.

The mate dragged the small figure towards Larsen. Horn suddenly knew that he couldn't stand by while the little man was killed by Larsen with a buckle-loaded belt. The odds were enormous that he'd be killed if he tried to interfere. But if he were killed, the *Theban* couldn't lift off Hermas to practice whatever Larsen had in mind against the *Danae*. At the least, Ginny would reach Formalhaut safely! She'd grieve when she learned that Horn was missing, and she'd hope for a long time that he might somehow return. But at least she'd be safe.

Horn put his hand casually into the pocket where the stun pistol waited. He'd have to be careful to seize the right instant....

All he could do was try to disable the *Theban's* entire crew and then take off in the ship itself. When that was done, he was finished. He was no astrogator. He knew the galactic poles, and he could recognize galactic longitude. But it was utterly unlikely that he could find his way back to, say, Formalhaut. There were too many stars. He couldn't pick out Formalhaut among myriads of other flaming suns. He didn't know the absolute magnitude of Formalhaut, its distance, or its spectral type, and he'd never used an identification spectroscope. He could aim a ship in the right general direction, but for him to find Formalhaut was as unlikely as finding a specific blade of grass in an acre of lawn. There were that many stars.

There was a clicking sound, loud, enormously magnified. A relay had operated somewhere within the beacon cone. There were scratching noises. Then a voice bellowed out of half a dozen loudspeakers built into the beacon's side walls.

"Mayday! Mayday! Mayday! Liner Danae calls for help! Liner Danae calls for help! Mayday! Mayday! Mayday!"

The bellowing voice, endlessly repeating the distress call, could be heard for miles. Larsen roared orders through the din, and began to run towards the *Theban*.

CHAPTER FOUR

MEN came from beneath the curiously shaped growths that was the Hermas jungle. They raced for the entrance port of the *Theban*. The mate was among the last to arrive, dragging the weeping engineer. Larsen snarled for haste. Men scrambled aboard the ship.

The mate said contemptuously, "What'll I do with him?" He shook the engineer for emphasis. "Leave him, kill him, or what?"

The distress call boomed over the clearing and went echoing and reechoing among the tall vegetation of Hermas. "*Mayday! Mayday! Mayday! Liner Danae calling for help! Liner Danae calling for help! Mayday! Mayday! Mayday!*" Larsen jerked his thumb and the mate heaved the sobbing little man inside. Horn was already aboard. Larsen and the mate crowded into the ship with what crewmen were not already within it, then Larsen closed and dogged the exit port.

"We'll be needing the engines to work right," he growled ominously to Horn. "They'd better!" Then he added to the crew, "Bring up the engineer."

He made for the companion ladder towards the nose of the ship, with Horn close behind. The crewmen scattered to their lift-off stations. In no more than seconds the ship was wholly silent save for the thumping and bumpings as the engineer was pulled up the companionway.

Horn came up and stood by the engines, with cold chills marching up and down his spine. The *Danae* was in trouble! She was broadcasting what was almost inevitably a futile cry for help. He could still hear the monotonous, staccato SOS, coming now from the communicator in the engineroom. *Mayday* was the traditional distress call.

Horn raged, but in part it was because he was surprised. He'd believed that Larsen planned to take some action against the *Danae*, and he'd considered disabling the *Theban* so it could not carry out any plan, however brilliant, for the commission of piracy. But whatever had happened had been done somewhere else by someone else. The *Theban* only had to take advantage of whatever had been arranged to happen.

The *engines wanted* signal lighted in the engineroom. Horn threw the switch. The engines made squawking, protesting noises as the *Theban* surged upwards. Then Larsen in the control room gave full power to the drive plates, and the *Theban* went plunging skyward. Outside air shrieked as the tramp ship forced it aside. Undoubtedly the ship's skin heated from the friction. But then the outer noises thinned and grew faint, there was clear space, and the engines made buzzing, moaning sounds, with burblings in between, as the *Theban* went hurtling away from the planet Hermas.

Horn grimly made an inconspicuous connection he'd contrived. It was a safety device, pure and simple. If anything broke down the engines would cut off before they destroyed

themselves. It was a precaution so that he could leave the engineroom. He was of no mind to stay there with no idea of what was happening.

He again touched his stun pistol for assurance, went up to the control room, and looked in the door. The engineer sat weeping on the floor near the wall. Larsen and the red-haired mate stared, fidgeting, at the vision screens.

"She'll be coming from Carola," growled Larsen, "driving blind and howling."

The communicator repeated its call with an unvarying, unwearied urgency that would have been tedious had it told of anything but disaster. The Hermas beacon, of course, could be picked up even by a ship in overdrive. Then an automatic astrogation unit would swing the receiving ship - and the *Danae* would be receiving the beacon's Wrangel waves - into line straight for the beacon. It would break out of overdrive when within light minutes of the beacon's sun. All this was because a ship's course needed to be exact. Small errors would add up instead of cancelling, if courses were started from the edge of a beacon's signal area instead of as near as possible to the beacon world.

Larsen growled again, indistinguishably, but the sound was one of satisfaction.

"She's out of overdrive," he rumbled a moment later, "just short of Hermas. Just like she should be!"

He crossed to the ship's computer. It was an old one, and Horn would have had trouble using so antiquated a model, but Larsen punched buttons as if he'd looked up the mathematical constants for this particular problem beforehand. The problem was to take a reading of the *Danae's* position, course, and speed towards Hermas, and to compute a series of courses and speeds for the *Theban* that would end with the two ships running side by side at the same speed and as close to each other as possible.

The computer clicked off a paper-strip answer - courses, durations, and accelerations - and Larsen began absordedly to set it up on the *Theban's* controls.

Horn swore softly and furiously to himself. The *Theban* had known in advance that the *Danae* would arrive here emitting distress calls. Larsen had risked his life and that of every man aboard to be here and pick up those distress calls. He'd shanghaied Horn to keep the *Theban's* engines going because he knew the *Danae* would be calling for help at just this place and about this time.

But what had happened? Worse, what was meant to happen next?

The *Theban* drove with the dwindling half-moon of a partly lighted planet behind her. Horn found his throat going dry as he began to imagine things that might have happened. If the *Danae* needed help, Ginny might be dead! Yet it was desperately necessary to make sure.

He thought he heard a slight eccentricity in the engine noises. Those sounds, if heard by a normal liner spaceman, would have paralysed him with horror. But Horn went down to find out what could be making the new noise. He found that a minor repair was coming unstuck because of the vibration that made the other noises.

He was still working on that when the *Theban* ceased to accelerate towards the *Danae*, and he continued to work while changes in power demands told him that the tramp was decelerating, and then driving back to match course and speed. Then he sealed the job and went up to the control room again. Larsen and the mate were excitedly trying to centre a small glitter in the vision screen. It was almost dead ahead, a sliver of reflected brightness that looked nearer than the stars.

The *Theban* drove on. The speckle of brightness grew in size. It became distinct, a long, sleek, shining shape which was the space liner *Danae*. It was a needle of polished metal on the screen.

"Try a call," rumbled Larsen. He punched the communicator. The incoming distress call cut off. "*Theban* calling *Danae*," he said. "What's your trouble? We see you clearly. We're close by you. What's your trouble?"

He released the call button. The speaker in the control room boomed, "*Liner Danae calls for help! Mayday! Mayday! Mayday! Liner Danae calls for help!*"

It went on senselessly, paying no heed to the reply it asked for. Larsen pressed the call button again.

"We're within a mile of you!" he growled. "What's your trouble? Answer."

He released the button and again the identical, recorded urgent distress call came from the liner as it drove on blindly through the solar system of Hermas. There was no visible damage to its hull. It must have power because it was driving, though out of overdrive, and it was broadcasting its plea for help. Its long axis pointed along its line of travel. Its gyros were working. It looked and acted like a ship perfectly controlled by perfectly functioning automatic astrogation units. But it cried to all the stars that it needed help, it needed help, it needed help.

Larsen tried twice more to get an answer from the driving, howling ship. The *Theban* was actually within a mile of it. She must show upon its screens, even if by any conceivable chance the *Danae's* communicator was not working. But it was!

Larsen turned and grinned at the red-headed mate. He stood up from the pilot's chair and jerked his hand in a gesture for the mate to take his place. He looked down at the shrivelled engineer, now not weeping but staring terrifiedly at him. When Larsen's grin widened, he tried to shrink to greater smallness.

"Come along!" said Larsen with sardonic gentleness. "You're no good for anything else, so come along."

But he did not wait for obedience. He picked up the diminutive engineer by his coat collar and dragged him into the air lock opening off the control room. There was a natural need for more than one air lock in a ship, and simple common sense called for them to be well separated. This was the bow air lock. Horn saw the lock's interior. Wrinkled, space suits hung on pegs in that amply large closet. A space suit tends to drape itself in a certain fashion when left to hang undisturbed for a long while. But suits hang differently for days after they've been checked over for air-tank pressure and power storage, and then are worked to pliability in readiness for instant use.

Larsen went in, dragging the engineer. Horn's eyes went desperately back to the image of the *Danae*. The space tramp, now piloted by the red-headed mate, had swung until the two vessels travelled parallel to each other and the picture of the liner was on a side screen instead of dead ahead. The communicator bleated, "*Mayday! Mayday! Mayday! Liner Danae calls for help! Liner Danae calls -*"

There were other sounds from the air lock, picked up by a microphone there. They were not pleasant sounds. Horn gathered that Larsen was donning a space suit himself, and trying to swear the engineer into another. After a moment, roaring, he hit the little man a resounding blow and seemed to be cramming him into it.

Horn heard his own teeth grinding. But he'd had a lesson. Even panic over what might have happened to Ginny couldn't override the need for him to keep his head now. His purpose in life, for the moment, must be solely that of being of use to Ginny. If the *Danae* was derelict or disabled, the *Theban's* engines were required to function. He mustn't interfere a moment too soon; he must assure the engines' perfect performance up to the very moment he risked everything to take advantage of it.

The *Theban* edged closer and closer to the liner which dwarfed it. Details of the *Danae's* exterior could be seen : Cargo doors, and the curious threadlike lines of outside ladders, each rung a metal bar forming the shallowest of U's and welded to the ship's skin at their ends. By them, every part of the ship's plating could be examined from the outside while she was in port. He could see the minute, projecting tripods which were the ship's eyes, relaying to screens in the control room what they saw so much more clearly than human eyes could do.

There was bedlam in the *Theban's* control room. The larger ship went on, screaming soundlessly to the stars, its outcry picked up and converted to sound by loudspeakers in the beacon aground and inside the *Theban*. Other sounds came from the bow air lock microphones. Larsen laced the engineer's space suit on him while the engineer protested hysterically. His space helmet went on, and his suit communicator doubled the volume of his frantic pleas. Then there was Larsen's voice, with the booming quality that told of his own helmet's being sealed and his suit communicator in action.

"All set here," growled Larsen through a loudspeaker. "Get as close as you can."

Doorframe lights came on, showing that the outer lockdoor was open. Now it was impossible to interfere with what went on there. So long as the outer door was open, the inner must remain closed. Every trace of air in the lock had gone out, to be lost between the stars. If the inner door could be opened the *Theban* would instantly cease to hold living men. She'd become a coffin, senselessly accompanying the larger ship to no purpose and to a destination of nowhere.

The *Danae's* hull was no more than a hundred yards away. The *Theban* edged nearer and nearer. The vast hull half-filled the side vision plate - then filled it. It spilled over to adjoining screens, the ones ahead and behind, above and below. The *Theban* reached a point where to draw closer would mean she must bump the larger ship's hull.

The distress call continued. Between its insanely repeated syllables came screams from the engineer, shrieks of unthinkable horror.

Then Horn saw the engineer on one of the screens. He was a tumbling object in an inflated, clumsy space suit, turning crazily head over heels in the space between the two ships. He floated, nevertheless, towards the *Danae*.

Above and below him there was an infinity of emptiness. There were stars towards which he could fall screaming for a hundred thousand years and never cease to fall. On two opposite sides of him there were the ships, which seemed to draw nearer to crush him between them. He screamed....

Larsen's voice roared at him. Larsen had thrown the little man out of the air lock towards the *Danae*. The two ships were almost matched in velocity, but not quite. As the small man went tumbling and shrieking between them, the *Danae* forged slowly and steadily forward. Larsen bellowed threats; roared fury; dredged the depths of the unspeakable to further terrify the engineer.

The mate veered the *Theban* away from the larger vessel. With such mass behind it, no great impact would be required to crack a ship's plates. The *Theban* drove on and on and the small engineer floated on and on, and it seemed that the *Danae* moved to escape him, and he shrieked and shrieked....

He hit the ship, and did not rebound. Much more terribly, he began to slide astern, touching the plating of the *Danae* but not able to grasp it. He jerked his arms and legs insanely. That was pure futility. It was unlikely that mere magnetic-soled shoes could have held him against the inexorable motion of the *Danae* past him.

But then the metal bars of a ladder interrupted his sliding. The screaming man did not see them, though they projected four inches from the ship's outer plates. But then he noticed, and seized them frantically. He held fast with the desperation of a man clinging to a handhold over hell. It seemed that his arms would be pulled from his body as the *Danae* drew ahead.

Then, suddenly, the straining ceased. He drew himself close to the ladder, seemed to try to embrace it. He clung close, weeping profusely. All of this his suit communicator relayed to the *Theban's* control room between the syllables of the maddeningly reiterated distress call.

The engineer clung to the rungs of the ladder bar as if he would never leave them. Larsen bellowed at him; roared at him; raged. The *Theban* drifted away and behind, and there was a hundred yards between the ships, and then two and three and four. Presently the spacecraft were a mile apart and the engineer became aware of it. Even greater panic came to him. He felt that he was being abandoned. He cried out, pleading as hysterically as before. He clung to half-inch metal rods on the outside of a vast metal object which did not answer calls and must be without life. And around him there were only stars and the *Theban* going away.

Terrifiedly, babbling, the engineer began to crawl along the separate rungs of the outside ladder. Once his foot slipped and there were only his hands to hold him to the gigantic hull. His legs flailed. He had no grip to bring his body close. His cries became appalling. Then his foot touched solidly and he was able to draw himself back to where he could crawl again, with his feet entangled in each rung as they came to it. And from the open air lock of the *Theban* Larsen watched him and roared threats.

It seemed an infinitely long time before, in his flylike crawling, the engineer came to a lifeboat blister. It was half open and he crawled inside, whimpering to himself. Minutes later the blister top closed crisply. The little man had found the control that closed it. It was, in a sense, an air lock, as well as the arrangement by which passengers and crew could enter a space lifeboat and launch themselves from a disabled vessel's hull. With the cover closed it would be possible to let air into the blister and, with the pressure equalized, get into the ship proper.

Apparently that was what the engineer had done. He would want frenziedly to get inside the ship to which he'd been thrown. And once inside -

Nothing happened. The urgent distress call voice continued to bellow in the *Theban's* control room. "*Maydah! Mayday! Mayday! Liner Danae calling for help! Liner Danae calling for help!*" Larsen closed the outer door and came out of the air lock. He continued to wear his space suit, with only the face plate opened. The two ships continued to separate. He took the controls and brought the *Theban* up alongside again. The pair of vessels hurtled onward, towards the sun Hermas. And nothing happened. And nothing happened. And nothing happened!

Larsen began to rage incoherently. He cursed the shrivelled engineer as Horn had never heard a man cursed before.

Then, suddenly, the blasting distress call cut off. The change in the *Theban's* control room was so sudden that it was shocking. For seconds it seemed actually quiet.

There was an appreciable interval before the buzzing, moaning sound of the half-crippled space drive made itself heard again.

Larsen cried out in triumph as great as his anger had been.

"He did it! He got to the control room!"

The red-haired mate muttered. Larsen pushed the communicator call button. "Calling *Danae*!" he snapped into the microphone. "Calling *Danae*! Come in! What's the trouble aboard?"

There was a whimpering; then the voice of the engineer came. He caught his breath irregularly as a child does after wild weeping.

'There's - nobody here!'

Horn heard it where he waited desperately outside the control room doorway. The engineer's voice panted, "The *boats are gone. There's nobody here - Nobody! The ship's a derelict! What - what do I do?*" The little man's voice cracked. *"I don't know how to astrogate a ship! I don't know how! What must I do?"*

Horn, hearing, went quietly mad for a moment or two. Ginny should have been aboard the *Danae*. But if there were nobody aboard, she couldn't be. It was a numbing, blinding, unbelievable shock.

When he was capable of thought again, he heard Larsen saying harshly, "You're at the control board. The gyro repeaters are in front of you. One dial says one-ninety-three degrees. That's your galactic longitude. The other says twenty-four. That's your latitude. Check me on that."

A part of Horn's mind listened and heard. A part of it was aware of the appalling sound of the engines, to which he'd almost become accustomed. He heard Larsen barking instructions to adjust such-and-such knobs until this-or-that dial read so-and-so. He heard the engineer's panic-filled responses. But such matters did not count, to Horn. He knew with anguished fury that Ginny wasn't on the *Danae*. And he knew with a terrible certainty that he was going to find whoever was responsible for what ever had happened to Ginny, and take a full and complete revenge for it. Larsen, yes. But Larsen had not personally turned the *Danae* into a derelict. There was more to it. And Horn would find every single man who'd had the least, smallest part in the disaster and he would kill -

Larsen was snarling ferociously: "Stay right where you are. Keep reporting. I'll get you down."

Horn could hear and feel and smell and see, but his emotions were paralysed. Ginny was the victim of a monstrous crime. The shock overwhelmed him. He could respond to nothing; he was like an automaton. But he knew that he would not act like one when the time came that he knew what had happened and who had brought it about. Then he'd react! But for now he was numbed. He could be - he would be - cold and cunning and convincing until he knew everything. And then -

"Read me what the engines say," commanded Larsen. Then he swore. "No. Forget that. You haven't got a Riccardo drive there, and you couldn't land on the drive if you wanted to. You've got emergency rockets. When I get you to atmosphere you'll switch in the emergency

landing controls and they'll let the ship down. They'll handle the rockets. They'll have radar readings to guide them, and they'll set you down."

Horn knew that it was true. When Riccardo drives were in common use, by a lavish expenditure of fuel, and considerable skill, a ship could take off and land where there was no landing grid. In those days there was much demand for skills. But nowadays ships went only from port to port and from landing grid to landing grid. They carried landing rockets for unthinkable emergencies, but modern ships' officers were not required to know how to handle a ship on rockets. There was a radar for height finding and a computer to give orders based on the radar's findings. Automation would let a ship down on any world, with due allowance for varying gravitational fields. The only human supervision required was the choice of solid ground for a landing spot.

Horn went numbly back to the engines. He nursed them, coddled them. He knew when the *Theban* drove, and when she went into free fall and her own gravity coils took care of the problem of weight inside. He could hear Larsen bellowing commands to the quaking little engineer aboard the *Danae*. It was curious that, after being flung through emptiness to the *Danae*, the engineer most passionately wanted to rejoin the *Theban*. But he knew only Riccardo engines. Given the most perfectly found ship in the galaxy, and unlimited fuel, he would never be able to find an inhabited planet. He might live on for years, alone, or he might go mad. The little man couldn't face either prospect. He swearingly and terrifiedly obeyed Larsen's orders in the hope of returning to the situation from which he had been flung.

Horn wasn't aware of the passage of time. He was in a totally unnatural state. He was hands and feet and arms and body, doing numbly what was appropriate in order to find out how Ginny had been harmed, and by whom. And when he found out, he knew he would become more deadly than any monster on a swamp world of Altair.

It was almost an anticlimax when there was the slight thump which proved that the *Theban* had touched ground again.

The red-haired mate and Larsen came clattering down the companion ladder to go aground. Horn painstakingly adjusted one of the multiple repair jobs he'd done so the ship couldn't take off again without him. He followed the others out of the ship, shouldering aside crewmen anxious to find out what criminal enterprise they'd carried through, and what profit they'd make out of it.

The *Danae* was landed. Having descended by rocket, it stood erect in a brand-new clearing of steam and smoke and charred vegetation. This was not the space beacon, or anywhere near it. It was another part of that quasi-jungle which covered most of this planet. Horn saw one of the sticklike native animals, twenty feet tall, fleeing from the tumult of smoke and steam. It made gigantic leaps above the brown-and-green foliage as it fled.

Horn was close behind Larsen and the mate when they reached the scorched area. He saw the passenger port of the *Danae* open. The *Theban's* engineer stood fearfully peering out. When Larsen and the red-haired mate made a dash across the hot ground, he shrank back out of sight. Horn followed the other two. His shoesoles were on fire by the time he made a leap into the entrance port, but he did not stop to stamp out the flames. He heard the clatter of the two ahead of him and raced after them.

Cargo holds. Crew's quarters. Messroom and supplies. More cargo holds. But no crew. Passenger quarters, but no passengers. Here Horn stopped, searching feverishly. He saw Ginny's name on a partly opened door. His heart in his throat, he went in. The cabin, perfectly undisturbed, was empty. The bunk was made. Ginny's ship-bags were in place. It was as if

she'd stepped out to have dinner or to chat with other passengers and hadn't come back. Her cabin had not been ransacked. The *Danae*, then, had not become a derelict by mutiny - which was unthinkable - or piracy - which was inconceivable.

Horn heard his own voice, calling Ginny. He stopped himself, went to another cabin, and another, and another. All were without any faintest sign of violence. In his anguish, his throat seemed to close. He flung himself at the companion ladder and climbed furiously. The passengers' lounge, arranged for dining, was empty. Another level up, the Passengers' stores and galley, was empty. Still another level. This held cargo - high-value freight divided among steel cubbyholes, each separately locked. He heard babblings somewhere on this level. Larsen and the mate were busy at the strongboxes. He heard noises suggesting frantic eagerness and raging anticipation.

Horn reached the control room, where the drive plates were still forward for the easier balancing of the ship around its centre of gravity, so in acceleration it would run true to its aimed course.

The control room was empty. Horn hunted frantically for the logbook. All ships on lawful voyages carried logs. These logs were ultimately turned over to the Space Patrol for analysis. Often they showed minor course deviations which were the first indications that a dark star and its brood of satellites was moving into a previously clear ship lane. The *Danae's* log would tell what had happened before the passengers and crew left in the lifeboats - if they had.

But the log was gone.

Horn made thick, senseless noises. Then he saw paper on the control room floor, under a chair as if it had fallen there. He snatched it up. He read:

"Liner Danae, last port Wolkim, next port Formalhaut." There followed a galactic date, and a time in hours and minutes. "Our engines blew out at -" again a galactic date and time - "and our auxiliary engines do not respond to controls. We calculate our position to be 1.37 light years from the beacon on Carola, which is within competed lifeboat range. Therefore we have taken to the boats and will attempt to make Carola. We are: officers two, crewmen four, passengers seven. We are taking the currency from strongbox IV as a salvage operation, having room for it in the boats. We leave the Danae dead in space, transmitting the standard distress call."

It was signed by the skipper of the liner, and was a perfectly spacemanlike document. The *Danae*, obviously, would continue to transmit though she was a derelict, because from her captain's viewpoint there was a faint hope that her signal might be picked up by some other ship. This memo was in case such a thing happened. The *Danae's* captain had evidently not imagined that her supposedly blown engines would begin to work again of their own accord after the ship became a derelict. It was probable that the *Theban's* engineer, half hysterical with terror when he reached the control room, had knocked the statement to the floor without noticing it.

Horn could make guesses, now, about the *Danae* and everything that had led to her abandonment. Ginny had taken to the boats with the other passengers and crew, trying to make Carola. Carola was uninhabited, but should have stores and food for just such an emergency as the people of the *Danae* faced. But nearly one and a half light years in a lifeboat was not good. Ginny in a new and well-found liner was to be worried about. Ginny in a cramped spaceboat, with foul air and none of the protective devices of a full-sized ship - that was really frightening. And her situation wasn't an accident. It was part of a crime.

He descended the companionway, hearing Larsen's strangled curses. Horn threaded his way through the strongboxes for high-value freight and found Larsen stamping in frenzied, uncontrollable fury before an opened and empty box. Horn coldly gave consideration to the idea of killing him now, and abandoned it because he himself was no astrogator. He needed to go at once to Carola to find out if Ginny had got there or had died on the way. The coldblooded and sensible way to get there was to have Larsen take him. He held out the memo he'd picked up.

"I found this," he said. He heard his own voice, thin and drained of all emotion because his emotions were numbed by their own intensity. "The engines cut off and they took to the boats. After they'd gone, the engines evidently cut in again. They're heading for Carola in the boats."

Larsen snatched the paper and read it. His face purpled. "They took the money!" he roared. "Forty million interstellar credits ! We've got to get 'em!"

Everything clicked into place in Horn's mind. For a moment or two Larsen was within a fraction of being killed, but then Horn icily told himself that he had to postpone the satisfaction. First things had to come first. Ginny was a first thing.

CHAPTER FIVE

EVERYTHING added up. When the *Theban* was again in space, this time headed for Carola, everything was perfectly clear to Horn. In ancient days, when in the course of human events a balance of trade was in favour of a nation which did not want to spend the balance in or lend the balance to a debtor nation, the debtor nation paid that balance in metallic gold. There was a tradition that gold was desirable in itself, and for centuries after the falsity of this idea was recognized, gold was nevertheless a medium of exchange.

After Buhl's law of the distribution of elements in planetary systems showed that first orbit worlds were always rich in heavy elements, there was a necessary adjustment of viewpoint. Gold was worth what it cost to get it from the inmost planets of most solar systems, and no more. So the interstellar credit note was invented and became the medium of exchange over all the occupied parts of the galaxy. Its value could be held stable because the quantity of credit notes could be controlled. This credit system was a highly complex, highly abstract, and thoroughly satisfactory way of balancing accounts and trade balances between worlds. And the notes were portable.

They were also avidly desired. It happened that the *Danae* was carrying forty million interstellar credits for the adjustment of debts and credits between two worlds some light centuries apart. This was not an extraordinary kind of cargo, but it was not publicized, usually, because it tempted thieves. If Larsen had somehow found out about the shipment, then everything that had happened was understandable.

Piracy in space was impossible, in any ordinary sense of the word. True, the *Theban's* engineer had been put aboard the *Danae* and that luxurious ship had been landed to be looted at leisure. But the *Danae* was a derelict when it happened. If there'd been anybody aboard they could have made the boarding impossible simply by putting the ship into overdrive for the briefest of instants. Then the *Danae* would have vanished, to reappear millions of miles away. Or the mere locking of all air locks and boat blisters would have left the engineer hopelessly marooned on the ship's outer skin, clinging there uselessly until the air in his space suit gave out.

The trick had been to cause the abandonment of the *Danae*. That required only that the liner's engines should appear to have blown. On a modern ship without engineers, deck officers knew how to turn the engines on and off, but hardly anything else about them. If Larsen had arranged for the *Danae's* engines to cut off by themselves, the liner's crewmen would know of no choice but to take to the boats or to wait helplessly to die in the ship itself. Evidently they'd taken to the boats.

Larsen would have needed to put a man of his own aboard the *Danae*, perhaps as a passenger. With a perfectly simple bit of apparatus the whole thing could be arranged. The device would need only to cut a power line at a predetermined instant, and at another

predetermined instant to restore the circuit that had been broken. Such a device wouldn't be complex, and needn't even be worked by anybody still on board. It could have been installed by an ostensible passenger before the *Danae* landed at its last port of call before Carola and Hermas. The man who installed it could leave the ship there and the *Danae* would go on, doomed but unsuspecting.

Now Horn could picture the actual event with precision. When the *Danae's* engines went off, the ship naturally broke out of overdrive in between the stars. The ship's two officers would be incredulous. They'd try to put the ship back into overdrive again; it would take a long time for them really to believe that their engines had failed. Such things just didn't happen!

But eventually they'd be forced to believe that theirs had failed. They'd have marvelled. They'd have been astounded. But they'd have turned confidently to the auxiliary drive and switched it into operation. It wouldn't work either.

The shock would be great. But officers were trained to know what to do even in such unprecedented states of things. They wouldn't actually panic. Ultimately they'd move to abandon ship. The discipline would be admirable. They'd distribute the ship's company among the lifeboats, and take all the other measures officially recommended for such emergencies - which nobody believed could ever happen. In this case they'd even piously take with them the most valuable and portable part of the ship's cargo, the currency. It wouldn't occur to them that the money was the cause of the engines' failure.

Understanding what had happened, however, was no guide to what to do. Horn's main concern was, naturally, for Ginny. She was in a lifeboat attempting to make the beacon planet Carola. Therefore Horn had to go to Carola immediately. He might have gotten away in a *Theban* boat, though it would be a journey considerably longer than Ginny was having to make. But it was impossible. He was no astrogator. Conceivably he could set a course for Carola, but more than that might be needed. If the *Danae's* space boats refuelled on Carola and went on from there, they'd take the stored fuel and Horn could not follow. And besides, he had to stay with the *Theban* in Larsen's pursuit of the lifeboats, in order to turn that pursuit into a rescue.

A day passed, two, three. The *Theban* drove for Carola. Horn knew that the lifeboats would have landed on Carola by now, if they, were ever going to land anywhere. The *Theban* had two more days' journey in overdrive before it could reach the other beacon planet.

Horn saw the wizened little engineer from time to time, always in the act of disappearing from sight. The engineer showed all the signs of a man who knows he is doomed. Larsen had certainly intended to kill him on Hermas. He'd made him take the spine-chilling job of boarding the *Danae* from space. He'd never let the little man leave the ship on an inhabited planet because of what the engineer could tell. So even bottles couldn't comfort the small man now. He talked fearfully to this crewman and that, and squirmed out of sight whenever he saw Horn.

It was the ship's cook who revealed what was in the minds of the rest of the crew. He brought coffee to Horn in the engineroom without being asked to do so. Having delivered it, he did not go away. Instead, with his eyes on the companion ladder leading up to the control room, he said in a low tone:

"A lot of us are worried. We was there at Hermas to land that *Danae* when it turned up derelict, an' to loot it. But then the skipper found out somethin' and started off for Carola. Didn't give us time to pick up what was there waitin' to be took."

Horn nodded. He said dryly, "I noticed it."

"There's talk," said the cook in a lower tone still, "that it was cash money he was after. Interstellar credit notes from one bank to another that were bein' carried by the *Danae*."

"That sort of shipment," said Horn, "has been known to be made."

"They say," said the cook, almost in a whisper, "it was forty million credits! In cash! An' when the boats left the *Danae*, they took it with 'em. That's why we're goin' after 'em."

Horn blinked. He hadn't told this. Larsen and the red-headed mate were the only ones who had known it, originally, besides himself. But now it was known to the crew. They wouldn't have known even of the shipment unless told, much less its removal in the *Danae's* lifeboats. So -

"That could explain a lot," said Horn. He waited.

"It's a lot of cash," said the cook. He searched Horn's face and then said furtively, "D'you think the skipper'll divide it up if he gets it?"

"No," said Horn flatly.

"We're worried too," said the cook. "An' - we're worried about the engines. How about them?"

"They'll hold together if I make them," said Horn. "Not otherwise."

The cook looked again at the companion ladder and then said in extreme unease, "Uh - if the skipper gets that money -"

"If he does," said Horn coldly, "there'll be the devil to pay. If he keeps it in his own hands, you'll talk about mutiny and think you'll get up the nerve to try it and take it for yourselves. But you won't. Or if he divides it, you'll start gambling among yourselves. The first man to go broke will kill somebody who isn't broke and start gambling again. The odds are that Larsen will keep the money and finally kick you out and keep it for himself. That's what I'd do!"

The cook still looked enormously uneasy, but not as uneasy as before. Something close to gratification diluted his unease. He nodded as to a fellow conspirator. "That's right! That's right! That's what he'll do if he can!" He paused for a long minute and then said confidentially, "We'll talk about this some more, huh? We'll see what we can work out?"

"No," said Horn sardonically. "You tell the skipper you sounded me out, but that I'm not joining any schemes to murder all but the members of a small, select group, who would then begin to murder each other. I'm not joining up with anybody. Not yet!"

The cook's mouth dropped open. It was amazement that Horn had penetrated the actual meaning of his proposed plot. But it was the most obvious thing in the world, to Horn, that conspiracies and counter-conspiracies must begin when the size of the *Danae's* treasure was known. It was even more certain that Larsen would be the first to start such conspiracies.

The cook went away and Horn turned back to the engines. He was engaged in as much of an engine overhaul as was possible without cutting the drive. But Riccardo drives had been developed with the need for repairs in mind. Many of the engines' component parts had been installed in pairs, of which one could keep the drive going. It had been considered ingenious at the time, but in practice it made the engines inordinately bulky and complex. But Horn was grateful for it now. Because of the overhaul possibilities, if he could get Larsen and the others under control and Ginny and the rest of the castaways aboard, there might be a fair chance of reaching Formalhaut. But he painstakingly arranged that only he could keep the engines going.

The noises of the drive did not diminish, though they changed from time to time. Some of the new sounds were deliberately made by Horn. One or two had him sweating before he found their causes. The *Theban's* engines had been incredibly neglected. The little engineer had been bluffing when he signed on to keep them going. He'd never been a competent man. Perhaps he'd never actually been certificated. Horn suspected, and he believed that Larsen was now sure, that the engineer had got himself the post only because he needed money for his bottles, and that he would ultimately have sacrificed his own life and that of all the tramp's crew to his personal necessity for drink.

But it was not easy for Horn to keep his mind either on the engines or on other matters while he worried about Ginny. If the spaceboat she was in got on a course that was even trivially wrong, she'd never land on Carola. If it were landed unskilfully she could be killed. If by mischance it did not land at the beacon, but somewhere else on some other continent, it would be utterly hopeless even to think of finding her. And there might be deadly animals on Carola, or diseases just as deadly.

These worries seemed more important to Horn than the situation on the *Theban*. With unbelievable riches awaiting them - or so they thought - the crew began to feel that they were already rich. It immediately followed that they felt they would be richer if some fellow crew members were not around to claim shares in the treasure of the *Danae*. But soon they realized that their fellow members were thinking the same thing. The castaways, of course, would have to be killed when the treasure was taken. Then Horn must be considered. He couldn't be killed or they'd all die in the breakdown of the *Theban*. But except for him, the fewer others who left Carola to divide the loot of the spaceliner, the more would be left for those who survived.

The *Theban* became a ship of conspirators, making multiple plots against each other and against Larsen. But all needed to have Horn on their side.

Larsen came down into the engineroom and stood beside him, scowling. Horn made a very fine adjustment to the item he was working on before he looked up. Then he said pleasantly, "I've a feeling that a balance coil's going out before long."

Larsen said harshly, "Did you spread the word about that money on the *Danae*?"

"Not I," said Horn. "If I had, you'd know it. Only the three of us knew it at first, you and the mate and me."

"Somebody let it out!" rasped Larsen.

"Yes. Perhaps the mate. But I think it was you," said Horn. "Now, about this balance coil -"

"Why would I start it?" demanded Larsen, snarling.

"To start trouble," said Horn matter-of-factly. "To have everybody on the *Theban* ready to cut everybody else's throat as soon as the money's on board. If nobody knew about it until the money was picked up, they'd start conspiring and might mutiny. Knowing about it ahead of time, they've already started conspiring. But they won't act until they see the money, and then they'll all be at each other's throats instead of combined against you."

Larsen snarled but did not contradict him.

"And," added Horn, "I think you've come to make a deal with me that the two of us will help the others kill each other off, after we have the money, until there is only you and me left to split it."

Larsen growled, "You've got it all figured out, eh?"

"Yes," agreed Horn. "Up to the point where you figure that if the two of us land this ship somewhere, the instant the engines aren't needed any more you shoot me in the back and don't divide with anybody."

Larsen scowled. Horn shrugged and turned back to the engines. Then Larsen's manner changed. It became almost genial. "Look," he said amiably, "I need you and you need me. We let it go at that. I can't risk killing you. You can't risk killing me. Call it a deal, eh? We understand each other?"

Horn said composedly, "You're assuming we'll find the spaceboats on Carola and that you'll get the money from them. But you might not. They may have landed and refuelled and gone on to the next beacon planet. If they have, they may never arrive, but we've no chance of picking them up in space. Why make a bargain about something that may not happen?"

Larsen grinned and turned away without a word. He climbed the companion ladder back to the control room level.

Horn stared after him. Larsen's grin had said that his objection was foolish. And Horn saw instantly why. Every trace of blood left his face and he began to tremble all over. His eyes were flames. These signs, in Horn, were indications of fury of an entirely different sort from red-faced rage. A man whose face flushes with anger may be a nuisance, but he can be coped with. A man who turns white while his eyes burn is more than likely to cause considerable damage before he's through.

Horn turned back to the engines, forcing his hands to steadiness, and laboured painstakingly at the matter in hand. It was seemingly a detail of the overhaul of the *Theban's* engines, so far as that could be managed while they ran.

The device he worked on was a trivial thing, in a way. It was part of the system by which the absence of rudders in spaceships was made up for. There can be no rudder, because in space there is nothing for a rudder to act on. So a ship in space always travels along a line which runs through the centre of thrust of the drive plates - forward - and the centre of gravity of the ship. When a ship is properly balanced, its centre of gravity is in the ship's axis, and if the ship were hung up somewhere it would hang vertically like a plumb line. But if there is poor storage of cargo, for example, it will hang askew and will travel crabwise, not as it is aimed. A ship taking off after a change in cargo will always be balanced so it will travel straight instead of in some unpredictable curve. And to balance a ship there are pressure coils, balance coils, trim coils, to place the centre of gravity where it ought to be. Without such balancing an astrogator coming out of overdrive can find out where he is, but he can never know where he's going.

Horn was arranging the controls of the *Theban's* balance coils. He was preparing a booby trap, to take effect if Larsen attempted to sell out Horn and his crew and the *Danae's* castaways in one triumphant feat of duplicity. Somehow, he believed Larsen had something of the sort in mind.

He finished the job.

Next ship morning the mate came truculently to him.

"The skipper says," he began, "that you don't care to keep on living."

"I hadn't noticed it," said Horn.

"There are some deals going on about you-know-what."

"I know of some deals about if-we-find-the-money," conceded Horn. "They seem pretty silly to me. Because we may not."

He spoke calmly, but he found cold anger surging up inside him. The more he considered, the less hope he could summon. So he was preparing various measures which would avenge what Larsen and his crew had done. But blind fury was always close under the surface in Horn right now. Larsen had grinned at the suggestion that the spaceboats might have refuelled on Carola and gone on from there. And Horn knew the significance of the grin. Among other things, it meant that Ginny had no chance at all of living unless he achieved the impossible very quickly. It was very likely that killing the mate would be one of the necessary steps towards achieving the impossible. Horn found his hand closing spasmodically on a two-foot steel wrench.

"The skipper and me," said the mate ominously, "we've got a deal. If you want in -"

"I don't," said Horn. "I've been offered other deals and I haven't taken them either, because if anything happens to me the engines will conk out in hours. And that will be the death of all of you! So if I get into a deal, I'll make it. And I'm not ready to make it."

"You're lookin' for trouble," rasped the mate.

"Now that you mention it, yes," said Horn. "With you!"

He stood up and moved towards the mate, swinging the two-foot tool. The mate snatched out a blaster - no mere stun pistol. He levelled it. Horn laughed at him, without mirth.

He saw the impact of his laughter. The mate could kill him, but he dared not. He dared not ever try to cripple Horn. Horn couldn't be forced into anything, because nobody could tell whether he'd done anything to the engines or not. It was a complete reversal of the state of things intended when he was shanghaied. Then he'd been classed as a captive who would be used as long as he was needed, and then disposed of. Now his death would be the ultimate disaster for them. But his escape from them would destroy them also.

It was a situation which seemed to have no possible solution. Horn, still laughing, moved towards the mate with the wrench swinging, and the mate held a blaster pointed at his middle. When Horn raised the wrench as if for a murderous blow, the mate fled. He scrambled up the companion ladder, swearing in panic, and Horn flung the wrench after him.

It didn't hit him. It clanged and fell back to the floor of the engineroom. Horn picked it up and went back to his work.

It became continually more difficult to keep his mind on the work, though. He thought of Ginny. The *Theban* would presently break out of overdrive, and there would be the usual tedious business of manoeuvring to the planet where Ginny might be aground or not, alive or not, in danger or not. If Ginny had died because Larsen wanted to loot a bank's shipment of currency - At that thought Horn went into a cold and terrible fury.

But he couldn't stop thinking of her, though all his imaginings were horrible or grisly or intolerable. She might be aground now, but the victim of unknown beasts or death from disease....

Then the *Theban* came out of overdrive at the solar system of which Carola was a member.

There followed a period of unalloyed torment for Horn. The landing of the *Theban* on Carola required that the engines function perfectly. Every ten seconds of engine failure during

descent could mean a wreck instead of a landing. So Horn stood by the engines. He could picture the handling of the ship by the demands on the engines and the swinging of the hull. The *Theban* went ahead on interplanetary drive for a while, then decelerated for nearly as long. Then there were indecisive drives, freefall hoverings, and touches of power just sufficient to keep the ship aloft while searching for the beacon.

Horn could imagine with extreme vividness the look of a planet from space, with a sunset line curving across its surface. There would be colourings which would be vegetation, and there would be muddy-seeming areas which would be seas; perhaps ice-caps would be visible, and perhaps not. But somewhere down below a beacon ceaselessly broadcast, "*Carola beacon! Carola beacon! Co-ordinates -*" By straining his ears he could hear the mutter of the turned-down astrogation communicator, tuned to the Wrangel waves of the beacon's broadcast. "*Unmanned refuge. Beacon only. Carola beacon! Carola beacon!*"

Then the movements of the ship became purposeful. It drove and swung about. It hovered. And gradually, gradually, the use of power increased. The *Theban* would be descending, but increasing its lift as the surface of the world below it grew nearer. Horn bit his nails.

The engines wobbled, and their noise grew shrill. With iron-steady hands, Horn remedied the trouble. The *Theban* was descending. The beacon, then, would be on the now sunlit side of the planet. Even Larsen would not be so impatient as to land on unseen terrain at night. Being let down by a grid was another matter.

The quality of the ship noises changed subtly. There was air outside the hull. By the sound, it grew thicker. Presently the *Theban* seemed to wallow slightly, as if it had lowered itself into a jet stream in the air. Then there was a breathless time of waiting, and the power-demand needles wavered up and down and up and down. This was very delicate jockeying of the ship to a chosen landing place. Then the ship steadied suddenly. It was aground. Horn heard agitated stirrings in the control room.

He very deliberately twisted a wire here and broke a circuit and completed it in a new fashion there, and painstakingly threw an adjustment out of optimum position. Larsen and the red-haired mate came down the companion ladder, armed with blast rifles.

Larsen snarled, "Come along, in case you get ideas!"

Horn had intended to follow anyhow. Now he trailed along down to the air bank, air-freshener level, to the galley stores and messroom level, the crew's quarters. Then the holds. On the way down, faces peered out at them. The crew knew that Larsen was landing to seize forty millions of credits in interstellar credit notes. There was no man aboard who did not know that treachery and murder would begin the instant the treasure was found. But every man was involved in at least two conspiracies to seize the whole, and every man knew it was highly unlikely that more than one of their number would survive the murderous competition for the loot.

Larsen and the mate, with Horn close behind, clattered down towards the ship's bottom exit port. When Larsen saw a crewman starting, from his post for landing, he rasped, "Stay at quarters! If I want you outside I'll call you. Stay at quarters."

They continued to clatter downwards, past the holds. They reached the exit port - naturally, an air lock. Here Larsen stopped and threw off the safety catch of his blast rifle.

"They were here!" he rumbled thickly. "I saw 'em!" Fury seemed to exude from him. It was somehow like the ferocity of a carnivore who bristles over his meat. Because he expected to

gather the fruits of a crime, Larsen was ready to add to it with atrocity. "But they saw us comin' down and they run off." To the mate he roared, "Open it!"

The mate unbolted the inner door, set the lock to "Aground" and undogged the outer door. Larsen raised the blast rifle. As the port swung open he opened fire, traversing his field of vision as the opening widened. Then he leaped out, rifle ready, peering ferociously for targets. He cursed luridly as none appeared.

The *Theban* stood slightly askew on an eminence which fell away on three sides to lower ground, and on the fourth direction went on, rising slightly, to a pattern of rounded, still-higher hills. About the landed ship there was a clearing of ground, sprayed to prevent the growth of any vegetation at all. There was the large, crimson-fluorescent cone of the beacon of this world. There were fragments of the same improbably lurid plastic on the ground a little distance away. There was jungle on every hand. But between the beacon and the jungle's edge there were the four lifeboats of the *Danae*.

They lay at random on the ground. The party had made it to Carola and had landed safely. Close by one of the boats there was a smouldering fire, as if someone had been cooking by it before the *Theban* appeared in the sky. It meant that someone had been here only moments ago.

Horn felt a surge of incredulous hope. It was so strong an emotion that for seconds he could neither have spoken nor moved. There was now a real chance that Ginny was still alive! And - blessedly! - the fugitives from the *Danae* had been aware that a ship of space coming to ground on Carola might not be a rescue ship. They'd fled at the *Theban's* descent. Perhaps some of them watched from the edge of the jungle now.

Larsen went striding to a lifeboat, blast rifle in hand. He wrenched open its port and entered. There were noises from inside. Crashings. Larsen seemed to be wrecking the boat's interior.

The mate looked truculent but uneasy. He stood by the exit port, staring about him. It was still day, here where the cone-shaped beacon sent its monotonous message to emptiness. But sunset was near. There were reddish clouds and a section of the deep-crimson disc of a sun already partly below the horizon. There, by convention, the west must lie. Against the sunset, improbable trees rose above the jungle. Peculiarly angular branches held tufts of foliage, and other angular branches departed from those tufts to meet yet other clumps of eccentrically shaped leaves. There were spikelike growths which also showed in silhouette above the forests. They appeared to have no branches at all. Then there was a dense mass of growing stuff which rose like a wall about the edges of the clearing.

Larsen came out of the first spaceboat. He panted incoherencies as he went swiftly to a second. He entered it, and there were more crashings. There was the sound of devastation. Larsen came out and trotted, snarling, to a third boat. Again there were monstrous sounds before he ran to the fourth, cursing.

The sun edged down behind the tops of the preposterous trees. Deep shadows crept across the clearing. In the last spaceboat Larsen seemed to have gone mad; to be trying to pull the boat apart with his hands. Then the blast rifle went off repeatedly. He seemed to be attempting the total destruction of the spaceboats that had brought castaways nearly a light year and a half from the abandoned *Danae*.

The mate licked dry lips. Larsen came out of the fourth boat, bellowing, "They hid it! They got it hid! But I'll get 'em!"

He strode to the *Theban*, his features contorted. He seemed ready to froth at the mouth. "Get lights going!" he rasped, "so they can't come back an' get away with the stuff! Lights! Plenty of 'em!"

He plunged into the ship. The mate looked scared. It was notorious that when Larsen was in a bad mood, somebody was in for a bad time. Now he was practically an incarnation of murder.

The mate said uneasily, "Stay here. Yell if you see anything."

He went into the ship. Horn did not answer. He was almost sick with relief that Ginny was at least possibly alive. He leaned against the landing fin from which the exit port opened. Presently he turned his eyes around. Yes, those fragments of crimson-fluorescent plastic had been a cache cover like the one on Hermas. And, like the Hermas cache, this one had been broken into, smashed, and cast aside. The emergency food supplies for possible castaways had now been broken open.

Horn did not have to look into the cache to know that those stores had been destroyed on the previous occasion when the *Theban* had landed here. This was the cause of Larsen's grin when Horn suggested that the fugitives might have restocked and refuelled their boats and gone away from Carola. The cook had said the engines began to act up after the *Theban* left Carola and before it could land on Hermas. So the *Theban* had gone on to Formalhaut for emergency repairs the little engineer was incompetent to make. Horn had been shanghaied to make them. And the present state of things was brought about.

Night fell quickly, as it did in the tropics in all planets. Lights flashed into being halfway up the *Theban's* battered hull. They were meant to give light for landing cargo in spaceports. Here they flooded the ground all about with a pitiless white glare. Horn grunted to himself. He'd had minutes of darkness in which to reach the jungle's edge before the lights went on, but he'd been too dazed by hope to take advantage.

Now the jungle seemed black by contrast with the floodlights' brilliance. In a little while there was movement at the foliage edge. Tiny things appeared, blinking and fascinated by the lights. They hopped and squirmed and crawled towards them. Larger things came, gazing adoringly at the brightness. Finally there was a great stirring, and something huge crawled into view. It stared raptly at the lights. It was a large thing, thirty feet long, with many legs. It looked like something that had crawled ashore from an ocean.

More things came out. There was one, larger than a horse, with incredible backward-curving horns and flippers. It stared stupidly at the lights. More small things appeared, staring too. Things on whipping wings flapped into the glare, swirled crazily out to darkness, and came back again. One of them crashed into the *Theban's* hull with a loud impact. There were things the size of dogs, which were wholly unlike dogs, and things the size of donkeys which were in no wise donkey-like.

The clearing filled with light-dazzled animals. They stared at the lights, edged towards them. They made no sound. They did not attack each other. They did nothing but crowd out from the jungle's edge, fascinated and drawn and hypnotized by the brightness.

It occurred to Horn that if anybody were watching a vision screen inside the *Theban* and saw this herd of nightmares, he would have no eyes for a man working his way through them. Yet if the creatures did not attack each other because of their fascination with the lights, they should not be aware of the presence of a man.

Horn began to move towards the jungle wall, around the ship from the exit port. The animals were utterly silent as he wormed his way among them. He heard clattering footsteps in

the ship. Larsen had looked in the spaceboats for the money they'd brought from the *Danae*, and he hadn't found it. Now he came with tools and crewmen to tear the boats apart to find the money. The lights were to illuminate the boats for that enterprise - and of course to make sure the castaways did not come back to claim possession.

But there were the animals. Horn forced his way between them. They seemed unaware of his presence. Once his shadow crossed the eyes of a rapt and fascinated horned creature and it tossed its head in alarm. It moved as if to rear up, but then the lights struck its eyes again and it continued staring. Horn pushed it out of his way as he went towards the jungle.

He heard Larsen cursing horribly. A blaster rasped. Nothing happened. The blaster fired again, and again. Horn reached the jungle's edge. Larsen, bellowing fury, tried to drive away the animals by blasting them. He failed entirely. The animals stood rapt and motionless, intoxicated and hypnotized by the lights. Larsen killed, and killed, and killed...

The animals still stood gazing at the lights. More of them came from the jungles, replacing those Larsen shot.

Horn made his way through thick growths in pitch darkness, his stun pistol ready for use, but taking - and he knew it - appalling chances. But he believed that Ginny was alive, that she was somewhere in this jungle, and that she needed him.

Nothing was more important than that.

CHAPTER SIX

PRESENTLY he saw a moon, and in glimpses of it between tree branches he saw it move swiftly across the sky. It was particoloured, one section vastly brighter than the rest. It would rise as a crescent in the west and wax as it moved, until it set as a full moon at the east, into the shadow of Carola. Speckles of surprising brightness appeared where the moonlight trickled through leaves. There were other speckles, at first brighter, from the glaring lights outside the *Theban*. where a blaster still rasped occasionally. But those light patches faded as Horn thrust his way on. It was necessary for him to get far enough from the ship to have a good start if Larsen led crewmen in pursuit of him.

He heard rustlings, and froze. Something moved slowly in the jungle. It was huge and it smelled of slime, but the rustlings of its passage were relatively trivial. When it was gone, towards the white light fog of the ship's floodlights, Horn pressed on to find the trail the unseen large beast had followed.

He found it, a small game trail. He'd had to force his way between tree trunks and underbrush till now, but this trail was clear to head height. Even fumbling along it, he could move at a reasonable pace.

Presently he was just barely able to see the glare of the *Theban's* floodlights behind him. He pushed on. A long time later he saw the moon again. It was the same one he'd seen before, passing through all its phases as it raced across the sky.

Presently he smelled swamp, and realized that the game trail he had followed had seemed to trend slightly downwards. Nobody should attempt a swamp in darkness! Horn climbed a tree; not far up, but high enough so animals using the same trail would not find him disputing the way. He braced himself to try to sleep, but inevitably his mind suggested that in this world there must be climbing carnivores, and that some things that in the darkness seemed tree trunks or branches might be something else - something deadly.

He thought of Ginny, and was comforted by the fact that she and the other castaways had realized there was a connection between the disabling of the *Danae* and the destruction of the stores they should have found on Carola. They'd fled when the *Theban* descended. There was a good possibility that, when they hid the treasure from the lifeboats, they'd hidden some foodstuffs too.

He dozed awhile, and awoke suddenly. There was a greyness overhead, and small, tentative, unfamiliar noises in the jungle. In a sense his situation was horrifying, though being afoot without food or water, and practically unarmed, in the jungle of an uninhabited planet was his own doing. The castaways he must join, too, would be deeply suspicious of anybody who'd arrived on the *Theban*. Any of them but Ginny, in fact, should try to kill him on sight because the nature of the *Theban's* errand was shown by Larsen's behaviour with the lifeboats.

He pushed his way on, ruefully trying to work out some way to meet this added problem. The jungle seemed to grow thicker as he went to lower levels and away from the ship. He followed a game trail; it was impossible to move except along these winding, meandering ways. They crossed each other from time to time, and at each such cross trail he examined the new one for signs of footprints. The ground became spongy underfoot. There was swamp somewhere nearby. He noted that the tree trunks had a uniformly muddied look up to about eight feet from the ground, as if there'd been a flood here not too long since.

Trees rustled in the wind that blew above them. There was one variety that creaked as it swayed, and for a long time Horn believed the sound to be the product of another kind of creature altogether. Far away there were occasional deep-bass bellowings, but they were minutes apart. For some reason Horn thought of the elephantine, thirty-foot-long monster he'd seen come out of the jungle on many legs to gaze raptly at the ship's floodlights. There were rare, musical noises which sounded like separate soundings of single notes upon a flute. They did not change pitch as bird calls do on planets which have been converted to human use.

And once, as he stopped to examine a crossing game trail, an animal came out of the jungle. It was the size of a small dog, and was sleek, smooth-furred and streamlined. Its paws were large out of all proportion, with widely separated fingers and webbing between them. It gazed at Horn with startled hazel eyes. He stirred, and it fled. It didn't look like a jungle animal, it seemed more like a water animal, devised for swimming.

He covered a mile, perhaps two. Once he saw a greenish-grey object lying on the ground. It looked like one of those somehow disgusting fungus masses one finds on rotting wood wherever earth-originated forests grow. It looked slippery and he went out of his way to avoid stepping on it. He saw a foot-high creature with pencil-thin legs trotting delicately along the game trail. It saw him, and darted out of sight.

Then he heard a human-made sound, a crashing of metal upon metal, and the squeal of metal being torn. It could only be someone attacking an already wrecked spaceboat, taking it apart to make sure the money from the *Danae* was not hidden in its innards. Horn had intended to make a circuit of the beacon's site, hunting for footprints, but he was getting too close to Larsen. He took the next of the branching game trails to go farther away and still make a circuit of the beacon.

He knew acute unease, now. If by any chance there were footprints leading directly towards the castaways' hiding place, Larsen and his followers could easily detect them at the edge of the clearing and reach the castaways before Horn could. He hurried, trying to complete the circuit of the beacon. He was in such haste that he almost stumbled over a tragedy of the jungle about him. There was another of the greenish-grey objects in this game trail. But it was no longer flat and flaccid, wet and slippery like some fungus. Now it seemed like a bag, a sack, in which a deerlike small animal the size of a fox terrier struggled desperately, only its head outside of the all-enveloping greenish stuff.

The seeming fungus was now a lump of writhing loathsomeness. It was not a disc but an animal, boneless and all gristle, which had separated its edge into writhing, clutching, constricting arms that quivered and tightened as it grew smaller to crush its prey. It was like a flattened octopus which lay in wait until some other creature trod on it, when what had appeared to be a disc became squirming arms that clutched and squeezed the life out of whatever had touched it. The tiny deer panted and struggled - its eyes agonized.

Horn used his stun pistol, without thinking. That was foolish. The noise was not too loud, but it was a human noise. The convulsive struggle stopped. The fumbling, writhing arms

collapsed. The deerlike creature lay still. It lay insensible upon the grey-green mass, which had regained its appearance of being a disgusting fungus in the trail.

Horn rather squeamishly moved the little animal away. When it regained consciousness it was not likely ever to step on anything flat and glistening and greenish-grey again.

Then he heard a blaster let go in continuous fire. It was very near, probably on this same game trail. It seemed to Horn that he heard the roaring of steam, as it develops where a blaster bolt hits something soaked with water. Automatically he snatched out his quite nonlethal stun pistol. The bellowing roar continued. It did not sound like a blast rifle in normal use; blast weapons are fired in separate bursts of energy. A gun fired single-shot - one blaster bolt for each squeeze of the trigger - may fire a thousand times before its charge is exhausted. Used in rapid fire, it can empty itself in less than two minutes, but it will melt down a metal door or burn through feet of wood or plastic. This wasn't rapid-fire, though; it was continuous. No gun could be fired this way by the use of its trigger. It would be melted down by its own violence.

The tumult diminished, though it wasn't cut off. From a bellow it became a roar, from a roar a formless shout. Then it dwindled swiftly to a growling sound, and finally it was no more than disconnected rumblings and the sound of steam rising through water.

Then Horn heard somebody sobbing.

He recognized the voice, and the sound did not rouse his sympathy. He ground his teeth and made his way swiftly along the trail. He ran into a monstrous reek compounded of steam and scorched organic matter. It drifted slowly through the jungle in an offensive, spreading fog. Horn's face wrinkled in disgust, and he saw no reason to change his expression when he came upon the *Theban's* engineer in a limp heap on the ground, weeping.

"What the devil are you doing here?" demanded Horn, The little man goggled at him.

"I said, what the devil are you doing here?" snapped Horn.

"I'm - trying," said the engineer miserably, "to - to get to the people from the *Danae*."

"What for?"

"M - maybe they won't kill me," snivelled the engineer. "On the *Theban* they will. They're all scheming against each other -"

"Naturally!" said Horn. "How do you expect to find the *Danae's* people?"

"I went around the clearing," the little man said, uneasily, "and I found footprints. But I didn't tell Larsen! I didn't tell him! I followed them. I - thought if I warned them -"

"Go on," snapped Horn.

"I - thought they might protect me from him. But then I - heard a stun pistol. I thought it might be Larsen. So - I ran, and I tripped, and my blast rifle went ahead and fell in the water...."

Horn looked down at the bare soil underfoot. There were footprints, evidently coming out of a game trail that had joined the one he was on a little way back. Then he saw the glitter of water. The trail dipped down and vanished under feeble ripples. The footprints went into it and vanished.

Horn could not believe his eyes. This was no ordinary swamp of tussock grass and reeds, with sluggish streams here and there; this was a forest whose trees grew out of water, though a little way back they grew on dry land. Horn could see a liquid surface ahead for as far as the foliage let him look.

Beside the trail there was the evil-smelling, still-smoking proof that a blast rifle had been shorted out. He saw the stock of the weapon, partly carbonized by heat. There was a pit exploded out of mud and already filling from the water around it. Mud had been thrown in all directions. It stank.

But Horn only glanced at the weapon. That was ruined. More important, he could see that the game trail went on and on through the tree trunks growing in the water. Presumably the footprints did the same. There was dense vegetation growing in the water on either side of a game passage, as if water-dwelling animals kept paths clear to swim in when they went ashore into the jungle.

Then he realized the truth. Water animals did not graze fixed paths through swamp water. Rather, the water had risen and flooded the trail. Recently. He looked to right and left, and it was evident. The muddied tree trunks proved that water had risen here some weeks or months ago. It had been not less than eight feet deep where now was spongy solid ground. Now the water was rising again. It might stop at a lower level, or it might rise to eight feet in depth here again.

The situation was appallingly clear. He said shortly, "Come along!"

He waded into the water, which barely covered his instep. As he moved on it deepened to his ankles. After two hundred yards, it was up to his knees. The little man said fearfully, "It's getting deeper!"

Horn only grunted in reply. He moved slowly, watching the tree trunks on either side. The water was halfway up his thighs when he found what he was looking for - another game trail joining this one; submerged, like this one; apparently kept clear by wild beasts, and actually a forest trail which had become covered by rising water.

Horn turned into the new trail, heading back in the direction of the beacon and the *Theban*. He moved slowly and carefully, making few ripples and not enough disturbance to be heard. The engineer made the beginning of a whimpering sound, but Horn turned upon him a face so filled with menace that the little man gasped instead.

Fifty yards. A hundred. The water was again up to his knees, and no higher. He moved more slowly and more silently still. This was a long way from where the blast rifle had burned itself out - at least a mile, possibly two. Then there was a sound which did not belong in a swamp: a child spoke querulously. The engineer gasped. The water grew more shallow.

Horn walked out of the water into a relatively dry new trail with very many footprints in it. Less than thirty feet from the water's edge, he looked straight into the astounded, unbelieving eyes of a man not six feet from him in the jungle.

"Where's Ginny Forbes?" asked Horn in a matter-of-fact voice. "I've come to help out in the mess you're in. She'll tell you why."

The man, with a spasmodic gesture, belatedly raised his weapon. Horn said impatiently, "Don't be an idiot! Where's Ginny Forbes?"

There were startling stirrings. Faces appeared. Then, with a little cry, Ginny came running down the path. She clung to Horn. "I knew you'd come! I knew you'd come!"

"That's more than I did," said Horn wryly. "You'd better introduce me. I must seem a suspicious character."

Ginny had to weep a little, from relief, before she could explain to the other castaways who Horn was. She didn't know how he'd got here, but he'd come because, she was in danger. And he would help them. Perhaps he had someone with him -

"Not him," said Horn coldly, of the engineer. "He's useless."

But there was no time to go into a long explanation of how he happened to be here in a swamp of rising water on a beacon planet several light years from where he should have been waiting for Ginny. At the beginning, he doubted that he'd be believed. The captain of the *Danae* regarded him with calm eyes that Horn at first thought were noncommittal.

He said politely, "You know the water's risen?"

"Naturally!" said the *Danae's* captain, composedly. "That gave us the idea of hiding here. We can't be trailed to this place."

"I trailed you," said Horn shortly. "Have you noticed how high the water's likely to rise?"

"We are watching it," said the captain, as calmly as before.

Horn pointed to the tree trunks about him. Very plainly, when one looked, at some time not too long past this jungle had been flooded to a depth which here was fully ten feet. The *Danae's* captain blinked. He hadn't noticed it. His expression wavered, then returned to a conscious and confident calm.

"Ah, yes!" he said composedly. "We have to take account of that."

The castaways clustered around, staring. All the ship's company of the *Danae* were gathered here; two officers, four crewmen, and seven passengers. The *Danae's* captain wore that air of calm confidence which is so reassuring to passengers that it is practically part of a liner captain's uniform. But it might mean nothing more than that, by following all the rules, obeying all directions, and travelling only on surveyed space lanes, he has never faced an emergency and therefore has an unblemished record.

The junior officer looked boyish and uneasy. Space-academy training had not prepared him for a situation like this. The passengers were oddly assorted. There were two children, a stout businessman, two women besides Ginny, and a cadaverous man who, muddied and dirtied like all the rest, still looked like one of that dismal brotherhood who travel from world to world seeking a cure for what they refuse to believe is hypochondria.

The crewmen were no more and no less than the usual crew of a space liner; men who had made their runs stolidly on well-found vessels between well-equipped spaceports with the regularity and all the sense of adventure of wind-up clocks, and who had lived until now in placid expectation of eventual pensions. They were not well suited to the role of castaways or fugitives from the crew of the *Theban*.

Horn noticed eyes turned on his companion. "This man," he said dryly, "is the engineer of the *Theban*, which landed last sundown. He has run away from his ship because he fears he'll be murdered for proven incompetence. I can't think of any way in which he'll be of use to himself or anybody else, but here he is. Now, how much food have you?"

They had food for some days yet. There'd been more, but it was left in the lifeboats. They hadn't finished stocking their hiding place when the *Theban* appeared in the sunset sky.

"Load up," commanded Horn. "It looks to me as if this planet has rainy seasons to make your hair curl. Every animal I've seen looks like a water dweller. They're equipped to live in a flooded jungle, but we aren't! So we've got to move to where we won't be drowned."

The *Danae's* captain said with calm dignity, "I chose our hiding place because we couldn't be trailed here by our footprints."

"But I trailed you," said Horn.

"Yes," agreed the captain, gravely. "But still -"

"There's a ridge of high land behind the beacon," Horn told him, "with hills beyond that. I'm going there. Ginny will come with me. When this swamp is under water we won't be here. Those are the facts. The decision is yours."

The *Danae's* captain frowned, as if in deep thought. But he was badly shaken inside. The fact that Horn had trailed his party was a severe shock. He'd hoped to stay hidden until the *Theban* went away. He apparently had no idea how long men will keep up a search for forty million credits. His training and experience were comparable, in a way, to those of a ferryboat captain. The space journeys he'd made demanded just about as much skill as steering a ferry across a river. He was official leader of the castaways because of his rank, and he had his rank because he'd never got into trouble. But Horn was another kind of man. The *Danae's* captain relievedly accepted his direction.

"Since you were able to find us," he said with a fine air of decision, "the men of the - the *Theban* might do so too. We should move, if only for that reason. And it will certainly be more - ah - salubrious at a higher ground level." He turned to the others. "We will go on. We must carry everything we have brought here."

There was a bustle. Ginny stood close by Horn. She said in a low tone, almost a whisper, "I'm so glad you're here! Now everything will be all right."

"I wish I were as confident," he told her. "But I'm glad I'm here, too."

He watched the preparations for a move. The castaways gathered up bundles of foodstuffs. There were other bundles, larger and probably heavier than the food. Horn said, "How many weapons? Where are they?"

Ginny shivered a little. "There's one blast rifle usable. The others - it's so damp here. The dew made them get hot. A - short circuit?"

Horn made a bitter, inarticulate sound. A blast rifle dropped in water will be shorted out, but a blast rifle with the safety left off in damp air will gradually lose its charge. It had not occurred to any of these people, that a weapon's safety might exist for another reason than preventing accidental discharges. A blast weapon has to be kept on safety when not in use. It has to be! Sheer ineptitude had practically disarmed the castaways.

Horn inspected the one weapon not made useless. Its safety was on. One weapon against the fully armed crew of the *Theban*! It did not look good. Now the whole party was loaded down for moving. The cadaverous passenger carried less than any of the rest. Horn curtly ordered him to exchange burdens with one of the women. He protested that his health did not let him overexert himself.

"Then you'll stay here," said Horn gently, "and enjoy your death." He ran his eyes over the other loads. "What's this stuff that isn't food?" he demanded. But he knew.

The *Danae's* captain said, "That's currency. Forty million credits in cash. The most valuable part of the *Danae's* cargo. It is my duty to try to save all I can from the wreck of my ship."

"Which isn't wrecked," said Horn. "But I wish you'd left this money outside the spaceboats up by the beacon, for the *Theban's* crew to find. It would have done most of the job we face."

The captain said reproachfully, "But they'd have gone away with it. It's what they're after!"

"They'd have started killing each other over it," said Horn, grimly. "We wouldn't have so many of them to deal with."

"But you don't propose -"

"To give it to them? The devil, no! Not now! We need all the weapons we can get!"

The party was ready to move. Horn led the way, with the one working blast rifle. Ginny walked beside him. Her expression was one of joyful, absolute confidence. It apparently didn't occur to her that with Horn on hand anything could possibly go wrong.

It was a strange journey. They waded into the slowly, slowly rising water till presently they came to where a game trail joined the one they followed. They backtracked on it, approaching the beacon and the *Theban*. Always, before they came to solid ground, they found another flooded game trail leading partly in the direction they wished. They moved in a succession of zigzags, going three or four feet sideways for every foot of advance around the ridge of higher ground they meant to reach presently.

They plodded on for hours. It was exhausting. Once they came to a hillock which at the moment was an island. Horn allowed them to rest here. A hunting party from the *Theban* wasn't likely to wade to it to find the signs of their pausing. They ate, frugally. The *Danae's* captain drew Horn aside.

"I understand how you got here," he said uneasily, "because of your fiancée. But isn't there someone who - knows where you are and will try to find you and us?"

"Only the gang on the *Theban*," said Horn.

The captain of the *Danae* almost looked distressed. "When you found us, I had so much hope...."

"We're not too badly off," said Horn. "We've food for a few days, and there's the *Theban* with more food aboard, and shelter when the rains come, and there's not too much more tinkering to be done to make her safe for a journey to Formalhaut."

"The rainy season!" said the captain. "Before we abandoned ship I looked up Carola in the space lane directory. It isn't really inhabitable. It's four-fifths ocean and most of the rest swamp." His tone took on traces of agitation. "It has a hundred and ten feet of rainfall a year! And as I compute it, the rainy season is about to begin."

"Then we'd better take the *Theban*," said Horn, "if only for shelter."

"But how?"

"We'll manage," said Horn shortly. "For one thing, since it's a bit chancy, I want to attract the attention of a passing ship."

"Impossible! The boats had communicators of limited range, but they're smashed."

"The beacon isn't of limited range," said Horn irritably. He had plans, and was trying to believe that they were sound. It was annoying to have the *Danae's* captain point out obstacles to all he intended to do. "The beacon's long-range. And I've designs on it."

"But the ship is there!" protested the captain. "You say it can't go away. The men in it will murder us; they've every reason to do so. And we aren't armed to defend ourselves!"

Horn frowned. It did not seem to him that in addition to thinking for all the castaways, plus the *Danae's* captain, and planning for the future, he should be required also to console the captain.

"Where," asked Horn, "did you get the idea that we aren't armed? We've got a weapon that's worth a thousand blast rifles. It's the deadliest weapon in the galaxy. And we've got it, and they haven't." Then he said annoyedly, "Come along! Let's rouse these people. We've got to carry on and try to get to solid ground far enough away before sunset."

"But," protested the captain helplessly, "what weapon have we got?"

"We," said Horn as patiently as he could, "have forty million credits in interstellar currency. Try to find a more deadly weapon than that!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

THERE was only one use of weapons that day, though by the laws of probability there should have been more. That one was after sunset, and Horn wasn't directly involved.

From a time near noon onwards, Horn led the *Danae's* passengers and crew along crisscrossing jungle trails flooded to a greater or lesser depth. Sometimes the water was thigh deep on the adults of the group, and the children had to be held above water. They seemed to enjoy the whole experience. Sometimes it barely reached an adult's ankle. But at all times the footprints they left behind them were underwater and invisible. Most of the time the prints were not even deep. The water had risen too recently to have made the soil real mud.

In their journeying they saw few wild things, none actually on the game trails they followed. Twice they did see animals resembling muskrats, swimming sturdily where the water was deep. Those creatures eventually climbed tree trunks and were lost to sight overhead. And more than once Horn saw lumps, not clearly distinguishable but certainly not parts of the trees and lianas on which they appeared. He did not see any of them closely enough to be certain, but they were a greenish grey and he believed them to be more of the octopuslike things he had seen crushing a tiny deer.

He made a guess that they dwelt aground in the dry seasons, preying on ground animals, and that when floodtime approached they climbed trees and lay in wait for the tree dwellers. The swimming animals also suggested an ecological system adapted to periodic floodings. Several times during the castaways' journey, too, he heard rumblings at the very bottom limit of audibility. All sound goes down in pitch with distance, and this might well be thunder of intolerable volume, reduced to mere pulsations of the air by the distance it had travelled.

But in the clearing the *Theban's* crew was then still engaged in the destruction of the spaceboats. Carcasses of the fascinated beasts killed the night before littered the ground. Some of them had had to be dragged away from where they'd fallen, to allow work to continue on the lifeboats being pulled to pieces in the search for treasure.

By the time Horn allowed his followers to take some rest - they'd found a hillock that had become an island - Larsen had been forced to recognize that the money wasn't hidden in the boats. He searched further, because the fugitives had been in the clearing when the *Theban* landed. The cone-shaped crimson-fluorescent beacon had a doorway. He explored its interior. There was the broadcasting unit - the beacon itself - and means for changing the signal it broadcast. If a survey ship discovered a danger in the ship lane hereabouts, the beacons along the lane could be adjusted to give due warning of it to space mariners. But there was no money hidden in the cone. There was no recent excavation in the clearing where the money might

have been buried. Larsen even had the supply pit emptied of its decaying, malodorous contents to be sure the *Danae's* people hadn't stashed away their precious cargo there.

So there was nothing to do but hunt down the fugitives and force them to reveal its location. At just about the time Horn had his partly rested followers take up their journey again, Larsen led some of his crewmen in a hunt for them. He actually wanted two things: the money and Horn. Both were necessary. If Horn could be found, Larsen believed he could threaten or bribe him into securing his own safety by his co-operation. Horn had co-operated from Formalhaut to Hermas, and from Hennas to here. But Larsen knew nothing of Ginny, whose presence had determined so much of what Horn had done.

The castaways seemed an even simpler problem. Human beings are adapted to human-ecology planets. Worlds not modified to grow Earth vegetation and support Earth animals simply don't produce food for humans to live on. The castaways had some food, but not much. They couldn't hope to find more on Carola. In time they must yield their treasure in exchange for food - which, of course, would last them only so long anyhow. So Larsen considered that, with a little judicious hunting and perhaps the killing of a few, the refugees from the *Danae* would surrender - under solemn promises of transportation to a civilized world - could be murdered in between the stars, and everything would be very tidily finished. Larsen led his hunting party after the castaways with a serene confidence.

The planet Carola paid no attention. Its single continent was mostly swamp, though there was higher ground along most of its coastline. There were rain clouds of incredible density, and storms of unbelievable violence. On this particular day the belts of storm clouds poured down torrents upon the empty seas and on much relatively solid ground. The swamps to the west of the beacon were filling up, and rain continued to fall beyond the western horizon at a rate of seven to ten inches per hour.

Presently the clouds would reach the beacon clearing. Then even hillsides would become torrents, and the already rising water level would grow higher. The game trails Horn now followed would be submerged fathoms deep. If the planet were aware of anything at all - and some people believe that worlds and suns are aware of their own existence - it was absorbed in the simple fact of being. It did not heed mere bipeds moving restlessly here and there on its surface. It did not even concern itself over the slaughter of its fauna for trespass on the beacon clearing.

Larsen's hunting party had luck, at first. They found the fugitives' tracks almost at once. They followed the trail, though the footprints were much obscured by the spoor of the beasts the ship's lights had drawn to the clearing after the castaways fled. But by paying close attention, fragments of tracks could be traced. Some were men's, some women's, and a few had been made by children. Larsen was unpleasantly pleased. If he found the castaways and got the money, hunger would make Horn return. Then he must run the *Theban's* engines, and matters would go as Larsen had planned.

But the trailing was slow. More than once they lost the track and went past the junction of other game trails the *Danae's* people had turned into. They had to search painstakingly to track down the forty millions of credits the castaways had taken from the *Danae* when they abandoned her. The fugitives would feel Larsen's displeasure for causing him the extra effort of trailing them.

It was past midafternoon, though, when he came to the place where water began to show among the trees. The footprint trail was visible, but he didn't see the hole made by the engineer's shorted blast rifle. The water level had risen and filled it. Larsen's party came to the

place where the trail ended altogether, where it went into water which glittered as far as they could see. Horn's and the engineer's footprints showed here, too, but they, like the others, went into the water and didn't come back.

Larsen cursed. He knew nothing of Ginny and he couldn't imagine Horn's purposes or habits of thought. But people didn't go into swamps to stay; they went into swamps to come out of them somewhere else. They must know of solid ground beyond this slowly surging liquid. But where they could go, Larsen could follow.

He led the way into the water, with his men trailing him. The water rose to their ankles, to their knees, to their thighs. They did not notice another jungle trail which joined the one they followed. Horn had turned back along that trail and found the *Danae's* company. Larsen didn't. The water continued to deepen, and he growled to his followers to hold their weapons high. He pressed on.

At just about this time, in late afternoon, Horn led his people ashore, miles away. They were on the far side of the beacon clearing. Horn led the way a full mile from the swamp's edge and worked with the others to cut a tiny open space in which to bivouac for the night. It was away from the jungle trail they'd followed. The hypochondriac passenger protested that his health would not let him exert himself. Horn drove him to labour, regardless. The engineer went through the motions of working, but he was very badly in need of a drink. The others, weary as they were, understood that a game trail was not a good place in which to camp. Large animals might want to use it during the night. But besides, the castaways realized that Horn had taken them out of a very real danger and they were safer than they had been. They weren't confident of the future, but they were much more hopeful than before.

Horn arranged for watches during the night. He organized his following briskly, and the *Danae's* captain dignifiedly agreed with his measures.

Larsen's enterprise was less fortunate. He led his followers deep into the swamp. From thigh deep the water became breast high. The rifles had to be carried overhead lest they come into contact with water and destroy themselves. It wouldn't be practical to use them even in an emergency.

The water grew deeper yet. The sun sank low. Larsen snarled at his followers. The branches across a jungle trail, of course, are never more than so many feet above its floor. A crewman caught his blast rifle in a branch and it was wrenched from his hand. It roared, shorted out.

The men of Larsen's party scattered as the rifle proceeded to destroy itself with thoroughness and much tumult. Another man stumbled. Another blast rifle created the monstrous uproar a short-circuit rifle does. There was panic, steam, and flying mud. There was boiling water. Branches were severed. One jungle tree toppled across the path.

Larsen's followers got to safe distances and waited out the destruction. Before they dared reassemble the sun was low indeed. Then they dared not go on. No sane man will wade in a flooded jungle after nightfall.

Larsen cursed, but his men retreated, splashing in their haste. It was dark before they came wholly out of the water. They actually took a wrong path and came out at the castaway's original hiding place, from which Horn had led them. They walked over and blotted out the footprints they were looking for, blundered on, found out that they were lost.

For more than an hour they fumbled about on jungle trails that led everywhere and nowhere. They tended to panic. Then the small particoloured moon passed swiftly overhead and Larsen

oriented himself by it. He noted the relative position of certain bright stars to each other and the line of the moon's orbit, then snarled his followers to silence and led the way towards the ship.

They were halfway back to the clearing when one of the party stepped on a flat, flaccid, greenish-grey splash of what looked like a mould or fungus on the ground. He did not see it, though it was nearly six feet across. He knew nothing of its presence until something stirred violently under his foot and then cold, wet, invisible snaky things seized him in the darkness. He screamed and struggled. Rough mouth openings with rasping bristles scraped at his garments and tore them. Something fastened on his cheek. He clawed at it. Monstrous, sinewy, horrible arms closed upon him and began to squeeze the life out of him.

Larsen and the others heard the noise. Somebody shakily made a light. They saw their fellow crew member engulfed by what now appeared to be a monster land octopus whose tentacles formed a net about him which swiftly grew smaller. The thicker, central portion of the horror slavered and bubbled in its eagerness to feed, and many other small mouths attempted to begin.

Larsen used a blast rifle. He could have been more careful, but there was desperate need for haste. There were more lights held up in shaking hands. The monster dropped off after the blaster bolt hit it, but the crewman fell to the ground too. Then other blast rifles opened up on the thing. Presently it was only a writhing group of unspeakable fragments on the ground, each of them seeming separately alive and ravenous.

The returning party hastened on. Now they carried lights, and things came out of the jungle to gaze raptly at the torches. The men used blast rifles again, shooting their way along the game trail. Two of them helped the man the beast had almost killed. Larsen had burned his own leg badly with his first shot while blowing the monster apart.

Then something utterly gigantic blocked the trail and stood gazing fascinatedly at the torches. The men of the *Theban* desperately poured blaster bolts into it. Presently they were able to believe it was dead. But they heard other rustlings. Their torches were bringing other beasts.... Glassy-eyed with terror, they tiptoed past the monster they had killed, which smelled of slime.

When they reached the clearing, the state of their nerves was deplorable. Some of them stumbled across the carcasses of the creatures Larsen had killed from the air lock door. They were terrified.

But Horn's group of fugitives was in a much better situation. When night fell, they were safe from pursuit. True, their food supply was to be counted only in days; they were hunted; they couldn't expect rescue. But they were safe from pursuit, or so it seemed, and only this morning they hadn't been. They rejoiced in the wisdom of their new leader.

Except the engineer. He was restless and racked by his need for the bottles he depended on. The others were very weary, and an hour after the sudden sunset only Ginny and Horn were awake - aside from the engineer. Horn was taking the first night watch and Ginny sat beside him. They talked in the darkness. Sometimes Ginny laughed - not because Horn had said something humorous, but because she was happy. Fortunately we humans are really rational only part of the time.

Once, though, the *Theban's* engineer disturbed them to ask pitifully if there wasn't even part of a bottle among the castaways. Even part of a part - There wasn't.

As they talked, Horn worked in the darkness on a bit of bark from a thick-barked tree. He carved out an object some six inches wide and eight long, felt his handiwork, then made a second. When he was satisfied, he awoke the *Danae's* junior officer. He gave him the stun pistol for armament, then went to sleep with Ginny's fingers intertwined with his own.

Again he awoke when the sky grew grey. He took back the stun pistol and some other items. He went into the water alone, moving faster with no others to shepherd.

It took him an hour instead of a much longer time to reach a spot suited to his purposes. This was at the edge of the swamp. The water level had risen half a foot during the night. He strapped the carved bark items to his feet and ventured on solid ground, then examined his tracks.

They weren't human tracks. He'd invented an animal and the animal's tracks. He left those tracks behind him instead of his own. He went briskly along the jungle trails. And as he went, he spread bait.

The bait was interstellar credit notes which he laid along the game trail he followed. There were hundred-credit notes, and five-hundred-credit notes, and thousand-credit notes. He left them in plain sight. Anybody searching for a human trail where Horn moved would not find one. But anybody from the *Theban* who saw money in a jungle path would cease to look for anything else.

Halfway along the trail, Horn came upon the place where Larsen and the others had encountered a greenish-grey constrictor beast the night before. They'd blown it to bits with blast rifles, and the smaller bits were quite dead now. But the thicker, more noisome centre of the creature still throbbed faintly. Horn was sickened by the fact even as he put money down beside it.

He went on. Presently he hid himself carefully, to watch the clearing and what might happen in it. The bodies of the light-dazzled creatures were moved now from where they'd been. They were now food for some of those same greenish-grey horrors. The men of the *Theban* had shot some of them for sport, and shot and shot again the fragments into which they separated. But they were mindless, mere ravenousness. To kill them was poor sport even for strong-stomached men like Larsen's followers. They'd dragged the dead larger beasts out of the way, and now the flat discs squirmed and swarmed over them, embracing them foully while the mouths at the ends of the tentacles fed, and fed, and fed.

These things Horn saw. The gluttony of the monsters was revolting. But he waited for the movements of men.

At barely midmorning a second hunting party started out from the *Theban*. The men filed into a trail leading into the jungle. They vanished. Horn kept watch from a place well within the jungle's edge, listening. Not long after the departure, he heard a faint shout in the distance.

Then silence. The *Theban* stood almost perfectly upright, with the blazing sunshine of tropical Carola beating upon her. There was no movement except of the grey-green things devouring dead animals. There were the normal, strangely sweet sounds of the jungle, flutelike noises similar to bird calls, and small creakings from a particular kind of tree which became vocal when it swayed. Once or twice he heard deep-bass bellowings, minutes apart, and once he was sure he heard very deep, very faraway thunder.

Just after midday there was a sudden waning of the light. Horn looked up, and there were clouds almost reaching to mid-sky, thick and sullen and dark grey in colour. Lightning flashed among them. They did reach mid-sky, and then they sullenly floated away again.

The party from the *Theban* came back before dusk. Their clothing was dry. They hadn't attempted to follow the castaways to an imaginary destination beyond the swamp. Instead, they'd found money spread invitingly along a trail they came to, and they'd picked it up. They gathered up every bit of bait Horn had spread for them, and devoted the rest of the day to trying to find more. They were exuberant. They were excited. They'd found money!

They went joyously into the ship. Before they were all inside the air lock, they were babbling to those who had kept ship. They'd found money! Much money!

And it was true. Forty million credits was an abstraction. It didn't really exist. Hundred-credit notes did. So did five hundreds. And they had visible proof that there were such things as thousand-credit notes. These were not abstractions. These were things one could hold in one's hand. They felt rich!

Horn went back on his bark animal-track soles and left more money on another trail. Then still another. He baited two small sections only a hundred yards each. He left patches of jungle trail displaying bright, rectangular, beautifully printed certificates saying that so many credits would be paid to the bearer at any bank in the galaxy. Then he went back to the *Danae* people's encampment. He wanted to see Ginny. If things had happened differently, he and Ginny would now be married and living happily ever after. As it was, they were in a very nasty situation, along with two officers, four crewmen, and six other passengers of the *Danae*. It was no time for romance, but Horn was working and planning exclusively for Ginny. He thought only in terms of what was best for Ginny. He didn't notice the anguish of the *Theban's* small engineer, two days without access to a bottle. The engineer was suffering intensely.

The *Danae's* captain had gravely decided that some sort of shelter should be built against rainstorms. They'd made a leanto of sorts, and it was partly thatched. Horn believed it would leak, but he praised it generously. He showed the castaways a small patch of what looked like mould or fungus on the game trail. With all watching, he touched it at its centre with a stick. It was barely six inches in diameter, but instantly it seemed to sprout tiny, horrible tentacles which seized the stick and squeezed and slavered lustfully over it. It was unspeakably disgusting. Horn flirted the stick and the small beast went hurtling through the air. It fell some distance off in the jungle, and Horn considered that his followers were properly warned against that and larger beasts of the kind.

He conferred at length with the *Danae's* captain, and gravely agreed upon measures to be taken if any of the beasts of Carola should attempt to investigate their camp after nightfall. Lights were to be the prime defence. Local creatures would become fascinated when lights were flashed into their eyes. They could be led past the camp, or even killed if necessary - but in silence if possible. Sharp-pointed poles might be used as spears while a beast was held hypnotized by light. But there should be no avoidable noise, because sound travelled a long way in the jungle.

So Horn and Ginny had not much opportunity to be together this night. The *Danae's* captain made a formal, even bitter protest against Horn's use of currency as a weapon in a psychological war, but he couldn't protest too much. He needed Horn to think of things he'd never been trained to think of, and therefore never had thought.

In the end, Horn left the encampment again very near the middle of the planet's dark hours. He headed back along the water route he'd used before. There'd be no constrictor beasts in the water, but after he came out he moved through blackness, with cold chills running up and down his spine. He carried his stun pistol out and in his hand. He'd use it if one of the monsters lay in wait.

Ultimately he came to the edge of the clearing. The particoloured moon went overhead and during the half minute of its passage the clearing was astonishingly bright. The *Theban* loomed high in the rapidly moving moonlight. It showed no lights. There was no movement except unseen, slithering stirrings where the beasts fed. There was no sound anywhere.

But the atmosphere inside the *Theban* must have changed very much. The crew of the *Theban* had money and nothing to do with it. They would probably be shooting dice soon. There'd be exultation when they won and anger when they lost. At least some of them would try to cheat the others. And they'd be beginning to want to get away from Carola. Not immediately, to be sure. Now that they had so much, they could imagine having much more. But when they had that much, they'd want to start spending it. It is a part of human nature that most men don't want to accumulate money; they want to spend it. Most men get nervous when they have more than they're used to, and will abandon any prospect for future wealth in favour of wild extravagance and celebration in the present.

Horn estimated how this human character trait would work on the *Theban*. Normally, no spaceman will work if he has two thousand credits. If he has ten, he won't try to get more. The money left on the jungle trail should mean to the men of the *Theban's* crew that they had vast excitement, great satisfaction, and wild parties waiting for them to get where they were going. Money was like a ticket to something thrilling. Nothing was more sure to undermine Larsen's authority than money burning holes in the pockets of his crew.

Actually, there was a dice game already going on in the tramp ship's crew's quarters. The money found on the trail was changing hands frequently and rapidly. Those who had the money bet it, and those who didn't watched. So there was nobody watching the clearing from inside the ship.

Horn made his way from the far side of the cone-shaped beacon to the beacon itself. He avoided the dead beasts and the revolting nightmares-made-flesh around them. The particoloured moon was long vanished. There was abysmal blackness everywhere. Horn guided himself by starlight alone as he found the entrance to the cone.

He went inside and found what Larsen had discovered before him. There was the broadcast unit, separately covered and sealed inside a plastic case. An infinitely tiny sound came from where the beacon's plastic recording went round and round under a magnetic pickup.

"*Carola beacon. Carola beacon,*" said the infinitesimal voice. It gave galactic co-ordinates by which a ship could check its own position. "*Unmanned commerce refuge only. Unmanned commerce refuge only. Carola beacon. Carola beacon.*" It had broadcast that message millions of times in the past, yet it went on monotonously: "*Carola beacon. Carola beacon...*"

Horn cut off the broadcast. There was a special device alongside the pickup. Using it, a patrol ship surveying the Rhymer passage could change its message and add warning of a newly discovered meteor stream, the future approach of a burned-out solar system, or a new patch of cosmic dust. Cosmic dust was particles ranging in size from much smaller than grains of sand to pebbles the size of pinheads. A ship striking such a dust cloud at full speed would vanish in a flare of vaporized metal and white-hot gas.

Horn used the equipment provided to give warning of newly found dangers. He recorded a terse and succinct notice that there were castaways aground on Carola. They were refugees from the wrecked liner *Danae*. They were being hunted by the crew of the space tramp *Theban*, which had caused the wreck of the *Danae*.

When the recording was complete, Horn utterly smashed the device for changing it. Nothing else could be substituted for it now. He turned on the beacon broadcast again and went quickly away. If by any chance Larsen should again pick up the tedious beacon signal and discover the change, he could only turn off the broadcast permanently, as Horn had done it temporarily. And even that would be reported by the first ship to pass this way. A patrol ship could come to make repairs, and it would find out what had happened.

As a result of Horn's just-ended visit to the beacon, it was absolutely necessary for the *Theban* to lift off from Carola. Whether or not her crew found the castaways, and whether or not they secured the money for which they had committed several capital crimes, they had to get away! Only, of course, they couldn't without Horn to run the engines.

There was no alarm. Horn was back in the jungle within minutes. He ensconced himself in a tree and tried to doze until daybreak.

There was reaction to what he'd done earlier, though, at a very early hour of the next morning. Crewmen of the *Theban* came bustling out of the ship and moved eagerly and briskly towards the west. The men who'd previously been left as ship guards were in this group. They went zestfully and hurriedly to look for money strewn on the game trails of the jungle.

They'd find it, of course. Some would have been trampled by passing beasts, but there was a mile-long stretch of trail on which credit notes had been strewn not too lavishly by Horn. There was another, quarter-mile-long section. And there were two short bits of trail where money was to be picked up by any passerby.

The searchers found money. Horn heard the noise as they bellowed boasts. But presently the men did not come back, and they didn't brag of their findings, either. There is a sum of money beyond which to boast is to invite robbery. There is another sum, and to boast of having it is an invitation to murder.

Horn moved away from the clearing's edge. The long stretch of money bait had been found first. It was now cleaned up. The quarter-mile section was found. He'd heard the noise there, too. He went carefully and cautiously to examine the hundred-yard strips he'd baited. The money itself was both bait and trap. A quaint side light, too, was that the men in the *Theban* would become desperately suspicious of each other, now, but no one would want to kill Horn. He was their only hope, and if he'd found the treasure he could give more of it.

He almost ran into two men on a hundred-yard bait trail, but he heard them squabbling and passed them by. There was another man.... It was the ship's cook. Horn heard him searching feverishly. He stepped quietly aside into the jungle and waited.

Presently the cook came by, half crazed by his good fortune. He'd found more money than he'd ever had before.

Horn coldly squeezed the trigger of his stun gun. Then he came out of hiding and picked up the cook, who'd fallen senseless as Horn had done at the gatehouse of the spaceport on Formalhaut. Horn carried the limp figure of the cook on his shoulder, trending gradually downhill towards the rising water. It had risen another foot during the night.

Horn fastened the unconscious cook to a tree. Then he went to the encampment of his followers. Ginny seemed about to faint with relief when she saw him. He drew the *Danae's* captain aside and explained. The captain was astounded, shocked and unwilling. Horn grimly offered to sign a statement acknowledging full responsibility.

The *Danae's* captain followed reluctantly when Horn went away from the encampment once more. The two of them, together, moved towards where Horn had left the cook tied up.

They heard him screaming from a quarter mile away. He shrieked as the *Theban's* little engineer had done when thrown out to space for a landing on the *Danae*. And he had reason for screaming. A five-foot constrictor beast swarmed over him. It seemed to embrace him, horribly. Its tentacles with their hungry, lipless mouths at the ends lapped at his flesh as if caressingly. His eyes seemed about to start out of his head as he shrieked.

It was necessary to get close, and Horn was almost repentant that he'd bound the cook for such a monster to find. But then he noticed something new; a new angle on the creature's natural history.

From a slit in the thickest part of the monster's central portion, little three-inch monsters squirmed and hitched their way out. They were miniatures of the full-grown beast. They were carried in a sack or pocket like an opossum, like a seahorse, like all monotremes and kangaroos, like many insects and a few fish. These infantile horrors squeezed their way to freedom, and they squirmed and writhed their way under their parent's constricting arms to feed on whatever the parent had captured.

Horn used his stun pistol carefully.

Just in time.

CHAPTER EIGHT

AN hour later it began to rain. By that time the *Theban's* cook was on his way back to the tramp ship, half stripped of his garments which the constrictor beast had torn in the struggle of its mouths to feed. The cook was gashed here and there by the beast, and he'd been nibbled on by the infant monstrosities riding in their parent's pouch. But he was essentially unharmed.

Equally important, he was rich. Horn had given him such a large quantity of interstellar credit notes that he could not stuff them in a pocket. He could hardly carry the whole amount on board the *Theban* except a little at a time. The cook also had painstaking instructions for the astrogation of a lifeboat to the planet Wolkim. The *Theban* had spaceboats. With his written instructions, the cook could take one of the boats and have a really fair chance of making port. He'd have probably as good a chance as anybody could have in a spaceboat. And if he did get there, he'd be a free man with a pocket full of money. It looked as if Horn were insanely offering immunity and riches to a man who was at least accessory to piracy and the intended murder of the *Danae* people. But Horn had kept the cook's blast rifle. It doubled the armament of his followers.

"You," said the *Danae's* captain heavily, as they moved later along a flooded trail, "have assumed full responsibility for this, Mr. Horn!"

They waded nearly waist deep in water, surrounded by the trees of a jungle turned to swamp. There came a rumbling from the west.

"Of course," said Horn curtly. "It's the only thing to do."

"I have co-operated against my better judgment, Mr. Horn!" said the captain fretfully. "I fear it will be hard to explain."

"It's perfectly simple," Horn told him impatiently. "The cook's gone back to the *Theban* with fifty thousand credits in his pocket. If anybody finds it out, they'll kill him for it. Any one of them."

More rumblings from the west. Horn cocked an ear, but did not comment. He waded on. *The Danae's* captain considered solemnly. He looked as dignified as any man could when surrounded by water to his middle, plus the eccentric vegetation of the planet Carola.

"In that event," pronounced the captain, "he will keep it a secret. And nothing will have been gained. I fear I have made a mistake in consenting to this, Mr. Horn."

"Maybe he'll try to keep it secret," agreed Horn as impatiently as before, "but already the different crewmen have found different amounts of money, and those who have the least don't like it. Even those who have the most are suspicious that somebody else has more than they have. They're watching each other. The cook knows it. He can't act naturally. There's no natural way to act! He'll know they suspect him. He'll try to allay their suspicions, which will

make them even more suspicious. Then he won't dare sleep. He'll go psycho from fear. He'll give himself away. Then the others will suspect each other more than ever! And there's the spaceboat bit."

The captain shook his head sorrowfully. "I doubt very much that he will attempt to make Wolkim in a spaceboat, Mr. Horn. A lifeboat journey is risky. We had no choice. We had to try it. But I do not think a common spaceman will do it for money. No, I do not think he will do it."

There was a sudden, angry growling in the west. It was thunder. Horn looked up and behind him. Clouds could be glimpsed above the jungle roof. There was a flash of lurid lightning, which doubled the brightness of the day. Horn shook his head annoyedly.

"He won't think of it as done for money," he observed. "If he does it, it will be because he thinks of it as his only hope of living. Which it may be! But like yourself, I doubt he will do it."

He turned into a branching jungle trail, towards a shallower part of the water. The *Danae's* captain followed him.

"Then I don't see what -"

"The *Theban* can't lift off without me," said Horn, "and presently they'll find out that the beacon has been telling all passers-by just exactly what's happening here. So if they stay here, money or no money they'll be caught and executed for various crimes. So they can't stay here. But they can't leave here via the ship without me, and I'm not available. But that does leave the boats. We've just reminded the cook of the boats by telling him how to use one. Presently all of the crew will be worrying that some of their number may get away in the boats and leave them behind. They'll all realize acutely that if Larsen has to choose between abandoning his crew and escaping, his crew will be in bad shape."

There was a bellow of thunder almost overhead. It was like the crack of doom above the treetops. It rolled and rumbled and reverberated. Horn looked up and said wryly, "I'm afraid we're going to get it. I hoped the rain would hold off a day or two more. But it's not far to the camp."

He mended his pace a little. Here the water was not quite up to his knees and offered less impediment to walking. The booming of the thunder went on, going down perceptibly in pitch as the farthest of the rumblings arrived at Horn's cars.

Far, far away there was a roaring sound, deep-toned and steady. Horn stared up at the sky again. He could see it only in patches, but a good half was still clearest blue, like the skies on all oxygen-atmosphere planets. The rest was dark. A cloudbank moved across the sky, with writhing fingers of vapour reaching on before it. The clouds were thick beyond conception, and grey instead of white, almost to their edges. They darkened as they advanced, and halfway to the horizon they were very nearly black.

The faraway roaring sound grew nearer. It was rain drumming on scores of square miles of jungle roof. Horn shook his head. "The feeble attempt at a shelter in the clearing would be of no use against a downpour amounting to six or seven inches of rain in an hour. But he hastened. The *Danae's* captain strode dignifiedly in his wake.

There were small jungle noises about them as they reached the edge of the water. They went along the game trail whose flooded part they had been following. There were more jungle noises. Horn saw something small climbing swiftly up a tree, saw a burrow beside the trail,

broken open from below. Something that had lived underground was aware that the rains were here. It had come out of its habitation to take refuge among the branches overhead. All the ground creatures seemed to be climbing.

The two men came to the tiny clear space they and the other castaways had made two days earlier. Ginny smiled brightly at Horn. The women, including Ginny, were working feverishly to enlarge and improve the shelter.

Ginny said confidently, "It looks like rain!"

The stout businessman brought more foliage to be added to the shelter's thatch. The younger of the *Danae's* officers aided him. The hypochondriac passenger huddled in the most protected corner of what had so far been built. The four spacemen from the *Danae* sat stolidly still. If ordered by somebody, they would probably have worked also, but without orders they simply sat. The two children were more active.

Horn ran his eyes over the group. "Where's the little man?" he demanded. "The *Theban's* engineer?"

A crash of thunder came at the instant. It was literally deafening. When it ended, one of the four crewmen said stolidly that the engineer had gone down the game trail an hour before. He'd carried something with him.

Horn said sharply, "One of these?"

He pointed to the parcels, not unlike food packages in appearance, which contained the shipment of interstellar currency. The crewman nodded. The little engineer had suffered from lack of his bottles. Among the castaways there was nothing to help him. So, desperately seeking relief from anguish, he'd taken some of the currency to get himself a welcome and a bottle on the ship. And, being what he was, he wouldn't intend to, but he couldn't refuse to guide Larsen's men to the hiding place of the castaways and the money shipment.

The roaring in the distance became louder. It drowned out the sound of Horn's voice as he called wrathfully, "Everybody up! Everybody up! We've got to move! He's gone back to the *Theban* to make a deal to sell us out for drinks. Everybody up!"

The roaring of the onward-sweeping rain became louder still. Horn furiously roused the *Danae's* crewmen, and loaded them. They looked questioningly at the captain, and submitted to be burdened. The *Danae's* junior officer took his full share of foodstuffs and money. Ginny went to the women. In the manner of females, they gave the children foliage to use as partial - very partial - shelter from the coming downpour. The stout businessman took up his load. They started off. The hypochondriac wrung his hands. To go marching off, with rain approaching....

There were a few drops of rain overhead. Then bigger raindrops, the size of pebbles, hit the nearer topmost leaves. Then with a rush, a rattling, and a booming sound, the rain arrived. Horn finished wrapping cloths about the safeties of the two blasters the castaways now possessed. The most modern of blast weapons shared a drawback that only flintlock rifles of centuries earlier had been subject to. They had to be protected from wet. Even with safeties on, a sufficiently heavy rain could make them heat up through a high-resistance layer of moisture. Horn carried one weapon. He'd given Ginny the other. He trusted Ginny to use her brains, whereas he had seen no evidence of such an ability among the others.

The rain beat down overhead. The air filled with a fine mist of splatterings. For minutes, though, and long enough for the party to get in motion, there was only a thin semidrizzle at the

ground level. The castaways moved away from their hiding place. They had previously gone from one spot to another along trails that were flooded, submerged; now Horn led them away from the swamp. He led them inland, uphill.

Then the rain broke through the jungle roof. It came flowing down tree trunks in glistening, rippling layers. It flowed down branches to their lowest point and then poured like compact streams from hoses. It ran into the trail they tramped. In minutes the sodden bare soil was half an inch deep in running water. And more rain kept coming down.

To march in such saturation was like walking under a waterfall. Garments filled with water to the limit of their capacity to absorb. The burdens the fugitives carried were made heavier by water. The trail surface became slippery, and it was difficult to keep one's balance.

A woman slipped and fell, and Horn helped her to her feet. A child fell down, and Ginny lifted it. The child grinned. Walking in the rain is a pleasure of childhood which few parents will allow. The two children enjoyed being castaways. No one else did.

The journey through this downpour was exhausting. The water fell at close to ten inches per hour. Movement was seemingly meaningless and altogether unpleasant. Streams of water descended as if thousands of faucets had been turned on above the castaways' heads, and there was nothing to do but blunder on below them. Leaves dropped steady, threadlike trickles. Splashing formed water droplets so small that they did not fall but floated in the air between the tree trunks. And the trail became a stream a full inch in depth, and then two inches, and then three.

The *Danae's* castaways could not have been seen from a hundred feet away. If there had been anyone to watch their progress, Horn would have been seen first, heavily burdened and with streams of water pouring from his elbows, his chin, and the corners of the pack he carried. He'd have seemed to approach through a film of falling water, with a torrent falling on him full blast. Ginny came close behind; then the stout businessman, doggedly trudging with more than his share of the castaways' few possessions. Then came the two women and their children, and then the four crewmen of the *Danae*, burdened and somehow squat in appearance, marching deliberately under spoutings and streamings of water. After them the *Danae's* captain. After him the hypochondriac and the *Danae's* mate. The passenger tried hopelessly to dodge the falling water. He was convinced that he was catching his death of cold.

The air was full of sound. There were splashing, but only nearby. The drumming of rain upon leaves made a monotonous uproar which blotted out all others. The jungle was deeply shadowed, as if in late twilight. But from time to time monstrous and malevolent lightning flashed. There were occasions when lightning flashes followed each other in such rapid succession that the people, marching in the downpour seemed to move jerkily, mechanically, as if they were clumsily made robots or hastily made vision animation. The thunder bellowed. It was useless to try to talk. One could only bend one's head against the downpour and walk, and slip, and walk and slip again.

This went on for hours. Then Horn saw where a monster tree had fallen. It was hollow at its base and with an entrance to its rotten heart like the doorway of a cathedral. The hollow side was down. It formed a roof of sorts, with side walls and a floor. It was a shelter. Horn halted his followers and went to examine it. The others waited, drooping in the flood from the sky, till Horn came back and waved them in. The tree had been a full twenty feet in diameter, vastly larger than the average and huge even among the others of its thick-barked kind.

It seemed strange to be in shelter. There was a curtain of dripping water across the hole by which they'd entered, and inside was darkness, but once within they could smell ancientness

and decay and, of course, the overwhelming wetness from without. But in the fallen monster tree it was actually dry. Horn even found rotted punk which, with sufficient encouragement, would smoulder without flames and might be shielded so no light would invite nocturnal beasts after nightfall.

Horn made the fire and the castaways settled themselves. They had, of course, left no footprints on the torrent-drenched game trail. They'd marched at random among the winding, crisscrossing paths. Under the conditions of their flight, they could not keep track of compass directions. Horn didn't know where he was, except that he was somewhere on the upraised spur of land on which the beacon stood. They might be half a dozen miles from the beacon and the *Theban*. On the other hand, they might be very near.

When that thought occurred to him, Horn prepared to post himself on guard. He got a blast rifle ready. It was warm to the touch. Despite its wrappings and its safety, moisture, which might have been the mere wetness of the air, was developing heat. On the trail he could have done nothing. Here he wiped the rifle, but everything was damp. He needed something dry.

He got interstellar credit notes out of a sealed parcel and used them for drying rags. He dried his own blaster and the other, then returned the notes gravely to the *Danae's* captain, who had watched him with an expression of as much alarm and shock as he could permit himself.

"Even money," said Horn, "has its uses occasionally."

The captain said with dignity and some reproach, "I am not sure, Mr. Horn, that I should have agreed to your measure. It was bad enough to attempt to cause dissension by the use of credit notes planted for those pirates to find, but that had some reason. This action has none."

"But it has," said Horn. "It keeps us armed a few days longer. Now that the rains have come, I can't spread any more money or manna for your would-be murderers. In two days or three we'd have won them over. They'd have begun to desert to us because it was too dangerous to be on the *Theban*, and safe and restful and happy to be with us. That was what I hoped for. But the rains have come. We have to start over."

He casually placed himself on guard, looking out into a grey semidarkness with curtain after curtain of falling water. He could see really close trees with fair clarity, but those twenty yards away were mere outlines in a mist. Beyond a hundred feet he could not see at all.

Ginny came to sit beside him. She looked at his expression. "It's bad?"

"Very bad," said Horn. "I've got to think of something new to do. If the rain had held off just a couple of days more, or if that poor devil could have gone a little longer without a drink.... But he'll have told Larsen everything he knows about us. Everything. That's bad!"

Ginny watched his face intently. "Do you - really think we're going to - get out of this?"

"Of course!" said Horn. "It's just going to take longer than I thought. If none of us gets sick, we'll make it. Larsen can't take frustration. We're frustrating him. If the rain keeps up, he can't hunt us. If he can't hunt us, his men will realize that they can't leave in the ship. Presently they'll realize that they can't leave at all except in the boats. Then they'll see that when the *Danae's* only a few days overdue, some sort of ship will make routine calls on all the beacons along her route.

"If they stop at Hermas they probably won't find the *Danae*, but the smashed food and fuel caches will tell them something's wrong. When they come on to Carola they'll find the *Theban*, and the wreckage of the *Danae's* boats. But before that they'll have picked up the beacon signal, which will post them pretty thoroughly on what's happened. All this, of course, is

assuming that no ship comes along the space lane earlier and picks up the modified signal the beacon's broadcasting now to blow the whistle on Larsen."

He was deliberately encouraging. It sounded very promising indeed. Ginny said reflectively. "It really looks -"

"I could end our troubles tomorrow," said Horn sombrely, "if I were willing to let Larsen get away. But he tried to murder you, Ginny. He was willing to have you die just so he could steal some filthy credit notes to spend on beastliness!"

Ginny said, "But how -"

"I could give him the money he's after," said Horn sourly. "I could dump it out in the clearing for him to find. He would, or he'd know instantly if anybody else found it. And then he'd set his men to murdering each other, maybe with a little help from himself. Ultimately he'd leave with the money in a *Theban* lifeboat. And we'd be in pretty good shape."

"We're going to try to get the children dry," Ginny said. "That rotted wood you found burns a lot like charcoal."

Horn nodded. He continued to watch out of the opening of the hollow tree.

The rain stopped rather more suddenly than it began. One instant all the world was filled with the drumming sound of water pouring down in masses, the next instant the drumming noise retreated. There remained only the sounds of water running here, and dripping there, and pouring furiously downwards at another place.

In minutes the sky could be seen, and the clouds were visibly less dark grey and less menacing than before. The giant tree in whose trunk they'd taken shelter had pulled down much of the jungle roof in its collapse. Masses of vapour overhead could be seen to twist and writhe as if struggling not to retreat from the area they'd overwhelmed. But they'd emptied themselves for the moment. In three hours they'd sent twenty-some inches of rain down to the ground around the castaways' retreat. Thunder still rumbled over the jungle. Now and then, not too often, lightning flashed. And wetness glistened everywhere. Leaves still dripped. Treetrunks still drained away water from their trunks. And the trail by which they'd come here remained a babbling rivulet.

Horn continued to regard the world outside this shelter with a certain weariness. Presently he saw animals again. At first they were mere flickerings of motion, too small and too quick to be identified. Then something writhed across the game trail. It was greyish green, and it seemed to be a disc of flabby and unwholesome mould or fungus. Presently a deerlike creature with large, soft eyes appeared and went away again.

The women attended to the children. Some of the men wrung out their garments. The *Danae's* captain supervised the operation. He moved about the shelter, confidently surveying the scene and the matters about which he was qualified to give orders. Ginny came back to Horn.

"I don't like sitting still," said Horn annoyedly. "I think it's unwise to give Larsen time to make plans of his own. We've kept him busy with what we were doing to him, after a fashion, but with the rains coming things tend to turn his way. It's time he got a shock. He's had several, but he needs a few more. Frustrating shocks. We need to keep him off balance."

Ginny looked uneasy, but she waited. After a moment Horn said, frowning, "Every game trail has had all its spoor washed away. My guess is that Larsen may start patrolling between

rains, to try to find man tracks and locate us that way. It would be wholesome for him to find he can't."

"But -"

"There are some new tracks," said Horn. "I've seen one animal like a deer since the rain. There'll be others. I think I'll give Larsen some evidence that the web he began to weave can close in on him."

"If you mean to go away somewhere," said Ginny uneasily, "I wish you wouldn't. Everybody depends on your decisions."

"This is one of them," said Horn. "I don't like leaving you, but you certainly ought to be safe here. And it isn't wise to let Larsen plan a new campaign. I'd rather make him plan some new defences."

"If - if I could go with you," said Ginny wistfully. "I'm always so uneasy -"

"I'll be making you safer," he told her.

He stood up and went through the shelter. The *Danae's* captain now wore an air of infinite calm confidence, somewhat marred by drippings that still fell occasionally from his uniform. He did nothing in particular, but gave an impression of supervising everything. The young officer of the *Danae* was busy getting more dry punk to keep the tiny fire going. The stout businessman wrung out his clothes again. The four crewmen from the *Danae* sat.

In the completely technical operation of a space liner from this port to that, every action of its officers and crew was routine. One did this at this time, and that at that. In between one did nothing. The *Danae's* crew was now operating out of routine, but with the routine habit of doing nothing but what was specifically commanded. The women were busy with the children, by the small, red-smouldering but smokeless fire. The hypochondriac was visibly despairing of his health.

Horn called the *Danae's* captain aside and explained curtly what he intended to do. The captain gracefully accepted responsibility for the group during Horn's absence. He was even cordial about it.

"Now," he said with amiable dignity, "we have something like a suitable shelter and we have hope of rescue because of your change of the beacon's message. While you are gone, Mr. Horn, I will get things snug and shipshape. Everyone will feel better if we are living as nearly as possible like civilized people while we wait for help. Tidiness makes for morale."

Horn wasn't altogether satisfied. He said curtly, "The important thing is no noise and a careful watch. But I think that what I'm intending will discourage Larsen and his men. They ought to realize that their best chance is to take to the boats, but they don't like it. I've got to nerve them up to it. Maybe I can."

"And the rest of us having something constructive to do - preparing to remain here until help comes - will be good for everyone," the captain said warmly. "Ah, yes, Mr. Horn! I'll have everything snug and tidy and self-respecting when you return."

Horn cast a glance around the shelter. The ceiling was rotten wood that hadn't fallen yet. The walls were similar stuff. The floor was dirt, its occupants were still soaked and still bedraggled folk who looked quite unlike the passengers and crew of a crack space liner. They didn't look as if they had ever shuttled neatly along space lanes from one civilized port to another. The men, Horn included, were badly in need of shaves. One of the women was

already trying to do something with her still-wet hair. The *Danae's* captain would have much to do to make this refuge tidy. But it was true that attempting it might be good for people who'd thought constantly of fear for a few days past.

Horn fastened on the bark, track-making devices he'd used before. He tried to smile at Ginny as he left the shelter.

The sounds of the jungle were muted now. Water still dripped from leaf to leaf and branch to branch, with tapping noises. There were few animal cries. The jungle trail here was still a narrow running stream. That was an advantage.

By the time it came to a junction with another trail, Horn had mastered an art it had occurred to him might be useful. A man walks confidently and forthrightly on any path, in a city or a jungle or whatever. His footprints are an even distance apart and he walks in the middle of the way. A wild animal doesn't. Unless in headlong flight, a wild creature meanders. He is listening. He is watching. He will hesitate here and pause there. The trail of any wild creature shows that he is acutely and fearfully conscious of everything about him. A man is apt to become lost in his own thoughts.

Horn worked out a way to walk. For one thing, he took steps only half the usual length, in order to seem four-footed instead of two. He meandered. He paused. After a few yards of this he examined the result. It was convincing. He became confident that nobody from the *Theban*, seeing tracks like these, would suspect that they were human-made.

He watched the ground ahead, though. And suddenly, where another jungle path joined his own, he saw new, fresh, multiple human tracks. They came out of a trail leading more or less towards the space beacon. They went down towards the spot where the tiny temporary clearing with the thatched shelter had been - the place Horn had made them abandon when the *Theban's* engineer turned up missing. The footprints went down that way, then came back. They'd retraced their steps towards the ship.

This was plainly the doing of the engineer. His need for stuff in bottles had overcome his sure knowledge that sooner or later he'd be killed on the tramp ship. He'd carried a money parcel to the ship as a peace offering. He'd offered to show where the fugitives were hidden, in exchange for the liquid he craved. And he'd tried to carry out his offer.

Horn heard himself growling. He stopped and studied the trail. Returning footprints overlaid the others. Some were wider and some were longer, and at least one was of a patched shoe which was distinctive. It looked as if as many returned as had gone towards the abandoned shelter. In any case, after the cook's experience with a grey-green beast it wasn't likely that any other *Theban* crewman would be willing to stay alone in a Carola jungle.

Horn debated for a long time. Then he went on. He followed the tracks towards the abandoned camp. They were largely trampled over by the tracks coming away from it again, but Horn was cautious. Intensely so. It took him a long, long time to get back close to the campsite. Then he heard a thread of sound. It was unmistakable, but it was unbelievable. It was Dauda music, the past year's craze in orchestration. It took a seventy-man band to play Dauda music acceptably. Now it swelled and pealed through the jungle on Carola, where human footprints in mud led towards its source and then away from it. It came to a wrenching, dissonant stop and a moment or two later it began again. Horn suddenly understood. He kept his blast rifle ready, of course, but he went forward.

The music came from the clearing the castaways had made and used for one night only. The shelter they'd been building was washed to trash, trapped and lodged among the tree trunks

downhill. There were footprints everywhere in the clearing. The *Theban's* men had searched it minutely for possible left-behind treasure. But there'd been nothing. The men were probably led by the red-haired mate, and they'd received orders to search with infinite care. They didn't find anything to take back with them.

They left two things behind. One was the walkie-talkie, playing music provided it from the control room of the space tramp. Its purpose was to let Larsen open negotiations with the castaways.

The other thing left behind was the wizened little engineer. Larsen had used him to board the *Danae* in empty space. Before that he'd meant to flog him to death on Hermas. Since then he'd deserted Larsen and returned to him, and he couldn't hope for more than a bottle or two, or really expect less than murder. But he'd been willing to be murdered if he had the bottles first.

He lay limp and still in the small clearing, horribly mutilated by the blaster bolt that had killed him. It was all perfectly clear. He'd led the party from the *Theban* to where he believed the fugitives would be. The party had kept in touch with the ship by walkie-talkie, which wasn't unlike the system Larsen used when he sent his mate to try to arrange for instant repairs in the Formalhaut spaceport. Obviously, today, when the engineer led the way to an abandoned camp rather than the treasure Larsen wanted, Larsen was angry. He'd flatly ordered the engineer killed.

Then Larsen gave another order. He was no longer confident that the castaways must ultimately make a bargain with him for food. And Horn's various manoeuvrings had turned the *Theban's* crew into a nerve-racked pack of suspicious and dispirited cowards. They feared him, and each other, and that the treasure would not be found, and that it would. They were afraid to try to lift off in the *Theban*, and equally to try a lifeboat journey. They'd begun to realize that the *Danae's* being overdue must cause a landing at the Hermas and Carola beacons by a ship sent to check such items. And then the *Theban's* company would be doomed.

So Larsen had ordered the walkie-talkie left, and it played cheerful, brilliant, lively tunes to call attention to the fact that Larsen wanted to make a deal with the castaways or with Horn.

CHAPTER NINE

VERY often, in a series of events, exactly what happens is less important than when. The most painstaking of plans may collapse because the parts of the plan do not keep to schedule. Larsen's contrivance for securing forty million credits in interstellar credit notes should have been foolproof. No such scheme had been anticipated and provided against. The plan was perfect, allowing for every normal and predictable contingency except that the *Theban's* antiquated engines would signal approaching breakdown when they did. That had happened after the castaways supplies on Carola had been destroyed, and before the *Theban* landed on Hermas to wait for the *Danae's* coming as a derelict.

Warning of a coming breakdown at any other time whatever would have let the scheme go through. Without the destruction of the supplies on Carola - that is, if the *Theban* had gone on to Formalhaut for repairs before smashing the caches on Carola - the castaways, on arrival there, would have had no suspicions. When the *Theban* arrived they'd have welcomed it, they would have been murdered, and the *Theban* would have gone away with the money.

Again, if the *Theban* had landed on Hermas on schedule to wait for the coming of the derelict liner, she wouldn't have had Horn on board, because her engines would have given no signs of disaster. She'd have picked up the *Danae*, found the money gone, and headed for Carola. And she'd have broken down on the way. She'd have become a derelict herself on the way to Carola. In any case, the castaways on Carola would have died if the *Theban's* engines hadn't acted up exactly when they did. Earlier, they'd have been murdered. Later they'd have starved. But in one case the *Theban's* crew would have been enriched, and in the other it would have died when the tramp ship's air gave out. The thing that counted was when things happened, not where or why or how.

A matter of scheduling operated now, while Horn distastefully buried the *Theban's* engineer as well as he could. If he hadn't taken time for the burial, he'd have got to the beacon clearing quite half an hour before he did. Which would have had consequences. They might have been fatal ones, or they might not. But entirely different things would have taken place.

In any event, Horn buried the engineer, after a fashion. Then he retraced his steps, seemingly leaving a wild beast's tracks behind him. He headed for the beacon and the *Theban*. He didn't accept the invitation offered by the music to enter into negotiations with Larsen. That would tell Larsen where he was. If he left no man tracks by the walkie-talkie when he used it, the presence of animal tracks instead might hint at false hoofs and false trailmaking. Anyhow, Horn did not use the walkie-talkie as Larsen wanted him to. Which was good.

On the other hand, Horn had finished burying the engineer at just about the time the murder party got back to the ship. Since there were only so many men aboard the *Theban*, that was bad. Then, it was very late afternoon, close to sundown. If the engineer-led party had got back

a little later, its members would have refused to go out in the dark and the night. That would have been good. But yet again -

The *Danae's* captain fussily organized the shelter under the big fallen tree. Naturally, he organized it as he thought things should be. This was neither good nor bad. But after he got things as tidy as possible, he announced that the crewmen and his own junior officer would join in making themselves as presentable as possible. They could not do much, but they could shave.

This was very, very, very bad.

They shaved in sequence, using the *Danae's* captain's own battery-operated pocket razor. He'd carried it in the tidy, flexible-plastic case that was watertight so perspiration would not affect the motor. The razor worked admirably. It shaved neatly and expeditiously and cleanly - and it made a spark disturbance which could be picked up at a distance of several miles by a walkie-talkie in operation.

It was the scheduling which made all this appalling. At any time no walkie-talkie was turned on, it would not have mattered. But the razor was used while one walkie-talkie played Dauda music to call somebody to it, and another one listened for what that somebody might say.

Horn, who was somebody, did not say anything. But the razor, which was not somebody, made the whining noise of a small electric motor, and Larsen heard it. Naturally!

It took only minutes to get a bearing on the motor whine which was the noise of a battery razor. It took no longer to get a second bearing. The giant fallen tree was no more than two miles from the *Theban*. In the rain the fugitives had marched at random. Horn knew he might have approached the space tramp. He'd worried about it. But the giant deadfall was miraculously what they needed. It had been better than he'd faintly hoped for, in the rain.

So he and the *Danae's* captain and everybody else had done their very best and behaved quite reasonably. But they'd happened to do reasonable things at unreasonable moments. Horn took time to conduct a funeral. The captain tidied up a tree-trunk and then shaved. The *Theban's* full complement of men was in the ship at that very instant. It was the scheduling of these events that made the trouble.

Horn reached the beacon clearing later than he'd expected. A second hunting party had left the ship while he followed the tracks back from a previous excursion that he couldn't know about. When he arrived, the storm clouds had retreated far to the west. They were dense and dark and they did not go to the horizon. The sun sank down behind them. Oddly, there were no brilliant colourings in the sunset today. The thick rainy season clouds were practically opaque. They cut off the sunshine before it reached the angle that produces sunset splendour.

Twilight fell. Horn made his way around the edge of the clearing, so he would seem to have approached from the west. He'd planned to arrive earlier. No spaceman likes to stay aboard his ship aground. Here there was nowhere to go and nothing to do, but from time to time somebody ought to come out of the ship, if only for some fresh air. With everybody finding some money, one might expect eager sallies after more currency. Horn had counted on that. But nobody came out of the ship.

He was disappointed. He'd meant to snipe at any man who came out of the *Theban*, and imprison the crew. They weren't wholly desperate yet because they still hoped to find the castaways and the money - and himself. But if a blast rifle were likely to open up on any man who poked his nose around the air lock door, the situation would be wholly changed again. And again the initiative would be Horn's and the problem Larsen's.

He grew irritated that nobody showed for him to fire at, while the light grew fainter and would presently shut off as if someone had flipped a switch.

Then, just as he began to consider alternative offensive possibilities, he saw a group of figures all the way over at the opposite side of the clearing. They came out of the jungle and made their way towards the ship. Horn strained his eyes. There were too many of them to be crewmen. There were more of them than the entire crew of the *Theban*. He saw two small figures. Children. The majority of the figures bore burdens. They made their way despairingly towards the *Theban*, with other marchers behind them. Horn made out blast rifles in the hands of the unburdened figures.

The *Danae's* castaways were captured. Guided by the whining static of a pocket battery razor, a hunting party from the ship had moved through twilight which made them almost as fearful as their quarry. They'd come silently - what few sounds they made masked by continued drippings from the trees - and they'd rushed the giant fallen tree after cries from inside it told them exactly where the fugitives were.

Again an element of timing was decisive. The interior of the hollow tree had had an occupant before the castaways took it over. Far back, where the rotted part of the toppled tree was smallest, a creature of Carola's night had slept through the day. It slept through the rain. Later, though, it awoke. It became uneasy because of movements nearby.

Then, when twilight fell, the castaways prepared to move their tiny fire to where it couldn't possibly attract any night-creature. Carrying the smouldering punk, they approached the night thing in its hiding place. It was terrified. When they were within feet of it, it bellowed and rushed for the open air. It toppled people. It toppled the glowing coals. It made a horrific bleating noise which called forth screams from the women and squeals of excitement from the two children. Then it found the exit and bolted into the night.

And within seconds the *Theban's* hunting party rushed the doorway through which the beast had fled. Blaster bolts set parts of the rotted ceiling aglow. A blaster shot knocked out the castaways' one weapon. It glowed red, then yellow, then incandescent white. But where it had fallen was dry and there was no explosion of steam.

And the castaways were captured. The crewmen of the *Danae* looked very unhappy. Two of the women desperately prepared to defend their children to the death. The red-haired mate rasped commands. He found the piled-up parcels of currency. He needed orders from Larsen about the disposition of the captives, but the currency was too much for four men to carry.

He loaded it on the prisoners. He was in a great hurry, because darkness was on the way. He and the three crewmen from the tramp ship herded their captives ahead, leaving the hollow tree to burn behind them. Presently there would be flames, leaping out into the night. Some nearby stuff might catch. But there was no danger of a widespread forest fire; the jungle was too wet. Tomorrow, or perhaps tonight, there'd come torrents from the sky that could douse any conflagration, no matter how fierce.

But the men of the *Theban* were literally afraid of the dark. Some of them had had experiences the night before that made them desperately anxious not to meet any night creature on the trail back to the ship. They drove their loaded captives ahead. If any monster did lurk in ambush, it would seize upon a prisoner at the front of the column, rather than an armed crewman at the rear.

Horn, waiting on the western side of the beacon clearing, saw the dispirited, despairing captives march slowly towards the ship. He'd had a perfectly workable plan in mind to increase

the tension inside the ship to where it might become intolerable. He'd meant simply to snipe. He'd confine the crew in a ship they couldn't lift and that he'd prevent them from leaving. And he'd let them know about the beacon, so the necessity for leaving would be past avoiding. Horn estimated that, considering everything, they should give up in two days.

But the *Danae's* crew and passengers, including Ginny, now straggled hopelessly towards the *Theban* on the beacon clearing of Carola.

Horn never remembered beginning to run. He simply found himself racing crazily across the clearing in the new-fallen night. He was unable to see the marching band clearly enough to aim at *Theban* crewmen alone. He couldn't fire into the clump of people. If he beat them to the air lock, he'd still be one man against four crew members, and he must take great care lest a shot kill a castaway, while his enemies could cut him down with blast rifles shooting three hundred bolts a minute.

But he didn't beat the party to the ship's port. He was three hundred yards away when the milling group about the landing fin began to dwindle. It was now black dark. Wholly inadequate starlight did show the stubby bulk of the *Theban* against the sky, but there was only a confusion of blackness where loaded figures were forced to enter the ship. By the time Horn was two hundred yards away, there was only blurred movement.

He was a hundred yards away, unable to gasp even a cry of desperation, when the exit port of the air lock clanged shut.

He arrived at it seconds later. He beat on it. But this was a time of tumult and confusion inside, and his pounding went unheard. It would take minutes for the clamorous boasting of the returned hunters to be subdued by roared orders from Larsen. It would take more minutes for Larsen to become satisfied that the parcels of currency were found, and to have them piled up by the captives.

The captives themselves would cause more disorder. They would have to be killed eventually, but murder in cold blood was not especially attractive to men who had forty million credits in currency to gloat over, and who wanted to revel in their stupendous good fortune. Murder was simply not yet an appealing idea. Besides, three of the prisoners were women.

A *Theban* spaceman ripped open a package of currency. Hundred and five-hundred and thousand-credit notes fluttered to the floor. He picked up notes and threw them crazily into the air to fall where they would. Other men tore at other parcels of cash. They made a snowstorm of money. They pelted each other with handfuls of it, laughing hysterically. They were intoxicated, drunk, drugged by the possession of inconceivable riches.

The captain of the *Danae* looked shocked. He must have known that his life was forfeit to the necessity of the *Theban's* crew, but he was shocked at this treatment of money. Larsen gazed at it with burning eyes.

Outside the airlock, Horn was filled with despair and with accumulating horror at this disaster. The particoloured moon of Carola rose swiftly in the west, as a crescent. It raced across the sky, waxing with unseemly haste until it was half full, scattering radiance upon the clearing. There was the fifty-foot wall of foliage ringing the artificially barren clearing like an irregular precipice. Single trees reached above it. Some of them were angular zigzags of wood with pompoms of foliage at every joint. Some were straight leafy spires which had no branches at

all.

The bright and rapidly moving light shone on horror, too. There were the carcasses of the beasts Larsen had slain when they came to stare at the ship's cargo lights. Some of the carcasses were swollen now, but there was movement among them. Writhing, undulating discs of greyish-green horror fed upon them. They glistened as the particoloured moon moved overhead. The dead animals were not pleasant to look at, but the horrors that squirmed upon and around them, feeding through many mouths, embracing the things they ate and making sucking noises.... They penetrated, suddenly, even into Horn's frantic state of mind.

As of the moment, Larsen was wholly victorious. He had the castaways as captives in his ship, and he had the currency shipment. He also had Horn essentially at his mercy. And he knew it. From the information given by the now-dead engineer, Larsen had undoubtedly learned of Ginny's special status in Horn's mind. Larsen would know that so long as Ginny was unharmed, Horn would do whatever was demanded.

With Ginny in his hands, Larsen could make Horn surrender. He could make Horn tune the *Theban's* engines to as complete dependability as such ancient mechanisms could attain. True, Larsen couldn't know when that perfection was real and when it was illusory. But while he held Ginny captive he had Horn at his mercy too.

This victory was still too new to be fully realized. Larsen now stood staring with hot eyes at money. Shaken out of its tightly wrapped parcels, there were bushels of it. It fluttered in the air, piled up a foot deep on the floor. The members of the *Theban's* crew were drunk with triumph and half crazy with rejoicing. Not one had yet realized that this was too much money to be divided or shared, too much to gamble with. Spinning and showering in the air, its final possession was yet to be determined, and only Larsen realized how that was likely to be arranged.

His eyes burned. But even he was only exploring what such loot amounted to. It would take time for him to work out every detail. But he must let his crewmen gloat and rejoice insanely. They had, for the time being, no ability to think of anything but their triumph. They tore the money parcels open, shouting. They flung thick handfuls - hundreds of thousands of credits - of money in each other's faces as if it were confetti. They tossed double armfuls towards the ceiling of the crew's quarters and let it shower down upon them. They howled when one of their number slipped upon piled-up money and fell to the floor. They began crazily to bury him in money, howling with laughter at the excruciating humour of the practice.

Outside the air lock, Horn drew back, making inarticulate noises of frustration. Ginny was in the *Theban*. She'd been in there a minute. Two. Perhaps three minutes. She'd been in the ship a hundred and eighty seconds, together with the other castaways and some forty million credits in currency. A part of Horn's mind gibbered over what might happen to her presently.

But there was a cold and acid-thinking part of his brain that spoke icily. No man, drunk with joy over riches, will turn to unrelated enormities until his first intoxication has worn off. The crew of the *Theban* hadn't yet realized that now they must set about murdering each other. It was evident that none of them could play fair with another when so much money was at stake. But for now they thought exclusively of the money. Two of their number literally wallowed in it, laughing foolishly and throwing the printed credit notes about as if splashing in water. It would be some while yet before they realized what must soon happen.

Danger to the prisoners would not begin for a while yet. It might be delayed again when these men, so rich in stolen money, began to suspect each other of plots and counter-plots, and of murders intended which must be prevented by other murders committed first. Or the prisoners might be seized upon as a distraction, to pretend that no such ideas were entertained

by anyone. Their fate might be debated and carried out simply to delay the crewmen's destruction of each other. But in the far, deep recesses of his mind, every man of the *Theban's* company actually knew that their number would be cut down by murder until no more than two, and more likely one, bloody-handed survivor owned all the riches now strewn on the floor.

These savage, frigid thoughts went through a part of Horn's mind that the rest of it ignored. He battered at the air lock, crying out raging curses. But the cold and acidly logical part of his mind went on. It predicted that for minutes yet there would be happy delirium within the ship. Only when some traces of calm returned would his hammering on the air lock door be heard. But in time even men half crazy with riches would notice vaguely that there was something calling for attention. Oh, yes! The door.

The separate, emotionless part of Horn's mind told him what he must do. It didn't suggest this action or that. It told him what must happen when the air lock door was opened. It told him to do this and that, to bring about the action.

He went to the pile of animal carcasses with their writhing cover of many-mouthed beasts. These were somehow more revolting because they not only hunted, lying in wait on the ground, and fastened themselves to branches to trap tree-dwelling creatures, but were also carrion eaters, devouring meat they had not killed themselves. All carnivorous animals despise the caters of rotten meat. Man is a carnivore. Even now and even in his present frenzy, Horn despised the beast he chose by dim starlight and poked with the muzzle of his blast rifle. It flung flailing tentacles up with strictly reflex ferocity, and seized the rifle barrel. It wound itself, slaving, upon the metal. It constricted, making feeble growling noises, trying in blind malevolence to begin to devour the thing that had touched it.

Horn ran with it towards the *Theban*, standing tall in the starlight. He swung the blast rifle in a wide vertical arc, with a jerk at the end. The glistening horror slipped off. It soared, and hit the plating of the *Theban* with a wet and disgusting sound. It fell to the ground, squirming.

He ran back, stabbed at the centre of another wet and writhing beast with the rifle. The thing made noises and clung, all its mouths vainly haggling at the metal weapon. Horn carried the beast away from the mass of its fellows. He swung it. It hit the *Theban's* landing fin.

Horn was not an edifying sight, just then, nor did the noises he made sound particularly human as he ran back and forth and back and forth, ferrying things that looked like fungus to where he could hurl them a last forty or fifty feet to strike the spaceship and flail wildly, hating everything, where they fell from it.

Not all acted in exactly the same manner. One swung some of its snaky arms, while others clung to the rifle. One of those arms tried to encircle Horn's wrist. He stopped long enough to lean his wrist on the ground and stamp on the thing that gripped it. It let go, making bubbling noises, but its other arms clung to the blast rifle until Horn flung this beast after the rest.

There were a dozen of the monsters about the air lock when Horn began to beat upon the door again. Five were piled together, struggling brainlessly to envelop each other, within two yards of his feet. There were other single ones, and pairs and triads of them, no farther away.

The castaways and the money and the hunting party that had brought joy to the *Theban* had now been inside the ship for more than five minutes. And, save for Larsen, no member of the *Theban's* crew was wholly sane because of his rejoicing. Still, half crazed with blissful ownership of riches, the crew's rejoicing was not quite as frenzied as it had been. And somebody heard the steady, resumed battering on the air lock door.

One crewman continued to roll on the floor, flinging handfuls of money about him. But the game was suddenly flat and foolish. Somebody was battering at the air lock door. Anything might have happened. The banging was resolute and determined.

Someone said, "Somebody's outside."

Nobody asked who. Nobody checked to see who it might be. The man who'd been rolling in the money got up and went clattering to open the door. He didn't think. He went - and other men followed him - to let in one of their number who hadn't been gleefully insane over the possession of millions and millions and millions of credits in currency, now strewn crazily on the floor of the crew's quarters.

The man who'd been rolling in money zestfully brushed a credit note from his clothing as if it were trash. He opened the outer air lock door. "We left you out!" he babbled gleefully. "Come in an' have a few millions."

From the darkness outside, Horn said in a thick, strangled voice, "I'm Horn. Tell Larsen I'll make a deal to run your engines now. Tell him!"

It was a shock to those who heard him. It was joyful, a glorious shock. All by itself it was intoxicating to know that Horn would return and the engines would run and the *Theban* could take to space again.

Larsen, even, was jolted by this superlative ending of everything that was left to be done. He rasped, "Bring him in!"

Men flung the air lock door wide. The light in there was faint. It did not illuminate the ground. Men babbled zestfully, tipsy with rejoicing and triumph and the end of everything they had worried about up to now. From now on they might have other things to worry about, but for the moment they knew purest relief and satisfaction.

"C'mon!" "C'mon in!" "Come look what we got!"

Above, Larsen's voice snarled, "In there!"

It wasn't intended for Horn but for the prisoners, to drive them into a nearly empty hold where they could be locked up safely until the disorganization of the crew wore off or was otherwise adjusted. Larsen had a stun pistol only, but his captives didn't realize the difference, in their despair. It wouldn't have mattered, anyhow. They filed numbly into the hold. But Larsen suddenly snapped, "Not you!" He caught Ginny's arm and jerked her back, then drove the others on. It was utterly dark there. They stumbled. The two children began to cry. Larsen kicked the door shut and put the locking dogs in place.

From below came more voices of men at the air lock door.

"C'mon! Larsen says -"

Larsen said, raging coldly, "Tell him I've got his girl here! Tell him to come in!"

Babblings. A voice reported, still gleeful because of money a foot deep in the crew's quarters, "He says he wants to make his deal first!"

Larsen considered a bare second. Then he grinned savagely. "Get him!" he commanded from above. "Don't kill him! He won't dare fight. I've got his girl! Go get him!"

Whooping, men leaped down. Two of them. One landed on a writhing, gristly tentacle which whipped around his ankle and bit him. Then a beast, all flailing arms, reared up and embraced him horribly and squeezed. He shrieked. A second man stumbled as he landed and a

glistening snakelike thing flashed around his neck and pulled him over backwards. The other men in the air lock seized weapons normally racked by the air lock door. They jumped down, the safeties snapped off the blasters. The blasters made their snapping sounds. Men in motion were seized by pairs and triple monsters who separated from each other to compete for living food.

Men went zestfully into battle. They had killed these beasts for sport. It was instinct to kill a beast in defence of a man. But their eyes were not fully accustomed to the darkness outside the ship. They attacked the monsters with perhaps excessive confidence.

Horn leaped up into the air lock and slammed the door shut behind him. He raced for the companion ladder, blast rifle ready.

The inside of the ship was suddenly and remarkably silent. Men outside fought the writhing monsters. It was practically butchery, but that was because the men fought together, with confidence, and the grey-green creatures fought by instinct only, and singly. But yet it was remarkable that the inside of the ship was so still. There was no sound through the closed air lock door. There was only the sound of Horn's footsteps on the companionway, and the panting of his breath.

Ginny's voice came to him, faintly and desperately, "Don't come! Don't! He's ready."

Horn reached the next landing. It was the stores-messroom-galley level. The ship's lights burned steadily, making the room quite bright. And Larsen stood waiting, with Ginny before him. He had one of her arms twisted behind her back. He grinned at Horn. Horn couldn't shoot. Nobody could risk a blaster bolt at Larsen, standing behind the white-faced girl. The odds were too great that Ginny would get the bolt.

Larsen thrust a weapon around her waist. He pulled the trigger.

Horn heard the waspish humming sound of a stun pistol, which is as effective as a blaster at short range, and very much less messy. He felt the intolerable pins-and-needles prickling sensation of a stun pistol beam. He heard it and felt it for only the fraction of a second, of course. In that small fraction of time, though, he knew such fury, such infinite hatred, and such despair as would make any man go mad if it lasted as long as a minute.

He felt himself falling.

Then he felt nothing.

CHAPTER TEN

HE came back to consciousness in a dreamy state. His mind awoke before the nerves that brought messages to it could begin to operate. But his mind knew that there was something wrong. Something desperately intolerable was going on, and he could not pinpoint what it was. He fought to get back to what he'd known before this strange and dreamy state intervened. Presently he heard a voice saying, "*You'd better wake up.*" It was muted. He heard it as if through many layers of thick felt.

He debated with himself why he should need to wake up. Then another voice came. It sounded desperate. It was Ginny.

"But you can't do that to them! You can't -"

The first voice laughed, a highly unpleasant sound. And suddenly remembrance swept over Horn like a flood. He knew that Ginny was here, and Larsen. He did not try to move. He knew that he had been shot with a stun pistol, and that he should remain motionless if he were to gain anything at all from recovering. His first movement should come after he'd regained control of all his body. Then, perhaps, a sudden, all-out attack. He heard poundings, and knew what they were. He'd been pounding like that on the air lock when Ginny and the rest were forced into the ship and he was locked out of it. Now there were others locked out of the *Theban* - her crew. They'd gone out to fight the grey-green horrors that seized the first two to go after Horn. Horn himself had slammed the door on them, locking them out so he could do battle with Larsen alone.

The crewmen were still outside. Larsen wasn't admitting them. Larsen was here, with Ginny, waiting for Horn to recover from the stun pistol beam. And the crewmen battered vainly on the air lock door.

Horn felt life returning to his legs. There was something strange about them, but he raced his brain and controlled his breathing lest the fury trying to rise up in him should reveal itself.

"But - but -" Ginny said desperately, "maybe he can't do what you want. Maybe it's impossible. And if it is, you - you can't hurt - not the children, surely."

"It's not impossible," rumbled Larsen. "Not for him!"

Horn stirred. It was very, very quiet inside the *Theban*. There were those muted, nearly hysterical bangings on the air lock door, but there was not even the whispering of the air freshener or any other noise.

"It's laid in my lap," rumbled Larsen in what was almost a genial tone. "I've got the money from the *Danae*. I've got rid of my crew so I don't have to split with anybody, and I've got an engineer who can run this scrap heap anywhere in the galaxy."

"But -"

"Everything's breakin' my way! All of it! All I have to do is show Horn where he stands. He'll see you here, with me. You'll tell him what's what. You'll beg him to do whatever I want him to."

"I'll tell him to destroy the ship."

"Yeah?" Larsen's tone went suddenly flat. "I don't have to hurt you to make him mad enough for that! There are the others. If he tries anything, I'll take one of the *Danae* crowd out of the hold where I got them locked, and I'll show him what I can do to that one - just to show what I can do to you. You'll beg him to do what I tell him."

Horn risked the faintest possible flutter of his eyelids. He saw where he was - on the floor beside the engines of the *Theban* - and where Ginny was - white and desperate against a wall - and Larsen at ease in the chair Horn had used when standing watch beside these engines.

"But you wouldn't!" protested Ginny. Terror filled her. "Not - not the children!"

Larsen made amused noises. Then he growled, "Don't tell me what I won't do, or I'll show you!"

He stood up, stretched, turned partly away. And in one swift, savage movement Horn rolled over and launched himself in a headlong leap.

He didn't make it. In midair, he felt a sharp, agonizing pain in his ankle. Something seemed to snap. In mid-leap he checked and came crashing to the floor. He'd been chained by the leg to the *Theban's* engines. Larsen turned and laughed at him.

Horn picked himself up. Only one leg would serve him. He said icily, "Well, I tried!"

"Sure!" said Larsen. "Sure! But things are breakin' my way. You figure what you can do to me. Not much. Then figure what I can do to her, an' the others. But I'll save her for last. Now, what's the matter with the engines?"

Horn said evenly, "They're worn out. I told you so before."

"What do they need to run good again?"

"You won't believe the answer."

"Tell me anyhow," rumbled Larsen. "Maybe I can check."

"When engines of this kind were new," said Horn with vast composure, "the Riccardo coils balanced. With use, they aged, and they aged differently. The changes could be compensated for up to a certain point. But these coils are past being compensated. You need new ones. But new ones aren't made any longer. So long as you use these they'll vibrate, vibration makes troubles, and sooner or later they'll blow."

Larsen rumbled to himself. "Yeah," he said presently. "The last engineer said that. But they got to run. You got to make 'em." He grinned, as if anticipatively. "If you don't make 'em run I take one of the *Danae's* crowd an' show you what she'll get if you don't get 'em runnin'. And she'll get it!"

Horn bit his lips. Then he said fiercely, "There's a trick. It sounds crazy. Maybe you'll think I'm trying to put something over."

"I do," said Larsen. "But you tell me about it. I'm not as dumb as I look. Tell me!"

Horn swallowed. He began to speak with infinite care. There were times when what he said did not convince Larsen, and he scowled. Horn went over it, rephrasing it until what he'd said became lucid. It was, in effect, a beautifully clear lecture on the principles of the Riccardo drive. At the end, it seemed obvious that the *Theban's* drive was irreparably gone past any justifiable use. It could blow at any instant.

Larsen rumbled again. Then he said amusedly, "Too bad! I'll go get one of the *Danae* crowd -"

Horn said desperately, "There's a chance. Not a good one, but if it works we can be sure. But it's not a good chance."

Sweating, he traced diagrams in the air with his fingers. Every ship carried in its holds certain balance coils - actually miniature drives - which adjusted the centre of gravity of ship and cargo together so they drove straight, in the absence of a space rudder and without side drift or crabwise motion. Horn explained the trick. If a generator of a pressor beam - a miniature drive - were fixed so its powerful thrust tended to deform a Riccardo coil in the opposite direction to the effect of aging, it ought to make the engine rumble for a certain limited further time.

"It's a tricky job," said Horn fiercely, "but if it works there'll be no engine noises. I'm not sure I can do it. I don't promise how long it will work. If I can do it at all, I can nurse it along. But that's every damned thing I can do."

Larsen seemed to reflect. Horn watched his face. Presently the *Theban's* skipper gave a short bark of a laugh. "Everything's goin' my way," he said expansively. "Not everybody'd find a guy who knew that trick! Yeah, everything's goin' my way! I'll get one of those coils. You'll make it work. If you don't -"

He rose and went to the companion ladder. There he paused.

"She hasn't got anything to kill me with," he said humorously. "Don't figure on tryin' anything. Things are goin' my way!"

He went down the ladder. Ginny wrung her hands. She said drearily, "Your leg - is it bad?"

"It's the ankle," said Horn evenly. "I think it's broken. It doesn't matter."

There came more hangings from below - gunbutts banging on the air lock door. The crewmen of the *Theban* wanted to be let in.

Larsen came back, grinning. He carried a pressor-beam generator coil. Broken wires showed, that he'd simply wrenched it loose from the socket in which it fitted.

"The guys outside are getting impatient," he said humorously. "They want in. But they had their fun with the money. Now they can think about it, but I've got it. Everything!" He rolled the coil to Horn, not handing it to him. He said blandly, "Handle this easy! It'll be too bad if I figure you might throw it. It's heavy. I'm watchin'!"

He sat down, a drawn weapon in his hand. He grinned.

Horn, tight-lipped, stood on one leg to work out the exact position for the small coil which could thrust as a ship's drive engines do, against nothing at all, but can also thrust against any material thing on which it plays. He adjusted the small item painstakingly.

"Now," he said harshly, "we'll see if it works."

He threw a switch.

There was a crashing sound on the other side of the room. A pocket blaster hit the wall and stuck there. There was a more cushioned impact. A chair and Larsen, together, hit the side wall with violence. They stayed pressed against it. There were small, feeble movements of Larsen's head and body. They ceased.

"Stay where you are Ginny!" commanded Horn.

He waited, patiently. Nothing happened. The chair and Larsen remained as if welded to the wall. Larsen's cheeks ballooned, one inward, the other outwards, to flatten against the wall.

"I think," said Horn, "that he's out. We'll see."

He threw back the switch. The weapon against the wall dropped to the floor. He snapped for Ginny to retrieve it. She did. He threw the current back on. Larsen had seemed to slump in the chair when the pressor-beam cut off. Now he sagged again, but against the wall.

Ginny gave Horn the hand weapon when he gestured for it. It was a blaster. He burned through the chain around his ankle, then half-limped and half hopped to Larsen and bound him carefully. He took keys from Larsen's pockets.

"You might let the *Danae's* people out of the hold," he said evenly. "Make sure none of them opens the air lock."

When Ginny came back, followed by the shaken, incredulous, unbelieving passengers and crew of the *Danae*, Horn was sitting in the chair Larsen had occupied. He nodded at Larsen's figure on the floor, holding Larsen's weapon handy.

"I want," he said briefly to the *Danae's* captain, "to have Larsen let gently down by a rope from the control-room air lock. Then close the air lock, and we'll take measures to go where we belong."

Ginny shakenly asked questions.

"I don't want to touch him again," said Horn. "It's too much of a temptation. He'd have done you harm, Ginny. I want to kill him."

Ginny said uneasily that she didn't know what had happened, but -

"I got him to bring me a balance coil," said Horn, tonelessly. "He knew it balanced a ship by shifting its centre of gravity. He didn't realize that it pushed, like artificial gravity. So I put a beam of twenty-gravity thrust against him, and it pushed him against a side wall. Nobody can stay conscious more than minutes in eight-gee thrust. I. gave him twenty."

There was a dismal banging on the tail fin air lock door. Horn sat still. He quietly gave orders that nobody should answer those knocks. They were made with blast rifle butts. He listened interestedly when told that when Larsen was lowered from the control-room air lock, his dangling body had been received by the crewmen of the *Theban*.

"This is very satisfactory," he said sedately to the *Danae's* captain. "Will you take over this ship and astrogate us to Formalhaut? I seem to have a broken ankle. I want to get it set. And I've other - ah - business to attend to."

The *Danae's* captain looked uneasily at the gigantic engines of the *Theban*. They were ancient and massive and he didn't trust them.

"They're all right," Horn assured him. "They were Riccardo drive engines. I more or less rebuilt them on the way here. They're simplified Riccardos now. In fact they're exactly like the engines of the *Danae*, except that a lot of useless parts are still in place."

He continued to sit placidly in place when the "*engines wanted*" sign lighted up in the engineroom. He was unconcerned when the ship lifted off. Ginny came and sat down beside him. She asked questions. She agreed that it had been best to leave the *Theban's* crew marooned for somebody else to take care of.

"Yes," said Horn. "I'm going to be curious what the crewmen say about Larsen when they're picked up."

Ginny looked at him uneasily. "You don't - you don't mean you think -"

"Oh, no!" said Horn wryly. "Why would they be angry with him? I don't think anything of the sort."

But he did. He explained carefully to the *Danae's* captain that the foot-deep currency should be counted. It turned out that much money which ought to have been lost had been hidden on the *Theban*. It was recovered.

Horn also explained firmly that the *Theban* would not go into orbit around Hermas and try to pick out the position of the grounded *Danae*, because there was no way to get her out to space again except with another pair of emergency rockets, which the *Theban* didn't carry. He explained other things. Ginny regarded him with a certain surprised respect.

"But I don't see," she told him, two days out of Carola and heading for Formalhaut, "why you bother to decide all these things. Don't you want to be a passenger, considering your ankle?"

"Presently," said Horn. "Right now I want to get to Formalhaut in a hurry."

"But why?" insisted Ginny. "What's the rush?"

"We were going to be married, remember?" asked Horn. "Something more than ten days ago? We've been cheated out of ten days of living happily ever after. I don't want to lose any more than I can help. So I'm insisting on a nonstop trip to Formalhaut. Do you blame me?"

Ginny smiled at him. Then she looked carefully about. There was nobody in sight in this part of the *Theban*. She kissed him quickly and then looked very proper and unromantic. And they grinned at each other.