

PLANET STORIES



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Jinx Ship To The Rescue

By ALFRED COPPEL, JR.



They were diving into the sun.

Stand by for T.R.S. Aphrodite, butt of the Space Navy. She's got something terrific in her guts and only her ice-cold lady engineer can coax it out of her!

BREVET LIEUTENANT COMMANDER David Farragut Strykowski III of the Tellurian Wing, Combined Solarian Navies, stood ankle deep in the viscous mud of Venusport Base and surveyed his new command with a jaundiced eye. The hot, sliny, greenish rain that drenched Venusport for two-thirds of the 720-hour day had stopped at last, but now a miasmic fog was rising

from the surrounding swampland, rolling across the mushy landing ramp toward the grounded spaceship. Visibility was dropping fast, and soon porto-sonar sets would have to be used to find the way about the surface Base. It was an ordinary day on Venus.

Strike cursed Space Admiral Gorman and all his ancestors with a wealth of feeling. Then he motioned wearily to his

companion, and together they slogged through the mud toward the ancient monitor.

The scaly bulk of the Tellurian Rocket Ship *Aphrodite* loomed unhappily into the thick air above the two men as they reached the ventral valve. Strike raised reluctant eyes to the sloping flank of the fat spaceship.

"It looks," he commented bitterly, "Like a pregnant carp."

Senior Lieutenant Coburn Whitley—"Cob" to his friends—nodded in agreement. "That's our Lover-Girl . . . old Aphrodisiac herself. The ship with the poison personality." Cob was the *Aphrodite's* Executive, and he had been with her a full year . . . which was a record for Execs on the *Aphrodite*. She generally sent them Earthside with nervous breakdowns in half that time.

"Tell me, Captain," continued Cob curiously, "How does it happen that you of all people happened to draw this tub for a command. I thought . . ."

"You know Gorman?" queried Strykowski.

Cob nodded. "Oh, yes. Yes, indeed. Old Brass-button Gorman?"

"The same."

"Well," Cob ran a hand over his chin speculatively, "I know Gorman's a prize stinker . . . but you were in command of the *Ganymede*. And, after all, you come from an old service family and all that. How come this?" He indicated the monitor expressively.

Strike sighed. "Well, now, Cob, I'll tell you. You'll be spacing with me and I guess you've a right to know the worst . . . not that you wouldn't find it out anyway. I come from a long line of very sharp operators. Seven generations of officers and gentlemen. Lousy with tradition.

"The first David Farragut Strykowski, son of a sea-loving Polish immigrant, emerged from World War II a four-striper and Congressional Medal winner. Then came David Farragut Strykowski, Jr., and, in the abortive Atomic War that terrified the world in 1961, he won a United Nations Peace Citation. And then came David Farragut Strykowski III . . . me.

"From such humble beginnings do great traditions grow. But something happened when I came into the picture. I don't fit

with the rest of them. Call it luck or temperament or what have you.

"In the first place I seem to have an uncanny talent for saying the wrong thing to the wrong person. Gorman for example. And I take too much on my own initiative. Gorman doesn't like that. I lost the *Ganymede* because I left my station where I was supposed to be running section-lines to take on a bunch of colonists I thought were in danger . . ."

"The Procyon A people?" asked Cob. "So you've heard about it." Strike shook his head sadly. "My tactical astrophysicist warned me that Procyon A might go nova. I left my routine post and loaded up on colonists." He shrugged. "Wrong guess. No nova. I made an ass of myself and lost the *Ganymede*. Gorman gave it to his former aide. I got this."

Cob coughed slightly. "I heard something about Ley City, too."

"Me again. The *Ganymede's* whole crew ended up in the Luna Base brig. We celebrated a bit too freely."

Cob Whitley looked admiringly at his new Commander. "That was the night after the *Ganymede* broke the record for the Centaurus B-Earth run, wasn't it? And then wasn't there something about . . ."

"Canalopolis?"

Whitley nodded.

"That time I called the Martian Ambassador a spy. It was at a Tellurian Embassy Ball."

"I begin to see what you mean, Captain."

"Strike's the name, Cob."

Whitley's smile was expansive. "Strike, I think you're going to like our old tin pot here." he patted the *Aphrodite's* nether belly affectionately. "She's old . . . but she's loose. And we're not likely to meet any Ambassadors or Admirals with her, either."

Strykowski sighed, still thinking of his sleek *Ganymede*. "She'll carry the mail, I suppose. And that's about all that's expected of her."

Cob shrugged philosophically. "Better than tanking that stinking rocket fuel, anyway. Deep space?"

Strike shook his head. "Venus-Mars."

Cob scratched his chin speculatively. "Perihelion run. Hot work."

Strike was again looking at the space-ship's unprepossessing exterior. "A surge-circuit monitor, so help me."

Cob nodded agreement. "The last of her class."

AND she was not an inspiring sight. The fantastically misnamed *Aphrodite* was a surge-circuit monitor of twenty guns built some ten years back in the period immediately preceding the Ionian Subjugation Incident. She had been designed primarily for atomics, with a surge-circuit set-up for interstellar flight. At least that was the planner's view. In those days, interstellar astrogation was in its formative stage, and at the time of the *Aphrodite's* launching the surge-circuit was hailed as the very latest in space drives.

Her designer, Harlan Hendricks, had been awarded a Legion of Merit for her, and every silver-braided admiral in the Fleet had dreamed of hoisting his flag on one of her class. There had been three. The *Artemis*, the *Andromeda*, and the prototype . . . old Aphrodisiac. The three vessels had gone into action of Callisto after the Phobos Raid had set off hostilities between the Ionians and the Solarian Combine.

All three were miserable failures.

The eager officers commanding the three monitors had found the circuit too appealing to their hot little hands. They used it . . . in some way, wrongly.

The *Artemis* exploded. The *Andromeda* vanished in the general direction of Coma Berenices glowing white hot from the heat of a ruptured fission chamber and spewing gamma rays in all directions. And the *Aphrodite's* starboard tubes blew, causing her to spend her store of vicious energy spinning like a Fourth of July pinwheel under 20 gravities until all her interior fittings . . . including crew were a tangled, pulpy mess within her pressure hull.

The *Aphrodite* was refitted for space. And because it was an integral part of her design, the circuit was rebuilt . . . and sealed. She became a workhorse, growing more cantankerous with each passing year. She carried personnel . . . She trucked ores. She ferried skelterboats and tanked rocket fuel. Now, she would carry the mail. She would lift from Ven-

usport and jet to Canalopolis, Mars, without delay or variation. Regulations, tradition and Admiral Gorman of the Inner Planet Fleet required it. And it was now up to David Farragut Strykalski III to see to it that she did . . .

The Officer of the Deck, a trim blonde girl in spotless greys saluted smartly as Strike and Cob stepped through the valve.

Strike felt vaguely uncomfortable. He knew, of course, that at least a third of the personnel on board non-combat vessels of the Inner Planet Fleet, was female, but he had never actually had women on board a ship of his own, and he felt quite certain that he preferred them elsewhere.

Cob sensed his discomfort. "That was Celia Graham, Strike. Ensign. Radar Officer. She's good, too."

Strike shook his head. "Don't like women in space. They make me uncomfortable."

Cob shrugged. "Celia's the only officer. But about a quarter of our ratings are women." He grinned maliciously. "Equal rights, you know."

"No doubt," commented the other sourly. "Is that why they named this . . . ship 'Aphrodite'?"

Whitley saw fit to consider the question rhetorical and remained silent.

Strike lowered his head to clear the arch of the flying-bridge bulkhead. Cob followed. He trailed his Captain through a jungle of chrome piping to the main control panels. Strike sank into an acceleration chair in front of the red DANGER seal on the surge-circuit rheostat.

"Looks like a drug-store fountain, doesn't it?" commented Cob.

Strykalski nodded sadly, thinking of the padded smoothness of the *Ganymede's* flying-bridge. "But she's home to us, anyway."

The thick Venusian fog had closed in around the top levels of the ship, hugging the ports and cutting off all view of the field outside. Strike reached for the squawk-box control.

"Now hear this. All officer personnel will assemble in the flying bridge at 600 hours for Captain's briefing. Officer of the Deck will recall any enlisted personnel now on liberty . . ."

Whitley was on his feet, all the slack-

ness gone from his manner. "Orders, Captain?"

"We can't do anything until the new Engineering Officer gets here. They're sending someone down from the *Antigone*, and I expect him by 600 hours. In the meantime you'll take over his part of the work. See to it that we are fueled and ready to lift ship by 602. Base will start loading the mail at 599:30. That's about all."

"Yes, sir." Whitley saluted and turned to go. At the bulkhead, he paused. "Captain," he asked, "Who is the new E/O to be?"

Strike stretched his long legs out on the steel deck. "A Lieutenant Hendricks, I. V. Hendricks, is what the orders say."

Cob thought hard for a moment and then shrugged his shoulders. "I. V. Hendricks." He shook his head. "Don't know him."

THE other officers of the *T.R.S. Aphrodite* were in conference with the Captain when Cob and the girl at his side reached the flying-bridge. She was tall and dark-haired with regular features and pale blue eyes. She wore a service jumper with two silver stripes on the shoulder-straps, and even the shapeless garment could not hide the obvious trimness of her figure.

Strike's back was toward the bulkhead, and he was addressing the others.

". . . and that's about the story. We are to jet within 28,000,000 miles of Sol. Orbit is trans-Mercurian hyperbolic. With Mars in opposition, we have to make a perihelion run and it won't be pleasant. But I'm certain this old boiler can take it. I understand the old boy who designed her wasn't as incompetent as they say. But Space Regs are specific about mail runs. This is important to you, Evans. Your astrogation has to be accurate to within twenty-five miles plus or minus the shortest route. And there'll be no breaking orbit. Now be certain that the refrigeration units are checked, Mister Wilkins, especially in the hydroponic cells. Pure air is going to be important."

"That's about all there is to tell you. As soon as our rather leisurely E/O gets here, we can jet with Aunt Nelly's postcard." He nodded. "That's the story. Lift

ship in . . ." He glanced at his wrist chronograph, ". . . in an hour and five."

The officers filed out and Cob Whitley struck his head into the room. "Captain?"

"Come in, Cob." Strike's dark brows knit at the sight of the uniformed girl in the doorway.

Cob's face was sober, but hidden amusement was kindling behind his eyes. "Captain, may I present Lieutenant Hendricks? Lieutenant *I-vy* Hendricks?"

Strike looked blankly at the girl.

"Our new E/O, Captain," prompted Whitley.

"Uh . . . welcome aboard, Miss Hendricks," was all the Captain could find to say.

The girl's eyes were cold and unfriendly. "Thank you, Captain." Her voice was like cracked ice tinkling in a glass. "If I may have your permission to inspect the drives, Captain, I may be able to convince you that the designer of this vessel was not . . . as you seem to think . . . a senile incompetent."

Strike was perplexed, and he showed it. "Why, certainly . . . uh . . . Miss . . . but why should you be so . . ."

The girl's voice was even colder than before as she said. "Harlan Hendricks, Captain, is my father."

A WEEK in space had convinced Strike that he commanded a jinx ship. Jetting sunward from Venus, the cantankerous *Aphrodite* had burned a steering tube through, and it had been necessary to go into free-fall while Jenkins, the Assistant E/O, and a damage control party effected repairs. When the power was again applied, Old Aphrodisiac was running ten hours behind schedule, and Strike and Evans, the Astrogation Officer, were sweating out the unforeseen changes introduced into the orbital calculations by the time spent in free-fall.

The *Aphrodite* rumbled on toward the orbit of Mercury . . .

For all the tension between the occupants of the flying-bridge, Strike and Ivy Hendricks worked well together. And after a second week in space, a reluctant admiration was replacing the resentment between them. Ivy spent whatever time she could spare tinkering with her father's

pet surge-circuit and Strike began to realize that there was little she did not know about spaceship engineering. Then, too, Ivy spent a lot of time at the controls, and Strike was forced to admit that he had never seen a finer job of piloting done by man or woman.

And finally, Ivy hated old Brass-bottom Gorman even more than Strike did. She felt that Gorman had ruined her father's career, and she was dedicating her life to proving her father right and Brass-bottom wrong. There's nothing in the cosmos to nurture friendship like a common enemy.

At 30,000,000 miles from the sun, the *Aphrodite's* refrigeration units could no longer keep the interior of the ship at a comfortable temperature. The thermometer stood at 102°F, the very metal of the ship's fittings hot to the touch. Uniforms were discarded, insignia of rank vanished. The men dressed in fiberglass shorts and spaceboots, sweat making their naked bodies gleam like copper under the sodium-vapor lights. The women in the crew added only light blouses to their shorts . . . and suffered from extra clothing.

Strike was in the observation blister forward, when Ensign Graham called to say that she had picked up a radar contact sunward. The IFF showed the pips to be the *Lachesis* and the *Atropos*. The two dreadnaughts were engaged in coronary research patrol . . . a purely routine business. But the thing that made Strike course under his breath was Celia Graham's notation that the *Atropos* carried none other than Space Admiral Horatio Gorman, Cominch Inplant.

Strike thought it a pity that old Brass-bottom couldn't fall into Hell's hottest pit . . . and he told Ivy so.

And she agreed.

OLD Aphrodisiac had reached perihelion when it happened. The thermometer stood at 135° and tempers were snapping. Cobb and Celia Graham had tangled about some minor point concerning Lover-Girl's weight and balance. Ivy went about her work on the bridge without speaking, and Strike made no attempt to brighten her sudden depression. Lieutenant Evans had punched Bayne,

the Tactical Astrophysicist, in the eye for some disparaging remark about Southern California womanhood. The ratings were grumbling about the food . . .

And then it happened.

Cob was in the radio room when Sparks pulled the flimsy from the scrambler. It was a distress signal from the *Lachesis*. The *Atropos* had burst a fission chamber and was falling into the sun. Radiation made a transfer of personnel impossible, and the *Atropos* skeeterboats didn't have the power to pull away from the looming star. The *Lachesis* had a line on the sister dreadnaught and was valiantly trying to pull the heavy vessel to safety, but even the thundering power of the *Lachesis'* mighty drive wasn't enough to break Sol's deathgrip on the battleship.

A fleet of souped-up space-tugs was on its way from Luna and Venusport, but they could not possibly arrive on time. And it was doubtful that even the tugs had the necessary power to drag the crippled *Atropos* away from a fiery end.

Cob snatched the flimsy from Sparks' hands and galloped for the flying-bridge. He burst in and waved the message excitedly in front of Strykalski's face.

"Have a look at this! Ye gods and little catfish! Read it!"

"Well, dammit, hold it still so I can!" snapped Strike. He read the message and passed it to Ivy Hendricks with a shake of his head.

She read it through and looked up exultantly. "This is it! This is the chance I've been praying for, Strike!"

He returned her gaze sourly. "For Gorman to fall into the sun? I recall I said something of the sort myself, but there are other men on those ships. And, if I know Captain Varni on the *Lachesis*, he won't let go that line even if he fries himself."

Ivy's eyes snapped angrily. "That's not what I meant, and you know it! I mean this!" She touched the red-sealed surge-circuit rheostat.

"That's very nice, Lieutenant," commented Cob drily. "And I know that you've been very busy adjusting that gismo. But I seem to recall that the last time that circuit was uncorked everyone aboard became part of the woodwork . . . very messily, too."

"Let me understand you, Ivy," said Strike in a flat voice. "What you are suggesting is that I risk my ship and the lives of all of us trying to pull old Gorman's fat out of the fire with a drive that's blown skyhigh three times out of three. Very neat."

There were tears bright in Ivy Hendrick's eyes and she sounded desperate. "But we can save those ships! We can, I know we can! My father designed this ship! I know every rivet of her! Those idiots off Callisto didn't know what they were doing. These ships needed specially trained men. Father told them that! And I'm trained! I can take her in and save those ships!" Her expression turned to one of disgust. "Or are you afraid?"

"Frankly, Ivy, I haven't enough sense to be afraid. But are you so certain that we can pull this off? If I make a mistake this time . . . it'll be the last. For all of us."

"We can do it," said Ivy Hendricks simply.

Strike turned to Cob. "What do you say, Cob? Shall we make it hotter in here?"

Whitley shrugged. "If you say so, Strike. It's good enough for me."

Celia Graham left the bridge shaking her head. "We'll all be dead soon. And me so young and pretty."

Strike turned to the squawk-box. "Evans!"

"Evans here," came the reply.

"Have Sparks get a DF fix on the *Atropos* and hold it. We'll home on their carrier wave. They're in trouble and we're going after them. Plot the course."

"Yes, Captain."

Strike turned to Cob. "Have the gun-crews stand by to relieve the black-gang in the tube rooms. It's going to get hotter than the hinges of hell down there and we'll have to shorten shifts."

"Yes, sir!" Cob saluted and was gone.

Strike returned to the squawk-box. "Radar!"

"Graham here," replied Celia from her station.

"Get a radar fix on the *Lachesis* and hold it. Send your dope up to Evans and tell him to send us a range estimate."

"Yes, Captain," the girl replied crisply.

"Gun deck!"

"Gun deck here, sir," came a feminine voice.

"Have number two starboard torpedo tube loaded with a fish and a spool of cable. Be ready to let fly on short notice . . . any range."

"Yes, sir!" The girl switched off.

"And now you, Miss Hendricks."

"Yes, Captain?" Her voice was low.

"Take over Control . . . and Ivy . . ."

"Yes?"

"Don't kill us off." He smiled down at her.

She nodded silently and took her place at the control panel. Smoothly she turned old Aphrodisiac's nose sunward . . .

LASHED together with a length of unbreakable beryllium steel cable, the *Lachesis* and the *Atropos* fell helplessly toward the sun. The frantic flame that lashed out from the *Lachesis'* tube was fading, her fission chambers fusing under the terrific heat of splitting-atoms. Still she tried. She could not desert her sister ship, nor could she save her. Already the two ships had fallen to within 18,000,000 miles of the sun's terrifying atmosphere of glowing gases. The prominences that spouted spaceward seemed like great fiery tentacles reaching for the trapped men on board the warships. The atmospheric guiding fins, the gun-turrets and other protuberances on both ships were beginning to melt under the fierce radiance. Only the huge refrigeration plants on the vessels made life within them possible. And, even so, men were dying.

Swiftly, the fat, ungainly shape of old Aphrodisiac drew near. In her flying-bridge, Strike and Ivy Hendricks watched the stricken ships in the darkened viewport.

The temperature stood at 140° and the air was bitter with the smell of hot metal. Ivy's blouse clung to her body, soaked through with perspiration. Sweat ran from her hair into her eyes and she gasped for breath in the oven hot compartment. Strike watched her with apprehension.

Carefully, Ivy circled the two warships. From the starboard tube on the gun-deck, a homing rocket leapt toward the *Atropos*. It plunged straight and true, spilling cable

as it flew. It slammed up against the hull, and stuck there, fast to the battleship's flank. Quickly, a robo-crane drew it within the ship and the cable was made secure. Like cosmic replicas of the ancient South American "bolas," the three spacecraft whirled in space . . . and all three began that sunward plunge together.

The heat in the *Aphrodite's* bridge was unbearable. The thermometer showed 145° and it seemed to Strike that Hell must be cool by comparison.

Ivy fought her reeling senses and the bucking ship as the slack came out of the cable. Blackness was flickering at the edges of her field of vision. She could scarcely lift her hand to the red-sealed circuit rheostat. Shudderingly, she made the effort . . . and failed. Conscious, but too spent to move, she collapsed over the blistering hot instrument panel.

"Ivy!" Strike was beside her, cradling her head in his arm.

"I . . . I . . . can't make it . . . Strike. You'll . . . have to run . . . the show . . . after . . . all."

Strike laid her gently in an acceleration chair and turned toward the control panel. His head was throbbing painfully as he broke the seal on the surge-circuit.

Slowly he turned the rheostat. Relays chattered. From deep within old *Lover-Girl's* vitals came a low whine. He fed more power into the circuit. Cadmium rods slipped into lead sheaths decks below in the tube-rooms. The whining rose in pitch. The spinning of the ships in space slowed. Stopped. With painful deliberation, they swung into line.

More power. The whine changed to a shriek. A banshee wail.

Cob's voice came through the squawk-box, soberly. "Strike, Celia's fainted down here. We can't take much more of this heat."

"We're trying, Cob!" shouted Strike over the whine of the circuit. The gauges showed the accumulators full. "Now!" He spun the rheostat to the stops, and black space burst over his brain . . .

The last thing he remembered was a voice. It sounded like Bayne's. And it was shouting. "We're moving 'em! We're pulling away! We're . . ." And that was all.

The space-tug *Scylla* found them.

The three ships . . . *Atropos*, *Lachesis*, and old *Aphrodisiac* . . . lashed together and drifting in space. Every man and woman aboard out cold from the acceleration, and *Aphrodite's* tanks bone dry. But they were a safe 80,000,000 miles from Sol . . .

THE orchestra was subdued, the officer's club softly lighted. Cob leaned his elbow on the bar and bent to inspect the blue ribbon of the Spatial Cross on Strike's chest. Then he inspected his own and nodded with tipsy satisfaction. He stared out at the Martian night beyond the broad windows and back again at Strike. His frown was puzzled.

"All right," said Strike, setting down his glass. "What's on your mind, Cob? Something's eating you."

Whitley nodded very slowly. He took a long pull at his highball. "I understand that you goofballed your chances of getting the *Ganymede* back when Gorman spoke his piece to you . . ."

"All I said to him . . ."

"I know. I know what you said . . . and it won't bear repeating. But you're not fooling me. You've fallen for old *Lover-Girl* and you don't want to leave her. Ver-ry commendable. Loyal! Stout fellah! But what about Ivy?"

"Ivy?"

Cob looked away. "I thought that you and she . . . well, I thought that when we got back . . . well . . ."

Strike shook his head "She's gone to the Bureau of Ships with a designing job."

Cob waved an expressive arm in the air. "But dammit, man, I thought . . ."

"The answer is no. Ivy's a nice girl . . . but . . ." He paused and sighed. "Since she was promoted to her father's old rank . . . well . . ." He shrugged. "Who wants a wife that ranks you?"

"Never thought of that," mused Cob. For a long while he was silent; then he pulled out an address book and leafed through until he came to the pages marked "Canalopolis, Mars."

And he was gratified to see that Lieutenant Commander David Farragut Strykalski III was doing the same.