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S. O. S. APHRODITE!

By STANLEY MULLEN



Coran struck her aside and lunged at Hamlin.

No wonder that signal stabbed out into the icy void. For it was a ship of hate and evil, and IP patrolman Steve Coran trusted only one person—after strapping her in her bunk!

ON THE HIGH METALLIC wall across the street was a big sign: VENUS TRANSPORT and a smaller sign which read CONTAMINATION AREA — KEEP OUT! Steve Coran

turned away from the window and faced the ISP official across the desk.

“From the time you leave this office, you’ll be in deadly danger,” the official said. “We aren’t dealing with sporadic

cases of space piracy. This is a well-organized group of saboteurs, pirates and assassins backed by a ring of powerful and unscrupulous men, some of them in high places. They have more on their minds than mere looting. They have certain political objectives—and will stop at nothing to cause unrest, even war or revolution, to gain their ends. Fishers in troubled waters . . .”

Coran laughed harshly. “Doesn’t sound like a rest cure. Why’d you pick me for the job?”

The official opened a file drawer and riffled the cards. “You were recommended by the Ministry of Transport. I confess that I was dubious, because of your record. However, you were transferred from the Mars-Jupiter sector for the one reason that you’re not known here. Any of our regular security agents or the ISP men would be recognized at once. Our original idea was to place you aboard a rocket transport as a crewman to spy out the weak links in our defensive measures. But a matter of graver importance has come up. The assignments will overlap, but we can no longer give you official backing.”

“You’d better bring me up to date,” Coran said bluntly.

“The pattern is usually the same. Barratry. Three of the Venus transports have been deliberately wrecked and looted. Of plutonium, for the most part. Members of this criminal group have infiltrated the crew. Even trusted officers have been forced, by blackmail or other methods, to aid the plotters. We can trust no one, not even the captain.”

“I see. What is this other matter you spoke about?”

“Two days ago we arrested a man. The charge was barratry. We had no name, only a heliophoto from Venus. In his possession we found documents relating to political matters of vital importance. Release of the information contained in his portfolio would be disastrous at this time. It could cause chaos, perhaps even war.”

Coran grunted. “Such documents have no right to exist.”

“I agree. Unfortunately, this one does exist. And it’s no longer in our custody.

A woman, obviously an accomplice, got a blaster gun to him. Two ISP men were killed, and the prisoner escaped. The documents went with him. I don’t have to tell you that both of these fugitives must be apprehended or killed. And those papers must be brought back or destroyed. That’s your job.”

“I don’t like it.”

“Tact isn’t your long suit, is it, Lieutenant? You weren’t asked if you liked it. With two black marks against your record, you can’t afford an opinion. One more and you’re through as an officer in the space patrol—”

“I don’t like working out of uniform.”

“—and I wouldn’t count too much on a friendship with Paul Jomian, if I were you, Coran. He’s through here . . . even if he was kicked upstairs into the transport ministry. We no longer approve his methods. His rough-shod, undisciplined methods may get by in a frontier civilization like that of the outer planets, but nowadays we require efficiency and complete co-operation in the ISP. The time is past when an ISP officer can forget to change his uniform and go without shaving for days at a time.”

Coran’s eyes glittered. “There was more to Paul Jomian than gold braid and pretty uniforms. He was a man. And he got things done so a lot of you pretty-boys could sit on your fat chairs and keep your hair unmussed. For your information, those black marks on my record are for tearing apart superior officers who made cracks about Paul Jomian. Do you want me to turn in my badge?”

The official smiled poisonously. “That would be the easy way out for you, Coran. What’s the matter—the job too tough for you?”

“I can’t stand the smell of perfume around here. And the jobs don’t come too tough. Relax, big shot. I’ll run your stinking little errand for you. But it’s the last one. When I hand your two-vikdal bad man over to you, I’m through. Make out my resignation that way, and I’ll sign it before I leave.”

THE official laughed and stood up. “Resignation accepted—upon com-

pletion of assignment. You're a hard case, Coran. Up to a point, you're even right. But you don't belong any more, not in this part of the universe. It took pioneers like you and Jomian to bang the holes in our fishbowl world, but we need men with dull routine minds to bring order into it. Unofficially, I'm sorry to see you go. Nowadays a man conforms or he gets out."

"Skip the bouquets and the funeral oration. What's the layout on the job you want done?"

The official threw a file card across the desk. "There's the man you want. The picture won't help you much, since he'll probably be wearing a plastic face-mask."

Coran glanced at it and shrugged. "Not much to go on. Any other leads?"

"Yes." The official glanced at his wrist-chron. "We know that he will be on the Venus transport X-1143—the *Aphrodite*—which leaves in three hours. Probably the woman, too. Whatever happens, they must not reach Venus alive."

CORAN caught an implication in the words. "What do you mean 'Whatever happens?'"

"The *Aphrodite* is an emigrant ship. It's a government secret that she's carrying plutonium for the power plants on Venus, but we're afraid the information may have leaked out. You may as well know that we're on the spot. It's too late to cancel the shipment without serious economic repercussions. And we haven't found any way to protect the passenger-carrying ships. Even if we armed them, which is against Interplanetary Law, they're too slow to run and too unwieldy to maneuver. Too much mass."

"What about convoy?"

"We tried that last time. The ship was disabled and driven off-orbit. Then a group of fast cruisers of unusual design showed up. The space patrol drove them off and gave chase. It was a trick, of course, to decoy our ships into space, then the main body of pirates moved in and cleaned out the ship."

Coran laughed. "When you're catching rabbits you have to be smarter than the rabbits."

The official flushed. "We're handi-

capped by lack of ships and lack of competent personnel. This is your chance to be smarter than the rabbits. The man you want is obviously a member of the same group. If there is trouble, he will try to contact his friends. It's up to you to find him first, and if you fail that, to make sure that he does not escape or turn over the documents to anyone else. We'll have an ISP squadron following six hours behind the *Aphrodite*. If you need help, get a signal to them—by helioflash, if you can. I suggest you find the man first, and through him, locate the woman. From there on, you know what to do . . ."

"It's a dirty job. Even with frosting, it's simple butchery—no trial, no evidence. Now I know why the Martians consider an ISP man just a hired thug."

"That's all he is. You have your orders and, whatever your private opinions may be, I'm sure you'll agree that lives are unimportant when we're playing for such stakes."

"Lives never are when politicians start dealing from the bottom of the deck," Coran snarled bitterly.

The official shrugged. "I wouldn't know about that. I'm just a yes-man. You can discuss it with Paul Jomian—your politician friend—when you see him. He'll be on the *Aphrodite*."

"Have you figured out how I'm to get on the *Aphrodite*? If she's an emigrant ship, they'll take only married couples. The altruistic Company wants settlers to colonize Venus and build up their plague-spot plantations for them."

"That's your problem. Marry someone if you have to, or hire a fake wife. It's been done. Anything, just so you don't give away your official position. Now get going. You've less than three hours till take-off time."

Coran bent over the desk and signed his resignation with an elaborate flourish, put an inked thumbprint beside the name, then stalked to the door clothespinning his nose between thumb and forefinger. "That's time enough to blow this stink off me," he said carelessly, wiping the inky thumb on his uniform jacket.

The official laughed. "You're right. It does stink."

STEVE CORAN was conscious of the girl merely as an obstacle between him and the ticket window. She was young, expensively dressed and too well-groomed, with blue-white hair, a haughty manner, and an icy stare in her violet eyes.

"I was here first," she said coldly.

Coran bowed mockingly. "I don't like you either. Besides, I never hit a lady in public. I hope this won't lead to one of those shipboard romances."

The beehive activity of the ticket office slackened as take-off time drew near. Coran studied her back as she stood ahead of him in the line and repressed a desire to pinch her and find out if she were real. The weasel-faced clerk was tired and his tone of long-suffering patience had worn to a thread of annoyance.

"I've told you before, miss. I can't sell single tickets—the company rules do not permit any but married couples aboard an emigrant transport. We feel that unattached women are trouble makers in a frontier society."

The girl made an arrogant gesture. "It's important. I must get to Venus. I don't care what it costs."

"Don't tell me. See the manager. I don't make the rules. Third office on the left. But you'd better hurry. I've only one double passage left."

Coran tapped the girl on her shoulder. She glared at him. "Take a tip from me, babe. See the boss. If he's a man, you'll get the tickets."

As she left the line, he pushed to the window. "I'll take those two tickets, bud."

"Do you have your marriage certificate?"

Coran reached through the window, snagged a coat lapel and had the man dragged half through the window in a flash. "Now I'll talk, punk, and you listen. Because I don't have a ring in my nose, don't get the idea I'm not married. Do I get those tickets, or do you give up mirrors for the next six weeks?"

The clerk looked at the gnarled fist under his nose and gave a wild nod of his head. "You get them."

The steel fingers relaxed and the clerk slid back inside his cage. "I'll report this," he stormed, shaking himself like a wet ani-

mal. "You'd better have your papers when you try to get past the purser." He handed out the tickets.

The girl followed Coran from the office. "I'll give you a thousand vikdals for those tickets."

Coran grinned savagely. "Not even if you said please."

"Please, and two thousand."

"Stop it—you're getting near my price. Besides, they wouldn't do you any good. You need a husband to go with 'em. Take the express rocket next month. It's a shorter orbit and you'll only lose two weeks."

"You take it then. My business won't wait. Three thousand."

Coran whistled. "What's your problem?"

"None of your business."

"Have it your own way. My business won't wait either. Now, if you don't mind, I'm in a hurry. I've less than two hours to find a honky-tonk and get myself a bride. I don't suppose you'd know where the nearest dive is. No, you wouldn't."

He turned away toward the elevators, but the girl clutched his arm desperately. "Six thousand . . . It's all I have."

Coran stared at her. "I'm sorry for you, but you'd have to kill me to get these away. And I'm hard to kill. I'll make a deal though. I'll sell you half of my double for three thousand. You'd have to marry me, though."

"Marry you!" There was a word of loathing in her tone.

"It's been done. I'm on my way out now to look up a floozy. I'll even marry her, if she's dope enough to want it that way. I don't like the idea any better than you do, but I'd hock grandma's false teeth to get to Venus. Forget I mentioned it. If I'm to be stuck with a dame for four months, it might as well be a flamethrower as an icicle."

He buzzed for the elevator before she called after him. "I—I've changed my mind." She was pale, with a look of suppressed fury about her. "I guess I'd do even that."

Coran laughed wickedly. "Don't flatter yourself. You're just a ticket to Venus to me. Meet me at the marriage bureau

in half an hour. We haven't much time, and you'll have to be psychographed. We really should know each other. I'm Steve Coran."

"I'm Gerda Mors. In half an hour."

THE purser stopped at a door marked No. 200. He was a young, inadequate-looking man.

"You won't have to carry me over the threshold," Gerda said crisply. She went inside and shut the door. In shocked silence, he re-checked the sheaf of papers in his hand.

"She's shy around strangers," Coran explained. "When do we take off?"

"In five minutes. We're making these emigrant runs under very crowded conditions. All passengers are expected to remain in their own staterooms most of the time. A certain amount of exercise is permitted, of course, once free flight is attained and the A-orbit corrections made. Until then, we recommend that everyone remain out of the crew's way. The safest place during acceleration is in bed."

Coran winked ponderously. "I'll make out all right. One thing, though. I believe I have a friend on board. Am I permitted to examine the passenger lists?"

"Of course, they're public property. See the captain. His office is up near the bow, just aft of the control rooms. But wait till we're out in space."

Coran knocked and entered the stateroom. Gerda was brushing her hair. She glanced up irritably. "This is my room," she told him shortly. "Find yourself another."

He laughed grimly. "The psychographs warned we were incompatible, but you'd better get used to me. It's 146 days to Venus, and we've only this stateroom between us. They practically lock us in, you know. We're going to be very good friends or most uncomfortable before we reach Venus."

Angry sparks shot from her violet eyes. "Did you know all this before?"

Coran nodded.

"You are a swine, aren't you? It won't do you any good. I'll tell the captain we're not married. I'll say it was all a fake, the

certificate was a forgery, that you're a . . ."

"Go ahead. I wish for your sake it would help, but they'd only check and find out it was genuine. Even if it weren't, you'd only be forced to go through the ceremony again. The rules are very specific to cover just such situations."

Fear and anger blended unpleasantly in her voice. "I'll think of something . . ."

Warning alarms blared through the ship. Ripples of soundless shock stirred the bulk.

"We're getting under way," Coran warned. "You'd better come to bed."

"I'd rather die," she said sullenly.

"Suit yourself. But it's pretty unpleasant."

THE rocket transport left its runway at an angle of 45 degrees, slanting up into the Sahara night with a blossom of pink-white flame flowering round its stern jets. A series of jarring vibrations smoothed to a muffled burr. The girl was flung heavily to the floor and lay there beside the porthole of fused quartz, retching feebly as the acceleration built up. Outside the port, what seemed the flank of a titanic mountain of moonlit sand fell rapidly astern. It tilted at an incredible angle.

Coran hunched himself off the bed and crawled to her. Gerda grimaced weakly and struck at him, then lapsed into unconsciousness. He picked her up and carried her to the bed, dumped her like a limp sack and clasped the straps about her. She did not rouse.

Her purse lay where she had dropped it. Coran went through it methodically. A small blaster gun of the type women thugs carry in their handbags. It appeared to have been used recently. Four Lumipencils. The usual cosmetics. A pillbox with a poison label. And, in an ivory frame, a small colorphoto miniature of the man whose face was on the Security Headquarters dossier card. Coran neutralized the charge in the blaster and set it on safety, then carefully replaced everything. He wished he had a pocket magnascope to study the miniature in detail, but that could wait. He must check the passenger lists and find out where Paul Jomian's room was located. Paul should be warned,

so that his surprise at seeing Coran would not give the show away.

The girl stirred and moaned feebly. Coran found the emergency medical locker and forced an anti-acceleration capsule between her tight-clenched teeth, following it with a water concentrate capsule. She would be wildly thirsty when she came out of it, and real water would have some unpleasant effects during A-shock. He leaned over and checked the straps. They were tight enough so she would never get out of that tie without help. Her eyes blinked open and she stared at him in panic.

"Just relax," he cautioned. "And don't get impatient. I'll be right back. Have to see a man about a . . ."

He went outside and made his way with difficulty up the bleak passage forward. The distorted gravity made walking extremely difficult. Once outside the main gravity field of Earth, artificial gravities would be turned on. Until then, only an experienced spaceman could get around safely. Coran was grateful for the rigorous training of the ISP.

A staccato bark of unintelligible verbal commands came through the half-opened doorway of the control room ahead. The captain's office should be somewhere about here. On Coran's right was a closed door marked CAPTAIN. Coran knocked twice without receiving any answer, then tried the door. It slid easily open. He stepped over the high threshold. Lights were flaring and dying away as if the generators were running unevenly. He peered about him, and at first the Spartan-like accommodations seemed unoccupied. He wondered if he should sit down and wait for the captain. A second look convinced him he would have a long wait.

Sprawled forward, half across the desk, was the captain's body. The upper part of his head had been blown away by a blaster gun, evidently fired at close quarters.

A cry behind him swung Coran around. In the frame of the opened doorway stood the purser, mouth open, pointing at the dead man with a trembling finger. Instinctively, Coran started for the door. The purser sprang into action, leaped on Coran

and caught him in a surprisingly strong grip for so slight a man. Coran made no attempt to struggle. In a moment the office was full of people. The burly first mate pulled the purser away from Coran.

"What is all this, Hamlin?" the mate demanded.

Coran had taken time to study the identification files on all the *Aphrodite's* officers at headquarters before coming aboard. He recognized the three officers instantly as Harriman, first mate—Hamlin, the purser—and Nalson, the navigator or astronaut—but was careful not to give himself away.

"I heard a sound in the captain's office, and when I came in to investigate, I found him," Hamlin explained. "The captain's been murdered."

Mate Harriman looked Coran up and down. "Where's the gun?" he asked.

"How should I know? I just came in a minute ago. He was like this when I got here."

Harriman drove a fist into Coran's mouth. "Come now, you don't expect us to believe a yarn like that. Where is that gun?"

Coran spat blood from his mangled lips. "I don't know anything about it. The purser can tell you why I wanted to see the captain."

Hamlin spoke up. "I told him to wait till we were out in space," he snapped. "He said he wanted to check the passenger list."

"I demand to see the first mate," Coran said.

The words seemed to recall Harriman to his duties. "I am the first mate," he said. "I haven't time to bother with you now. I'll take care of you later. Throw him in the cells till we get out in space. I'll have to take over for the Old Man."

CORAN was hustled roughly to the lower part of the ship and flung into the cramped quarters of the transport's brig. He settled back on the bunk and tried to straighten things out in his mind.

"At least I got a room to myself," he mused grimly. This was going to complicate things.

His wrist-chron had stopped, so he had no way of telling time, but they fed him

four times and he slept twice before they came for him. Two crew men waited in the passage while Hamlin came in and sat down.

"You're in a bad spot, Coran. It's customary in cases of civilian infractions of ship's rules to appoint an officer as counsel for their defense. I'm yours. Sorry you got pushed around, but you were lucky at that. Harriman's a pretty tough character. You'd have got worse if Nalson and I hadn't been there. He's been disciplined for brutality before now. They're giving you a hearing in the wardroom. I'd suggest you co-operate with me by telling me anything that will help with your case. I don't mind telling you your story's too weak to hold up. I'll do all I can for you, but you'll have to help."

"What am I supposed to do?" Coran grunted.

"You might tell me the truth. We know the captain must have been killed just as the ship took off. Otherwise, someone would have heard the shot. If you could prove you were somewhere else at the time——"

"I was with my wife. She'll bear witness for me."

"It won't do, Coran. I should have told you that your wife is ill and won't be able to testify. I found her myself, strapped to the bunk in your cabin, Martian plague! I called the doctor who examined her, then quarantined the cabin. We left concentrated food and water, warned her not to leave, then locked and sealed the cabin. No one can see her."

Coran went cold with anger. "Someone must really be trying to foul me up," he raged. "She couldn't have the plague—— she's never been off the earth."

"Your papers read that you just came from Mars," objected Hamlin.

"I did. We were married just before the ship left. If I were carrying the plague, I'd have it myself. She couldn't have it——"

Hamlin laughed nervously. "I wish you could convince the doctor of that. He's been taking blood tests of me ever since we left her. I'm sorry for you, Coran, but she has it. I saw the grey rash myself. It's horrible, horrible . . ."

Coran's mind worked like lightning. She had said she would think of something. Something to keep the stateroom to herself. There might even be a more sinister motive than that. After that picture of the man he wanted in her purse, he could believe anything of her. Maybe she even knew about him. She was faking, but how? How, since she had been securely tied when he left her? Had he started his quest at the wrong end? She must have been the woman accomplice who had got a gun through the security police guarding the prisoner.

"What am I charged with?" he asked.

"Deliberate murder and plotting against the welfare of the ship. If the officers agree on your guilt, you can be put to death immediately. They put you through an airlock. The regulations have to be pretty stringent on a spaceship."

Coran stood up. "Let's go up and get it over with," he said. "We'll see about your regulations."

Manacled between the two brawny crewmen, a sullen Coran rode up in the elevators. Outside the wardroom, the group stopped while Hamlin knocked. "I wish you'd let me help you," he said in a final attempt.

Coran shook his head. "I know what I'm doing."

Hamlin shrugged. "I hope you do."

THE assembled officers stared at Coran curiously. His lip was still bruised and swollen. He stared insolently at the group and tried to thrust all other considerations out of his mind. The girl and his quest would have to wait. His immediate hurdle was to get out of this mess.

Harriman wet his lips and opened the hearing.

"I won't waste words when we all know why we're here. There is no need for formality in a hearing of this kind. The captain of the *Aphrodite* was foully murdered, and this man who calls himself Stephen Coran was found standing over his body. There was no gun in the room and none on the prisoner. Coran's papers seem to be in order. They show him to be a prospector from Mars, en route to Venus, but may be forgeries. That can be checked.

His wife is in quarantine, and will be unable to testify one way or the other."

Coran broke in. "I demand to hear the formal charge against me."

"As acting captain of the *Aphrodite*, I officially charge you, Stephen Coran, with the wilful murder of Captain Joseph Shalm, late master of this ship. Also, since the murder must have taken place at the exact moment of take-off, with the deliberate intent to delay and endanger the safety of the ship and all the lives on board."

"Good. Now I make formal demand that my wife be called as witness to the fact that I could not have been in the captain's office at the time of take-off."

"You heard me say that your wife is in quarantine. She will not be able to testify. If you have anything else to say in your defense, speak up."

"I make no defense. Since the court is so obviously prejudiced, I will stand on my civilian rights as a technicality. This court has no jurisdiction over me. The most you can do is to confine me to the area of this ship until a charge can be brought against me in the admiralty court on Venus. Also, under Security Law No. F 1720, since the one witness I asked to have called in my defense has not been brought to court, I demand that the whole proceedings be dropped as illegal, unjustified, and prejudicial to civilian rights. Since I obviously cannot escape from the ship, you cannot even require the customary bond for reappearance."

Harriman's mouth dropped open. "Do you expect to get away with this?"

"More than that." Coran grimaced unpleasantly. "I wish to file charges with the nearest official of the ministry of transport that I was mishandled and held under restraint without formal charges being brought against me. If there is such an official on board, I demand to see him."

Nelson, the astronaut, hid a smile behind his sleeve, then leaned forward and whispered earnestly to Harriman. Harriman nodded, then turned to consult with the ship's doctor.

"Is this your doing, Hamlin?" the acting captain rasped sourly.

The purser shifted uneasily. "No, sir.

But, since the prisoner chooses this defense, I have no choice but to repeat his demands, officially. There is an official aboard, Paul Jomian of the transport ministry. I suggest you send for him and turn this hearing over to him. He will have whatever authority is necessary to deal with it."

In momentary desperation, Harriman glanced round the room at the circle of faces and saw that Coran had him over a barrel. The hard-faced navigator, Nelson, spoke up. "Better send for Jomian. In theory, we have the right of assessing the death penalty, but in practice, it's not so simple. The admiralty will review the case and, if your foot slips on some technicality, you might even have to face the disintegrators yourself."

Harriman gave in and sent for Jomian.

A RED BULB flashed and the buzzer sounded, then Paul Jomian stepped into the wardroom. He was a lean man, greying into his late fifties, with the bleakness of outer space in his eyes and a face badly scarred by spaceburns. His eyes stared as they fell upon the manacled figure of Coran standing in the center of the harsh-lit stage. Steve Coran stared back at him with insolently expressionless face.

The difficulty was rapidly explained by Captain Harriman in a monotonously leveled tone of repressed fury. Jomian studied the prisoner with politely casual interest while the harangue went on. When Harriman finished, the transport official considered briefly before giving his verdict.

"Well, gentlemen, much as I sympathize with your feelings in this matter, I'm afraid the prisoner is within his rights. Even if the circumstances are somewhat unusual, we have no choice but to release him. However, in view of the possible menace involved to the safety of the ship, I recommend that he be under constant surveillance by some competent and responsible officer, preferably the one appointed for his defense, who will see to it that he has no opportunity to perpetrate further violence. Once Venus is reached the man can be turned over to the proper authorities."

Coran broke in roughly. "Does all this monkey talk mean I'm free?"

Harriman was maliciously official. "I'm afraid it does. But don't try anything funny. Hamlin, Nalson, I'm detailing you two to watch over Coran in shifts. Don't let him out of your sight, day or night. If he attempts to steal a lifeboat and escape, or makes the slightest untoward move to hinder the operation of the ship or molest anyone on board, shoot him—that's all. Since he has no room, he will share yours for the remainder of the voyage."

Hamlin got a key and released Coran from his manacles.

Jomian glanced at him with an odd expression. "If you don't mind, Coran, I'd like a word with you in private. If the captain has no objection."

Harriman was curious, but nodded. "Are you sure you'll be safe with him?"

Jomian smiled. "That's my worry. Send your men to my cabin in an hour. After twelve years in the Space Patrol, I'm used to handling bad boys."

NINE days out the *Aphrodite* ran into trouble.

Proximity alarms blared wildly. It was only a small asteroid, not more than a quarter of a mile in diameter, just a jagged piece of rock and fused metal. But it came out of a direct line with the sun, moving fast, and discipline had been dangerously lax on the *Aphrodite* after Harriman took over command.

At 9:05 ship time, there came the sound of a rending crash up forward, followed by a nauseating sense of shock and withering waves of motion energy transformed into heat. Fortunately, the collision was a glancing one, but enough. The *Aphrodite* was a shattered wreck. Her bow and the control room were carried away bodily, and only the spacetight bulkheads of the waist saved the passengers and crew from instant death.

At 9:20, feeling far off course, leaking air dangerously from sprung seams, the doomed transport and the asteroid circled each other like wary wrestlers awaiting an opening. Sooner or later, as the initial force of the spin died down, they would crash together in flaming holocaust. In

the meantime, everything that could be done was being done.

Orders went out to abandon ship. Of the original complement of four hundred and eighty passengers and crew, nineteen were dead or missing, and eighty others more or less seriously injured. The heaviest casualties were among the rocket crew and officers, some of whom were fatally burned by premature atomic discharge. Rocket jets were set roaring at full capacity in a vain effort to break the wreck away from the deadly vicinity of the circling asteroid. Surviving crew members labored heroically to load and launch the lifeboats from three airlocks, two of which were so badly jammed as to be almost unworkable.

The forward compartments were a scene from inferno. Coran, who had been with Nalson in the chartroom when the crash occurred, picked himself out of the jumble of broken lockers and scattered metal-leaf charts and crawling through the glare and heat to a pitiable huddle of pulped flesh pinned beneath the wreckage of a beryllium table. Nalson's skull was fractured, blood pulsed from his ears, and he was gasping out his life as Coran pried the table off him. His eyes seemed bursting from his head.

"No excuse for wreck," he got out. "I'm . . . Security Police. Sent me in case you fumbled. Watch Harriman . . . Hamlin."

A spurt of blood from his mouth and nose stopped his words. The navigator spat savagely. "Think . . . Hamlin's . . . the man you want." His lips moved weakly, then hung open as he died.

USING a leg of the ruined table as a wrecking bar, Coran pried open the door and got into the passageway. A blast of sickening heat rushed to meet him. Forward was a lurid glare of white hot metal, and he could hear air shrieking through the leaks where seams had started. He fought his way aft to a bank of elevators, but they were hopelessly jammed.

Descending the spiral stairway, he encountered Paul Jomian.

"I thought you were gone," Jomian said. "The entire forward part of the ship seems to be carried away."

"It is. I'm hard to kill. Nalson's dead. And so are the men in the control room."

A kind of exhilaration moved in Coran. The endless waiting and watching, under constant surveillance, had gotten on his nerves. He was not used to intrigue. Now that a need for his kind of action had arisen, he felt better already.

Jomian's left arm had compound fractures above and below the elbow. It hung useless at his side, with splinters of bone thrusting through mangled skin and flesh. Coran broke open a locker and gave him emergency first aid, binding the limb with metal splints.

"That'll hold it till you can get it cared for. You'd better get to the lifeboats. I'm going to find my wife. As I told you, she may be in this racket, but I can't be sure. In any case, she's my responsibility."

"Can't I help?" Jomian asked.

"Not now. If I make it, we'll discuss it there. If not, you can take a message for me. There's an ISP squadron six hours behind us. Get a helioflash to them. Tell them to come a-running. I've an idea they'll find something interesting."

"I'll get word to them," Jomian promised. "Take care of yourself, boy."

The door of stateroom No. 200 was still locked and sealed. Coran opened a locker and got out a wrench to work off the lugs on the lock. A voice from behind jarred him.

"I've been looking for you," Hamlin sneered. "I thought you'd be up to something." In the dimming and flaring light, Coran got a glimpse of the blaster-gun in Hamlin's hand. Coran's fingers tightened on the wrench. He spun around and hurled the wrench in one motion. Hamlin pressed the trigger, but the wrench spoiled his aim. Coran dodged under the gun and dragged him down in a flying tackle. The gun went rattling down the corridor.

"Come away from there, you fool," Hamlin screamed as he broke away. "D'you want the plague?" He edged toward the gun, but Coran cut him off. Both lunged for it. Coran got it, but before he could use it, Hamlin kicked him in the stomach. He rolled on the floor in agony. Hamlin kicked again viciously. Coran fumbled with the gun.

A warning alarm sounded. The boats were about to leave.

Coran got his breath back. "Help me get her out. She has no more plague than you have. Besides, she's your——"

"You're mad," Hamlin shrieked. "They'd never let her into the boats. I won't risk the lives of innocent people on your sayso." He leaned across Coran to snatch at the gun. Coran clawed at his face and layers of plastic came off in his fingers. Hamlin screamed as the stuff came loose from his flesh. Then he turned and ran.

He darted up the companion stairs. By the time Coran could reach the gun, it was too late. The man had vanished to the upper deck.

Coran got to his knees and aimed the blaster at the jammed lock on the stateroom door. The mechanism and half the door disappeared in ravaging violence. The shock knocked Coran flat.

Gerda stepped through the shattered doorway.

"What's going on?" she wailed hysterically. It was apparent that she had been crying, although she had tried to efface the marks.

"Never mind that. We've got to get you out of here. Are you all right?"

She laughed wildly. "Of course I am! Has everyone gone crazy? You look a fright. D'you want to carry me, or should I carry you?"

"Get to the lower decks. Find the doctor. Show him you're not sick. And hurry——the lifeboats are leaving." Coran made a vague gesture and slumped weakly against the wall while spirals of nausea raged through him. She was halfway to the companion stair before she noticed that he was not following. Coran had fainted.

COLD water splashing in his face revived him. His head was nestled in her lap.

"What are you doing here?" he raged. "If you don't hurry, it will be too late."

She answered with quiet assurance. "Listen, tough guy, you didn't have to come back for me. D'you think I'd leave you to save my skin after that?"

Coran shook his head to clear the mist

of dizzy weakness, and she helped him to his feet.

"Let's get going," he urged. "If the lifeboats leave before we reach the airlock, you'll really be in a jam."

With the girl's arm tight around his waist to support him, he managed to make it to the sally port. The airlock door was closed.

"The boats have gone," he said. He sat down hopelessly on a casket-like metal toolbox.

"Maybe someone will come," she said.

"That's what I'm afraid of," he snapped.

"In the meantime, I think we need some coffee . . . if I can find an unopened can."

Coran waved toward a locker where supplies were kept on clipshelves. She found a can with built-in heat unit and opened it, pouring coffee for them. He sipped his slowly, while she gulped down a scalding draft.

"You seem very calm about all this," Coran said grimly.

"Hysterics won't help. Besides, you seem to be expecting someone. What did you mean, that's what you're afraid of? Who would come back?"

"Don't you know?"

She shook her head in bewilderment. "How should I know? I'm a stranger here myself."

"You may as well stop playing innocent. In case you don't already know, I'm an officer in the space patrol. This wreck was deliberate, planned by some of the crew. There are two possibilities. Either they'll come back and try to salvage the plutonium cargo, or they have confederates waiting in space to close in as soon as the ship is abandoned. I don't look forward to either one."

"You act as if I knew something about all this," Gerda said irritably. "I don't know why you should think so, but you're way off the track. Why suspect me?"

"How can I help it, with that picture in your purse, and that phoney deal you pulled by playing sick?"

Gerda flushed, whether from anger or guilt Coran would have given much to know.

"I don't know how you know about that," she answered evenly. "I—I can't

explain about the picture, but the other I had nothing to do with. While you had me tied up, someone came into the room; naturally I thought it was you coming back. I was still dazed from shock and only half awake. First thing I knew, a man in uniform had jammed a pillow over my face. I thought he was trying to kill me, and nearly smothered. He rubbed something on my elbows and down the cords of my neck, then left. It seemed like a nightmare. I blamed you vaguely till I remembered the gold braid on his sleeves and knew it must have been a ship's officer. Later, an officer came in with the doctor, who took one look at me and seemed scared to death. Too scared to examine me. They wouldn't listen to anything, just untied me enough so I could work loose eventually, left some stuff, and locked me in. That's all I knew till you let me out just now.

CORAN considered. "It sounds plausible. I'd like to believe you, but that photograph is too damning. You'll have a lot of explaining to do . . . if we get out of this alive."

"What about the photograph? What's he wanted for?"

"There's another one of him in the Security Police headquarters. He's the man I was sent to get. Both ISP and the Security Police want him. The original charge was barratry, but—"

"What's barratry?" she asked.

"It's the deliberate wrecking of a ship, for the insurance or to salvage the cargo illegally. I don't know what your connection is with this man, but—"

"It's very simple," she said. "He's my brother. I knew he was in trouble, but didn't know it was so serious. Our family broke up years ago. Mother married again. That was fifteen years ago. I was ten, and Ken was thirteen. We took our stepfather's name, but Ken and he never got along very well. Ken ran away to Venus when he was seventeen. Mother died a year ago. I—I wanted to find Ken and help him. My stepfather had him traced for me and we found out he was in trouble with the police. I thought if I could talk to him, maybe he'd give himself

up, take his just punishment, and we could start over again together. Ken's all I have left. He's not bad. A little wild, but not bad."

Coran stood up and stared into the black gulf of space through the visiplat. He felt a sudden bleak distaste for his profession.

"I'm afraid it's a little late for that," he said gently. "He's wanted for barratry, murder, and perhaps treason. The penalty for any one of them is death. I'm sorry."

Gerda sat silently, brooding over the information. "You think I'm going to cry, don't you? And you hate emotional women. You can relax. I think I've known all along that it was hopeless. It does hurt, but I'm beyond crying any more."

FAR out in the void a clustered blur of faint, needle-sharp lights etched itself against the star-patterned darkness. Space-ships, coming up fast under rocket power. Coran glanced quickly at the wall-chron. It was too soon for the space patrol. Even under full acceleration, they could not make it in less than three hours.

"I'll have to trust you," he said grimly. "Brace yourself—company's coming."

Gerda snapped out of her black reverie.

"What are you going to do?"

"We'd better work out a plan of action."

Working like mad, Coran dumped the contents of the metal toolbox onto the floor. With a wrench, he smashed the hand-operated controls which worked the airlock from the interior of the ship into a tangle of twisted machinery. Then he scooped up the rest of the tools and threw them down a waste disposal chute.

"Get inside the toolbox," he ordered.

"Try it once to make sure you can raise the lid from inside. Then keep out of sight. When they get here, I'll try to draw them away into the after part of the ship. If I succeed in drawing them off, you slip out and get into the airlock. Close the door and lock it from inside. If I manage to circle around and get back here, I'll signal you with three soft taps on the door, followed by three hard ones. Don't open for anyone else. It'll take them over an hour to cut through that door from in here. You'll have a gambler's chance."

"Good luck," said Gerda softly. She

climbed into the toolbox while Coran recharged the blaster gun and stuffed his pockets with extra ammunition.

Gerda raised the box lid slightly. "It works, Steve," she said. "Take care of yourself."

He grinned. "One thing more. When you're into the airlock, get into a space-suit and get one ready for me. They're on racks at the left side, inside a locker."

She nodded. The lid slammed down.

Coran re-arranged the stowage of boxes in the next compartment into a series of defensive barricades, then crouched beside the half-opened door of the sally-port. He had not long to wait.

The airlock door swung open and three rough-looking men in space suits came cautiously through. They were followed by a dozen others not wearing the heavily-insulated space armor. The pirates must have run a gangway tube between the ships and fastened it with magnetic grapnels. The outer doors of the airlock would open automatically as the pressure equalized. He wondered if Gerda would have sense enough to close and bolt the outers as well as the inward doors. It was too late to worry about that now.

Coran took careful aim and fired his blaster beam into the crowd of men. Four were killed by the first discharge. The others broke for cover. Blaster beams interlaced, and the room jarred with repeated concussion. Men poured through the opened airlock door. The temperature rose sharply with the release of energy. The pirates rushed the door and Coran was forced to fall back to his line of barricades.

He retreated cautiously, firing as he went. From behind the last of his barricades, he burned down three of his foes, then broke and ran for the engine room shaft, leaping across it to the spiralled stair. Just as he reached the upper loft of engines a beam cut down the shaft. He dodged behind a massive generator, but three blaster beams concentrated on it. The force of their tripled discharge tore it from its moorings. Artificial gravity combined with its mass to send it crashing into a tangle of the intricate machinery below.

To avoid being crushed, Coran was

forced to plunge down the second shaft. He lost himself in the spiderweb of inner support beams. The pirates scattered and climbed into the maze of beams, probing with their blaster rays as shadows moved uneasily in the eery darkness. The lumibulbs waxed and waned as the unsteady current fluctuated.

FURTHER and further Coran led them, always away from the sally-port and the airlock, darting chance beams at his pursuers whenever opportunity presented. He had the advantage of knowing that they were all enemies. Their forces were divided and confused. In the weird and uncomfortable lofts of the engine-room, clear targets were impossible.

A wild half-plan occurred to Coran. He headed in the direction of the main engine-room switch box and with his beam burned out all the fuses.

Pit-like darkness enveloped the lofts as the lumibulbs went out. It was touch and go sliding down the long beams in the pall of utter blackness. He reached a catwalk, and cautiously made his way toward the elevators. Once he collided with a heavy body and a man swore savagely.

He missed the elevators, but by some miracle found a hatchway leading to the cargo holds. Sliding through, he cut down the intensity of his blaster beam and melted the plastic and metal hatchcover into a fused mass. That should delay them a few minutes. He scuttled down a deserted passageway and began climbing flights of stairs. If he could only find his way back to the sally-port from this other direction. He came suddenly into the room of his hasty barricades next to the sally-port. It was occupied.

Two men had been left behind as guards. He caught them unawares, and burned both down with one sweep of his beam.

The sally-port was empty. The box lid lay on the floor and the airlock door was closed tight.

With the butt of his blaster, he tapped out the signal on the airlock door.

There was a smooth hiss of releasing metal parts and the airlock door came open. He slipped through and slammed the door, spinning the lockbolts tight.

"Thank heavens, you made it," Gerda said. Pale and shaken, she handed him the heavy space-armor. "I was afraid you'd run into those others in the next room. They almost caught me. I had the lid half-raised when they came into the sally-port to check."

"Put on your helmet," he ordered roughly, as she handed him the fishbowl-like contrivance.

She laughed. "The air's bad in here. I could hardly breathe, and I didn't know how to work the valves in the helmet."

Coran swore briefly, then adjusted her helmet and put on his own. He set the microphones and the space communicators.

"I shut the outside door," she complained. "I even bolted it, but it won't stay locked."

"It's automatic," he told her. "When the air pressure's equal on both sides, it opens. I'll show you."

Just as he reached for the controls, the door came open with a violent crash. Hamlin stood framed in the doorway, blaster gun in hand.

"I hadn't counted on you, Coran," he said. The gun did not waver. "Don't reach for that gun."

CORAN relaxed and stared at his opponent. "You look quite different without the plastic mask," he observed. Hamlin was older than he had looked in the photographs, but noticeably the same man, despite lines of strain which did not show in either picture.

Hamlin smiled wolfishly. "My pictures don't flatter me, do they? The problem is what you've done with my men. You are becoming a nuisance, Coran. I'll have to kill you, of course, but I'd like to know how you managed this switch."

Coran was playing for time. "I'll make a deal with you," he said. "I'm curious to know why you pulled that Martian plague stunt with Gerda."

Hamlin laughed. "I recognized her at once, even though she had changed since I last saw her. Ten years is a long time when you're kids, but I'd seen a picture of her since then. When I saw you with her, I knew you were up to something. I wanted to keep you away from her till I

could deal with you. The rest was easy, just a little grease and aluminum powder. The doctor was scared to death . . ."

Gerda was staring at her brother through through the space helmets. "You did know me, Ken?"

Hamlin shot her a contemptuous glance. "You little fool," he snapped. "You should never have come here. I don't know what I'm going to do with you."

Gerda cringed as if he had struck her. "We'll have plenty of time for old home week later," Hamlin went on. "Now tell me what's happened to my men, Coran. I haven't much time to waste on you."

Coran bit his lip. "I just lured them into the engine room and tangled them up in the lofts, then blew out the lights. It was a good trick while it worked. Some of them got weeded out on the way."

"Now it's your turn, Coran," Hamlin said brutally. His finger tightened on the trigger. Gerda stood looking from one to the other with a look of anguish on her face. "Don't do it, Ken," she said, moving in front of Coran.

"Stay out of this, Gerda," Coran warned.

"I'm not kidding," Hamlin said, "if you get in my way, I'll kill both of you"

Coran struck her helmet so heavily she fell against the wall. In the same movement, he lunged at Hamlin. The blaster beam raked the ceiling, and in that confined space concussion was unbearable, even inside the space suits. Coran's blow knocked Hamlin through the doorway into the connecting tube. Coran swung about and caught up his gun.

"Don't shoot, Steve," Gerda wailed.

The shock of the first blaster discharge had loosened the magnetic grappels which held the ships together. The pirate's craft began to drift away, tearing loose the end of the tube.

Hamlin was on his feet, trying to fire his blaster, but the charge was burned out. It only flickered feebly. He leaped the widening distance between the ships and went up the side like a spider, gripping the shell of the *Erania* with the magnetic soles of his space-boots. Coran climbed round the doorway and went up after him, gun in hand.

Hamlin had disappeared round the curve of the hull. It was rough, dangerous work climbing round the outer shell of a spaceship. One slip meant a plunge into the awesome emptiness of the void. Gravity was practically non-existent, but the grip of the soles was slight, and only one foot could be moved at a time.

From the vantage point of his cover behind a dead rocket tube, Hamlin waited. He knew that his time was short. Off across the black gulf of space three flakes of gleaming light resolved themselves into fast patrol cruisers, racing toward the derelict *Erania*. Coran had not seen them, but came on steadily, determined to see his assignment through. Hamlin waited, gun resting on the rocket tube, hoping for a clear shot. Mad with hatred, he blamed Coran for the failure of his whole life, and was viciously resolved to take his enemy with him.

The patrol ships moved in close and warped alongside the *Aphrodite*. Men in space suits poured out of the access hatch and guns were trained on the rocket tube behind which Hamlin held out.

Sick fury possessed Hamlin. With the gesture of a trapped rat, he rammed his blaster gun up the vents of the rocket tube. If he could ignite the remaining fuel, they would all blow to Kingdom Come in a roaring atomic holocaust.

Coran saw his intent and stood up to fire. His beam went wildly into the darkness as he lost his balance and toppled into space. Another beam whipped out from the patrol cruiser and caught Hamlin full force as he stood up to fire into the tube.

He vanished in a glittering cloud of particles, dispersed instantly by their own radiation.

Lines with magnetic grappels looped out and snatched Coran reeling him back to the patrol ship like a grotesque fish. For three days, he lay unconscious from space-shock . . .

BACK on the Moon, at Luna Station, three people were waiting for the Martian Express to take off.

"You see, Steve, Gerda's really my daughter," Paul Jomian explained. "Her mother divorced me fifteen years ago, and

a year later married Gartan Mors. She took the children, of course, and Mors raised them as his own. Gerda was young enough to conform but Ken was always wild. He took it for three or four years, then ran away to Venus. Gerda always idolized him, but really she scarcely knew him. If anyone's at fault in all this, I am the one to blame. I was a stubborn fool, and Nell could never stand my job."

Gerda offered her hand to Coran. "I hate long goodbyes," she said. "I'm sorry about everything. I—I don't really blame you for Ken's death. Goodbye, and good luck."

Steve decided it was safe to play out a fond and corny farewell. He took her hand lingeringly. "Don't worry about things, Gerda. I know how you feel. It wouldn't have worked out anyhow. Just let me know when you get the divorce. Let's break this up. I thought that I hated Mars-station, but now that I'm through with the Space Patrol, I can't wait to get back."

Paul Jomian put his arm around his daughter as they watched Coran turn and wave before climbing aboard the express cruiser. On Coran's face was the smug complacency of a man who has neatly avoided being stuck with a dame. He grinned and vanished up the gangplank. Jomian muttered something inaudibly.

"You're a sucker to let a man like Steve get away . . . for any reason," he told her. "Such men are hard to find, and still harder to hook once you've found them."

"I know it," she said firmly, though tears brimmed in her eyes. "But I just couldn't love the man who'd killed my brother. I couldn't."

"That's the biggest mistake you ever made. Steve didn't want me to tell you, but he didn't shoot Ken. His beam went wild." Jomian nerved himself for an ordeal. "I killed him."

"Why didn't you tell me—*why?*" she wailed.

"I should have told you before, but I couldn't. I didn't want you to hate me, now that I'd just found you."

Gerda clung to her father fiercely. "I couldn't hate you, dad. But we musn't let him go. I might have a chance to win him, but how can I if he's on Mars and I'm here?"

"I'm afraid that's out of our hands. Steve doesn't know it, but he's not through with the space patrol. They refused his resignation. He's just been appointed commander of the Mars-Jupiter sector. Do you think you have the guts to be a space-man's wife?"

"I *know* I have. But how'll I ever convince Steve? You heard him. He said it wouldn't ever work out."

"That's your problem. He's a stubborn man."

Sudden determination shone in her face. "And I'm a stubborn woman," she called back, blowing her father a kiss. She reached the gangplank just in time to grab it and be dragged up with it.

Jomian grinned. "She's my kid. I'll bet she trims his wings, the rat."