

**SUPER
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Dying from the gray fogs in his tortured brain, Calloran knew that he must not give in to the invisible destroyers— not till he had made his body a blazing cosmic beacon, warning all travelers—

SPACEMAN, BEWARE!

October 12, 2237. Sighted derelict at 0925 hours. Altered course to investigate. Design of ship appears totally alien. Coming alongside at 1218 hours—will send party to board and explore—full details to follow.

—Last message received by official helioflash from ISP cruiser Polaris

By Stanley Mullen

CALLORAN didn't need the wary glances shot at him by the rest of the crew to tell him what was wrong. Spacefog always began like this, with blind worms of mist crawling inside your brain and a jagged fringe of gray ice around the perimeter of vision. Medical bigwigs talked learnedly of a nervous disorder compounded of fatigue, nervous strain, and the mind-shattering emptiness of space. But the real thing is something else again, and the outer darkness is a grim laboratory. At the moment, Calloran knew more about spacefog than medical science ever would.

Later would come the curious distortions warping his judgments of time and distance, followed by an evil nightmare of delirium. If he lived through it, he would be twisted in both mind and body. He had seen it happen too often to others for him to have any delusions about his future. . . .

Inbound from the moons of Saturn, the interplanetary supply ship Procyon IV tobogganed sunward with a full cargo of trouble. The desk-chair dare-devils back on Mars had decided to try out a new, shorter orbit back to Callisto. Procyon IV was the elected guinea pig.

On paper, the new orbit worked out perfectly, with great saving of time, which was money. In a jinxed blast-off from Titan, the ship had blown three atomic converter units and mangled a whole blank of correction tubes. Since then, in the long weeks of silent flight while Titan diminished to infinity astern, strains had mounted steadily until both men and ship were in such state as to make a cinch landing difficult and a difficult one impossible.

They knew now that so prolonged an orbit correction was too great a strain for the alloys used in a freighter, and probably the technicians were already at work on supermetals which

would stand up. In the meantime, Procyon IV and Calloran, pilot and astrogator, worked out their destiny together in the great darkness.

Burrowing into the maze of charts and possible orbits, Calloran smiled grimly and tried to ignore the hysteria which shrilled in his brain. Anyone else aboard showing his symptoms would already have been overpowered, drugged and securely manacled in his bunk. But they needed him too desperately; Herndon (standing quietly by, ready to take over the control board) had too little experience for the messy work ahead. He had to hang on as long as he could. He would call the relief in plenty of time, before he cracked; until then, on the board, he temporarily outranked even Captain Glamis.

But he worked with a growing conviction of futility. The one calculation he dared not make was how much longer he and the ship would hold together. For the rest, equations danced through his mind in numerals of gray outlined in frostfire.

Calloran jumped as Captain Glamis came up quietly behind him.

"How do your figures work out?" Glamis asked.

"Not good. We'll converge with the orbit of Callisto about twelve hours late."

The captain frowned. "In that case, you'd better plot some corrections now. I'll put the engineers on it. Maybe they can do something . . . if the old crate holds together long enough."

Calloran laughed harshly. "It won't. I'll fudge up a correction, though. Give you something to do. Don't you figure I'll be with you that long?"

Glamis grunted. "You know more about that than I do. How are your eyes?"

"Bad. They're fuzzing already. I've tried drugs. They don't help."

"They never do. Do you think you can take us in?"

"No. But if you get through, give my love to Jean."

Captain Glamis turned away quickly to avoid looking at the pilot. He was wondering how he could tell Jean about Calloran . . . if he got through to tell her anything.

Calloran half-turned, reaching for the push button to call for relief. As his blurring vision whipped across the indicator board, he froze, automatically pedaling the emergency alarms.

Eerie howler signals shrilled through the confined galleries. Everywhere men abandoned what they were doing and stood by the intercoms for orders.

"What is it?" the captain asked.

"I don't know exactly. But there's something up ahead."

The forward visipanel showed only a blankness of dark, studded with hard, unwinking points of light. Glamis crouched at Calloran's shoulder, studying the boards intently. Herndon came in hurriedly, then paused, embarrassed. The pilot waved him to the spare board.

"Meteorites?"

Calloran shook his head sharply. "Too big. And too regular for any small asteroid. Mass thirty-eight hundred Castel units. Probably metallic from the ratio. Thermal readings give only about thirty degrees difference between light and dark sides. Probably spinning rapidly. Albedo eighty-seven. There's a variable, which could mean two objects spinning around a common center. Could be spaceships, but—"

"Too big?"

Calloran nodded. "Never was a spaceship above six hundred Castels. We couldn't power it off a body larger than Luna, for one thing. And above six hundred the stresses would be impossible to handle."

"Then it couldn't even be two spaceships!"

"Not likely," grunted Calloran. "But we'll know soon enough. It's almost dead ahead." He sounded the acceleration warning.

PROCYON IV groaned and snapped ominously as the braking force was cautiously applied. Forward rocket tubes flared crimson to orange to purple. Racking nausea and the momentary blindness of the deceleration stunned Calloran. He gripped himself, knuckles whitening on the control bars as he inched them forward. It was all he could do to control the throttle and retain his faculties.

The mysterious object was still too distant to be seen, and the panels were obscured now as the braking tubes released their ravaging energies. Palest violet flame faded into white as a cone of blinding glare formed around the nose of the ship. Plumes of snowy incandescence ringed with rainbow tints flared ahead in cometary splendor and beat furiously at the surrounding darkness.

Proximity gongs began to beat in quickening tempo, merging into steady clangor of sound. The ship checked, swerving slightly from its calculated orbit. Red danger lights blinked on the board.

Calloran cut the switches, gasping as the agony released him slowly. The panels cleared. At a signal, Herndon cleared the feed lines, shifting the power from the atomic converters to liquid fuel for close-in maneuvering. Procyon IV drifted, wobbling, spinning off center. Short blasts from the midship jets steadied the whirl. A blurring spiral of stars on the visipanel slowed, became solid and stopped.

While Herndon called readings, Calloran watched a point of light move across the field of stars.

"That's it," he barked. "Stay with it!"

Rocket tubes hummed again, a series of slight jars smoothed as Procyon IV moved in a long curve to intercept the glittering particle. Minutes trod a gulf of darkness.

"Spaceships, all right," Captain Glamis said hoarsely. "One of them looks like an ISP cruiser. What that other thing is, I don't know. I never saw anything like it before. Did you?"

Calloran squinted, trying to distinguish forms on the panel. He groaned audibly as the spacefog hit him. Momentarily, under stress of excitement, he had forgotten it, but now a shower of hot needles coursed through his brain. Gray mist clogged his thoughts. He tried to speak but only a choking babble came from his lips.

An ISP cruiser! Thank Heaven. Now maybe they could get him to the company hospital in Callisto in time. At least put a pilot aboard, or convoy the ship in. . . .

He let go and sagged in his swivel stool. Groping blindly, he pushed himself from the board. He was vaguely conscious of words being spoken, but at first they didn't register. Through a whirl of pain, he grasped at meanings.

"It's the Polaris," someone said. "I'd know her anywhere."

The Polaris! The Polaris had been missing four months, unreported. . . .

Calloran gasped and then screamed. Rough hands reached for him as the convulsions began. He was aware of figures moving in gray mist, catching his arms, dragging him down away from the board. Struggling savagely, he struck out at them. A mass of writhing weights crashed over him, restraining his agonies. Sharp pain jabbed his arm.

Impenetrable darkness. . . .

CALLORAN passed quickly from sleeping to waking. First came the

sound—incredible sound, with myriad brittle harmonies, as if shafts of chill crystal snapped one by one and fell upon the metallic floor. Then came the strident hiss of escaping air. Afterward, silence. Utter, unbelievable silence.

It bothered him. There should be some of the countless tiny sounds of human habitation; half-heard voices, the clatter of feet on metal floors or rungs, the general blurred murmur of life itself, even the throb, hum or burr of vital automatic machinery like the air pumps or the artificial gravity. But there was only stillness, vast, awesome.

He lay quietly, listening. With rest, some of the fogs had cleared from his brain. He was weak, dizzy and wretched, but his mind was functioning better. He'd had a pleasant dream, of Homeport back on Mars, and he was reluctant to leave it. He had dreamed of the lights and cities, and later of Jean Glamis—Tom Glamis' brat, that gangling creature of seventeen, all freckles and green eyes, with a perky nose. But the dream was ended. With a nasty start, Calloran remembered who he was, where he was, that all of his dreams were ended.

Slowly, he got to his feet and swayed across the cabin to the porthole. Staring through the fused quartz, he studied the two ships hanging against infinity. Startlingly huge and close at hand, the great bulks clung airlock to airlock in a mad, whirling dance.

The smaller was Polaris. But what was the other! Even the airlocks and the rows of octagonal portholes were of alien design. The shell was elliptical in section, half a mile long and bulging at either end like an immense dumb-bell. The outer surface was metallic, polished, glittering with reflected sun and starlight. Calloran's eyes focused painfully on it, trying to puzzle out details.

Something must be wrong. Staggering from vertigo and weakness, he made his way to the corridor and shouted. His cry echoed along the empty gallery and lost itself in the stillness. He waited, called out again. No answer.

Chilled, he ran through the passage, shouting, opening doors, looking into empty cabins. The engine rooms were deserted. A generator ran wild with an angry, snarling whine, scarcely audible; its danger lights were globes of flickering crimson. Calloran broke the circuit, shut it off. He raced on into the holds.

Here, amid the great tanks of liquid fuel and the jammed storage vaults, his strength failed. He lay against a bulkhead, gasping for breath. From above came a low unearthly whistle of escaping air. Like a blind man, he groped his way to the ladder well. Rung by rung, he ascended, going by instinct, feeling for handholds. Twice, as paroxysms clawed at him, he almost fell, but he reached the upper decks.

ON THE galley stove a stewpot bubbled untended. He cut the switches and hurried on. The chartroom was empty. On the control bridge, robot pilots had been set to keep the ship automatically on a course circling the Polaris and its eerie companion.

The sound which had so merged with silence as to seem part of it was now more audible, more insistent. Following the shrill hissing, Calloran reached the forward escape hatch. Here was evidence of swift abandonment. Both the life shells were gone, their tackle hanging in hopeless confusion. Airlocks had been imperfectly closed and the atmosphere was seeping out with a high, droning whistle.

This was nightmare. It was heartless, inhuman. His comrades couldn't

have gone off like this, abandoning him in midspace.

Calloran tried hopelessly to close the airlock door. It was useless; the door was sprung out of true. Two things were obvious. The escaping crewmen had not planned to return; it would be impossible to re-enter through such an airlock. Also, the condition of the warped frame showed that Procyon IV was breaking up fast.

Calloran fled to the corridor. Already the air in the sally-port was perilously thin, and the bone-freezing cold of outer space was finding its way into the chamber. He got the heavy door shut, but it too was out of line and would not close tightly enough to seal.

One chance remained. Calloran knew that one lifeboat shell had been damaged in the frowsy takeoff. It was in the stern lock. If even the leaky shell were left, he could still make his way to the Polaris. Slowly, he worked his way aft, fighting for breath. He wished now that he had thought to run a signal to the space patrol cruiser while he was still on the control bridge. Too late for that.

The damaged lifeboat still hung in its tackle, facing the escape tube. Guiding the clumsy shell from its tackle into the tube was hardly a one-man job at best. Considering Calloran's condition, it was a minor miracle that he managed at all.

With a harsh grind of tortured metal, the shell settled awkwardly into its cradle. Calloran got aboard, lowered himself through the manhole hatch and clanged down the lid. He spun dogs tight to seal the lid, then settled into the seat and punched the release.

There came a deafening blast of air-pressure, then a brief shock of movement. The shell popped from the tube like a cork from a champagne bottle. Calloran tripped jet-throttles with reckless abandon, guiding his frail

craft toward the Polaris. In his haste, he overshot the mark. The huge bulks swung closer, but instead of the patrol cruiser, the glittering monstrosity of the alien craft rose between him and the empty gulf of space.

The other lifeboats clustered about an airlock on the far side of the stranger. That was curious. On impulse, Calloran decided to follow their example.

In seconds he was among them, jostling them away from the airlock. With magnetic grapples, he made fast lock to lock.

Escaping air hissed sharply, and the doors came open automatically as pressures equalized. Calloran stared through both airlocks into a weirdly lighted interior.

Ill, frightened and angry as he was, Calloran yet found time to stare in awe at the immense interior. Architecture and decorations, even the implied functions of the furniture, were totally unhuman. He looked about him in amazement. The cabin was a treasure-house, with the wealth of dreams flung about in such careless profusion as to frighten him.

Plates of beaten gold, richly chased with figures of odd geometry, covered ceilings and bulkheads, and hangings of metallic cloth studded with patterns of gemfire bespoke a culture a thousand times richer and older than Earth's.

Pale daffodil light flooded the interior, seeming to come from no special source, but to be a quality of the air itself. Even the atmosphere was alien, richer in oxygen. A slight burning and tingling enveloped his lungs, but the sensation was not unpleasant. Stimulating, rather. . .

Calloran needed stimulation. The artificial gravity seemed set higher than that of Earth, but with the additional energies provided by his slight oxygen jag, Calloran felt his muscles

respond easily. There was a bite of ozone in his nostrils, but his head seemed to be clearing. Thinking came easier, and his vision was less clouded by the blurring grayness.

He explored a dozen apartments, catching his breath at the esthetic and technical marvels revealed in each. Small wonder that his companions had callously deserted him.

It was easy to imagine what had happened. The first party must have gone aboard the alien craft, reporting their findings by helio or semaphore signals. The remainder, already terrified by the imminent breakup of Procyon IV must have tumbled helter-skelter into the other shells and set off to make certain of a share in the rich find. In his present mood, Calloran was cynically unsurprised that no one, not even Captain Glamis, had spared a thought for him.

Instinct led him to what must have been the bow of the ship. There, in the alien control room, he might find his companions. It would be an awkward moment for them, he promised himself. Jean must never know, of course, that her father had left him behind to die. But he'd have an accounting from Glamis and the others.

Calloran came suddenly into the control room, a great cone-shaped bubble roofed in some transparent substance.

"Tom — Herndon — Mack!" he shouted. "Where is everybody?"

A hollow, golden-throated echo vibrated unpleasantly in the bubble, but no answer came. Anger turned swiftly to cold fear as the echoes died unanswered.

CALLORAN stared at the maze of unfamiliar instruments, gauges, controls, hot-panels. His technical curiosity was excited. At another time, he would have liked to go over

them carefully, puzzling out their functions. They seemed mainly mechanical, and nothing mechanical could stump a good spaceman. But there was no time for that now.

A mistake to have wasted his effort searching the ship. Best to have cut straight through to the other airlock where Polaris was moored. Unless something dreadful had already happened, there would be a doctor aboard the cruiser—ISP ships always carried doctors. And Calloran must find help soon.

The airlock proved difficult to locate. Calloran was confused in a tangle of passageways, ending suddenly in a room which he took to be the fuel storage-hold. Not tanks of liquid hydrogen—not even the minor artificial radioactives—but heavy metals, in unbelievable quantity. Countless tons of them, the rarest and heaviest of metals, to judge from the shielding; and all must be activated or such shielding would not be needed. Calloran went cold as his mind automatically calculated the power-equivalent of such a store of metals. Enough power here to blast a solar system into a nova.

Wealth and power beyond all dreaming. All this, but a deadly danger, too. . . Whoever held this ship controlled the destinies of the five inhabited worlds of the system, in peace or war. His imagination rioted with the wonder and terror of it. But corroding depression settled over him. Such power was not good for men—it corrupted the best of them, did horrible things to their minds and their ambitions. The mystery of Procyon's desertion en masse no longer puzzled him, but the explanation was worse than the dread. Had they already struck at the crew of the patrol cruiser? What **fearful conspiracies, what mad ambitions, were already at work? Were they**

already, secure in their strength and knowledge, watching him, waiting to strike him down, playing with him as cats play with a captive mouse?

Masters of the system! It was possible, hideously possible, with the limitless forces at their disposal.

Sickened, with something worse than physical terror gnawing at him, Calloran turned away to continue his search for the airlock. The situation was more desperate than ever now. If he could reach the Polaris, warn its crew—The ISP would know what to do. They were good men, loyal—not just loyal politically, but loyal to the best interests of the vast, brawling multitudes of mankind. In a tight situation they were not too fussy about legal details—they took care of it and argued with the lawyers afterward.

As he worked his way aft, trying to find his way to the airlock, Calloran was stopped time and again, puzzled by some new mystery of the alien ship. Its crew had obviously not been human. But he could find no picture, no representation of their form.

Who were these voyagers? And a greater enigma—where were they?

Even if all had died of disease, accident, exposure to deadly rays, surely some remnant of their bodies would remain. The deathlike silence of the leviathan frayed his already tortured nerves. Loneliness, the recurring symptoms of his ailments, and an unnatural dread of his surroundings built into a crescendo of hysteria. He was lost in the maze of corridors and passages; their very strangeness made all doors and chambers look alike; the corridors led nowhere. He had overshot his mark. From the distance he had traversed, he must be abaft the airlocks. He tried vainly to retrace his steps.

Time was running out swiftly. In weakness and indecision, **he paused**

while a phantasmagoria whirled in his sick brain. Could all this wonder and horror be part of the delirium of space-fog? That was a new thought, a terrible one.

Or suppose the aliens were still here, invisible, amused, studying him, waiting to pounce on his first unguarded moment? The sensation of being watched—stalked!—sent him in head-long flight through tangled galleries and apartments. He fled through rooms where robot machines labored tirelessly at tasks set them by the unthinkable entities who had manned the ship.

Careening wildly, panting out his breath in sobs, Calloran stumbled into a hold he had not seen before.

Near a bank of vats bearing hieroglyphic labels lay Herndon—or what was left of him.

On the floor, heavy clothing lying shredded about it, was a limp, still-twitching body. Calloran knelt quickly, examining. Herndon was dying. Skin and flesh had been eaten from his face and body, showing raw bone. Hideously exposed jawbone and teeth worked spasmodically, whether in last attempts at speech or in the purely mechanical contractions of a corpse. But the tongue was gone, dissolved as if by swiftly corrosive acid. As Calloran watched, part of the brain, visible through empty eye-sockets, crumbled in decay. The writhing body was still.

Calloran's mind rocked with horror. He raced down the nearest passage, shouting the names of his comrades. Scarcely noticing where he was, he came suddenly into the airlock chamber he sought. The pressure doors were still open.

SCREAMING with relief, he floundered and fell through the locks into the control room of the *Polaris*. Here at least were tables and

chairs, chart desks, familiar controls, gauges, machinery, instrument panels.

On the floor, rocking slowly back and forth as his weight disturbed the equilibrium of the cabin, was a single shoe, its laces snapped. On one table, a pair of gloves, the leather of one half eaten away. Beside the gloves, in tumbled-out disarray, were leaves torn from the ship's logbook. Apparently acid had gotten to the pages also, for some were partially shredded and curiously dissolved.

But even here there was no living being. Calloran's frantic ringing of alarm bells and howlers brought no one to him. For a full minute, he sat in the chair and howled. Calming, he buried his face in his hands and wept.

"They can't do this to me," he moaned. "They can't—"

His eyes came to rest on the torn-out pages of the logbook.

Thursday, 12th: About 0930 hours, we sighted large object moving sunward at angle of five degrees north ecliptic. Investigation revealed large spacecraft, of unusual design. 1018, alongside, no response to signals—presumably derelict. Following procedure 14. 1024, boarding party away—reports curious. Grappled alongside. 1031, second party put aboard. Helioflash disabled, possibly from proximity of unusually strong force field. Alien ship deserted—apparently abandoned in haste. Second party still searching for first. No sign of life. Investigation continuing.

Maydell, First Officer.

Friday, 13th. Hope gone for No. 1 party. Key-sing, semantics expert, still going over metallic plates. Ideographic form of writing. Difficult to decipher, but Key-sing says he can break it in time. Matter unsol. . . . (Rest of page missing.)

. . . pparently the vessel started 900 years ago, or three of their generations. Exact source still unidentified, but one sheet is complicated star-chart. Astrogator working on it. Men growing restless. Can't blame them; so am I. 0120 hours. The astrogator's report in. Destination our own sun. Why? One more mystery. In search of something. Lucky for us they ran into trouble, my opinion. I don't like this. . . .

. . . Curious life form, not carbon jelly. Not even organic in our sense. Crystalline formation, possibly silicoid. What could have happened to them? Apparently all well, engines working properly, when ship in region of Pluto's orbit. Position then 3 degrees south ecliptic. Terrific orbit. Should be some clue to origin of ship.

0230. Trouble again on the strange ship. Two

men are missing. No one else aboard at time. Guards failed to report, no sign of either. Search continuing.

. . . some form of mold, which may have under-
gone mutation during voyage. Keyring thinks
solar radiation may have stimulated it to unusual
activity. Banks says they brought stuff along
as medicine. . . Still no sign of Rayce and Egan.
Hope waning.

1530. Mystery solved. Men going mad with
horror. Part of Rayce found in after hold of
ship. Eaten alive by something. Two attempts
at mutiny put down by officers. More trouble
coming.

. . . mold, all right. Horror is loose again.
After feeding it is quiescent for a time. Gives
us a few hours. Think of something. . . (rest
of page missing.)

. . . hideous stuff fed on them, seems to absorb
energies from any living matter, dissolves, digests.
Became malignant and turned on its masters.
Solar radiation. . . Found Egan, still alive. Dying.
Tried to speak, but gray foam burst from mouth
and nostrils, dissolving flesh as we watched
helpless.

It's everywhere. Comes from those vats when-
ever it senses living presence, probably sensitive
to heat radiations. Those dancing motes in the
air are spores! We came boiling back to the ship
like maniacs, got the airlock doors closed and
broke free. One thought, to get away. Seemed
we had made it. But the stuff was already here.
Gray muck started forming on Douglas' eyes.
Carter shot him.

Alongside again. No escape. None of us can
go back now. One thing left to do. Must take
this ship out to the emptiest part of space and
destroy it. Ourselves with it. No hope left. .

A little time now. It has fed. Keyring and
Morell took a party to plot the course, figure out
their controls. I laid out a rack of time torpedoes
to take aboard, plant in the hold where they kept
atomic fuels. Timing bad—the mold got all of
them. I watched Morell die. Stuff clung all over
him, gray-green mold, sticky and slimy with a
sort of foam on top. Flesh dissolved down to
bones. Even the bones, eventually. Only three
of us left.

Lies dormant according to amount of its feed-
ing. Jacobs offered to go in and let it take him,
give us time to plant the torpedoes. No use.
None of us left can manage those controls. . .
Ship must be taken outside the system before
the timers let go. We tried. . . .

Final entry. Time nearly up. Banks says a
ship approaching from Saturn. Helio still too
weak to warn them off. Will try to set hand-
signals. Too late. . . God help them!
(The last page of the manuscript finished with a
dreadful scrawl, and close beside the page was
a dry, hideous smear as if someone had crushed
a very large moth.)

CALLORAN'S mind reeled as he
finished reading. It was clear
now, all too clear. And clearest
of all was what must be done.

The racks of time torpedoes were

easy to find. He opened the locker, got
out two full racks. If these were placed
against the shielding in that alien stor-
age hold, they would do the work. To
be certain, he made two trips.

The alien ship's control might be
difficult, but he could manage. A good
spaceman can always manage. Transfer
some of the robot mechanism from
Polaris, if necessary. Then a simple
matter of laying a course for outer
space. Right angles to the ecliptic
would be best. Just give the torpedo
timers enough leeway. He must man-
age those controls. After that. . . .

A strange, wonderful calm descended
over him. Something to do, something
worth doing. There were problems,
but none he could not face. One last
responsibility, then he would be free.

Calloran made sure the magnetic
grapples held Polaris fast—wouldn't do
to have the cruiser break free, carrying
its cargo of horror and pollution
through an inhabited system. He set
the fuses to explode at peak velocity,
then made his way to the control room.

When those torpedoes let go against
the shielding, all hell would break loose.
Even the mold would give up its stolen
energies. Holocaust! Too bad he
wouldn't see the fireworks. From Earth
or Mars, it should look like a super-
nova. They wouldn't know, but his
going would at least be spectacular. . . .

Spacefog was closing in again as
Calloran eased open the throttles. The
big alien ship moved slowly, its nose
pointing toward the pole star. Each
acceleration pang sang a note of joy
to Calloran. At peak velocity, the tor-
pedoes would blow. All throttles open,
the ship gathered speed. The gray
fringe of fog did not mean anything
now. He had beaten it. Frightful
acceleration-nauseas racked him. He
smiled grimly as gray fog filled his
eyes. This was it. . . .