

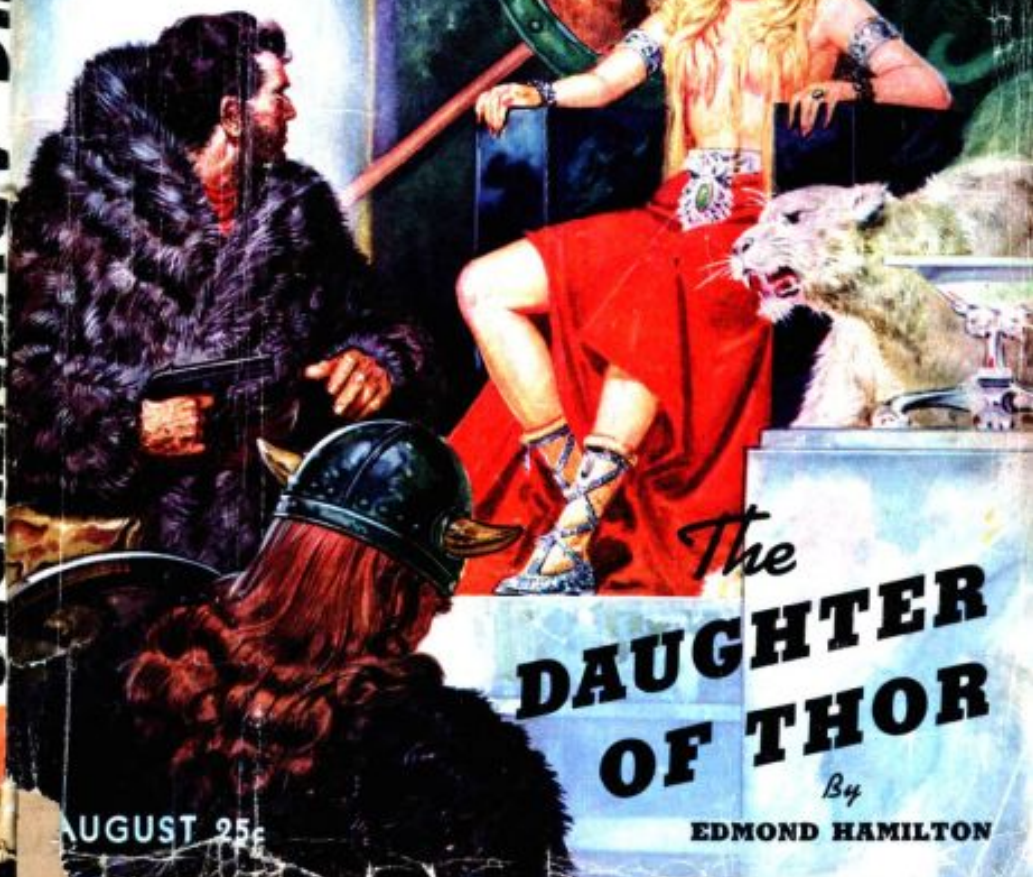
VOLUME 4
FANTASTIC ADVENTURES

The Son of Death *by* Robert Moore
WILLIAMS

fantastic

ADVENTURES

244
PAGES



The
**DAUGHTER
OF THOR**
By
EDMOND HAMILTON

AUGUST 25c

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The gun flamed a great gust of red

The MENTAL GANGSTER

by

John Russell Fearn

Writing under the pseudonym Thornton Ayre.

First published *Fantastic Adventures*, August 1942.

Murder took place on this ship in space over a treasure—a perfect crime. But then the dead man came to life to confront his killer!

This was zero hour. Blackie Melrose had been banking on it for three months, either plotting in his cell, else giving signals to his fellow convicts in the mineral sorting room. Four of them were ready to make the break any minute now. . . .

Blackie's cold gray eyes scowled at the electric clock on the metal wall as the second hand crept round. His fingers played with the minerals on the conveyor belt. His gaze shifted to his fellow conspirators and from their appointed positions they responded with tight little nods. . . . All four of them the toughest bunch that had ever decided to try and escape the prison walls of this asteroid penitentiary way out beyond Pluto—lonely, damned. . . .

Sixtieth second exactly!

“Right!” Blackie snapped; then a whirlwind of action exploded into the fear-quiet silence.

The guards up on their balcony were taken by surprise: that was the crux of the thing. Doors opened for conveyor trucks remained open, mysteriously—jammed. Four men slammed and hammered their way to them. Knives glittered, ray guns exploded, tables and small machines overturned.

Blackie, six feet of iron hard muscle, used only his fists—but with terrific effect. The two guards who jumped to seize him fell away, one slugged on top of the head and the other with a mashed jaw.

Sirens started to scream as the four pelted down the corridor outside. “Knife” Halligan whipped out his trusty blade, drove it mercilessly to the heart of the solitary sentry at the external valve. He dropped.

“Here!” Knife panted, whisking suits from a concealed plate of metal in the wall. “Spacesuits. We’ll make it. Those guards are all messed up in the machine room— You locked the doors on them, Pen?”

Pen Anderson nodded.

They scrambled and struggled into their suits, slammed the visor-helmets in place. Then, Blackie leading, they opened the valve and emerged onto the starlit plain outside. There, as arranged, was the spaceship awaiting them.

At top speed they raced to it, blundered through the airlock even as the hail of raygun charges seared after them, to flash back harmlessly on the slammed barrier. The ship took off immediately, left the barren little asteroid far below—climbed slowly and inexorably to the stars.

Blackie took off his spacesuit slowly, then slid big hands comfortably down his overalled thighs.

“Well, boys, we made it!” His voice was hoarse with satisfaction. “All the sweat an’ planning wasn’t for nothing, see. Y’can trust Blackie—always gets you in the clear. Yes, sir!” He rubbed his close-cropped dark head complacently, then lighted a half cigarette and relaxed gratefully in a wall chair.

“And them screws can never get us now,” he finished. “It’s space—and freedom!”

Knife Halligan gave a slow nod, switched his ratty eyes to the man at the control board.

“You did a nice job, Conroy,” he said slowly.

“So I thought.”

Conroy slipped the automatic pilot in position and turned to face the quartet. All the men caught up a little sharp and looked at each other. Conroy was a go-between—not the first time he had assisted in a getaway with a pirated ship . . . but it was the first time he had looked so white around the gills about it. He had a dead, codfish-gray face, and his eyes stared with the murky brazenness of smeared glass.

“What’s gotten into you, Conroy?” Rays Walford asked quickly. “Been taking a shot of dope, or something? You look slewed.”

“Do I?” Conroy seemed surprised. “Perhaps it’s space strain. I’ll fix up something for you to eat. . . .”

He went out to the provision department and the four men looked at each other again. Rays Walford, best mineral-frisker this side of Pluto, rubbed his pointed jaw thoughtfully.

“Say, Blackie, he’s acting kind of queer, isn’t he? Notice his way of talking, too? Like he’s upped a bit on his eddication since we saw him last.”

“Why the heck not?” Blackie demanded. “We’ve been in the pen five years, don’t forget. A guy can polish his A.B.C. a lot in that time. Always was screwy about books was Conroy. . . .”

“Yeah, I suppose so—but it’s still kind of queer. He talks nearly as high hat as Pen here.”

Pen Anderson, round, greasy, slimy as the blackmailing racket by which he had lived before the law had caught up on him, gave a shrug.

“Some acquire it; others have it naturally. I’m the latter, of course. Pity of it is I have to associate with you lice. . . .” He regarded his fingernails thoughtfully.

Nobody said anything: they were accustomed to Pen’s highbrow methods. Then after a while Conroy came back with the same dead look on his face. He put out the meal, seemed oblivious to the eyes fixed steadily on him as the four wired in hungrily.

“All set for the Earth trip?” Blackie asked presently.

“Certainly. That’s what you paid for, wasn’t it?”

“I’m just asking you: I want to get the thing straight. How soon do you figure you can get us there?”

“Oh, about three weeks. Barring accidents.”

“Accidents!” Knife Halligan looked up with tight jaws. “What accidents?”

“Space,” Conroy shrugged, “is full of potential accidents.”

“Yeah? . . .” Then, Knife’s truculence subsided at a scowl from Blackie. He satisfied himself with a muttered warning. “Be too bad for you, Conroy, if you queer the set-up, that’s all.”

“I agree,” murmured Pen, dabbing his greasy jowls. “It is essential I reach Earth as soon as possible. I have a certain—hum—matter to attend to. Valuable matter! Most important.”

“More graft and corruption, eh?” Blackie grinned. “I’ll hand it to you, Pen, you sure make good use of that phony polish and handwriting of yours.”

“And I,” said Rays Walford, “have certain rocks to get dumped.” He patted his belt significantly. “I packed enough away to put me on velvet for the rest of my life once we touch Earth—”

He broke off suddenly and looked up as, surprisingly enough, the ship’s distress signal suddenly flashed. It was actuated by something cutting across the photoelectric beam from the prow, thereby giving instant warning of anything ahead.

Immediately Conroy moved to the observation port.

“A space ship! A small one!” he ejaculated. Then he gave a frown. “That’s odd—way off the usual lanes, too.”

“Dodge it!” Blackie snapped, coming up. “Dodge it, I tell you! We’re answering no distress calls this trip. Understand?”

“Frankly,” Conroy said, looking round with that stare that went through things, “I *don’t* understand. The code of space has to be obeyed. You are safe—all of you. You’re not in convicts’ clothes, only overalls. And this isn’t a law ship . . . I’ve got to stop!”

“You do,” Knife Halligan whispered, blade glittering in his clenched fist, “and I’ll pin you to the damned switchboard—”

“Shut up!” Blackie snapped, wheeling on him. “Come to think of it, Conroy’s right at that. Going past would create suspicion. Stop, and we’ll be in the clear. We’re armed. Okay—pull up.”

They all waited tensely, faces sweating a little as Conroy slowed the machine down with a burst of the forward jets. Airlock interchange began. At last the control room door opened and a figure with helmet tossed back on steel plated shoulders entered. It was a girl, much peroxided about the hair, much painted, faintly sardonic in expression.

“A dame!” Rays Walford ejaculated. “Well, is that something! Ain’t seen one in—”

He was going to say “five years” but the warning glance of Knife Halligan stopped him. For her part the girl slammed the door and gazed on the assembly coolly.

“What is this, a convention?” she inquired dryly. “Any of you mugs got tongues? My ship’s out of fuel: how about some?”

“Your *own* ship?” Conroy questioned, and her frizzy head nodded.

“Yeah. I was headed back for Earth as a matter of fact. I’m a solo dancer—or was—at Draconi’s Cabaret, cheap sort of dive located at Easter City, Neptune. They sort of didn’t like my style, and so . . .” The girl shrugged. “I decided a girl can do better on her native planet where she has friends. But I started off without enough juice. Give me a little, and I’ll trouble you no more.”

“There’s none to spare,” Blackie answered roughly. “But we’re heading for Earth, so you can have a free ride.”

“But— What about my ship?”

“Forget it! It looks like an old model, anyway.”

“Look here, smart guy, that bus cost me plenty of—”

“I said forget it, see!” Blackie’s lips were tight.

The girl relaxed slowly, her gray eyes fixed on Blackie’s uncompromising visage; then with a shrug she pulled off the rest of her space suit and stood revealed in a form fitting dress that made Rays Walford’s eyes open a shade wider.

"All right, Gorilla, so be it," she shrugged. "I slept in a sewer once, so I guess I can take this. . . . If you want to speak to me the name's Dorothy Wilson—*Miss* Wilson, to you."

"That's plain Dot to me," Blackie grunted. "Get moving again, Conroy, no time to waste."

The ship began moving forward again. The girl, her cynical eyes watching everything intently, perched herself near the table and daintily fingered what was left of a bowl of concentrates. Rays Walford took his eyes off her slender legs finally and rubbed his jaw speculatively.

"Get this!" Blackie snapped suddenly, swinging round. "This dame means nothing to us, see? Nothing! Just a free passenger. Because she's a woman doesn't mean any of you mugs can get funny ideas. One pass at her and I'll plaster you all over the wall. Okay?"

"Okay, Blackie," Pen Anderson soothed. "Okay. You know us."

"And how!" Blackie looked at the girl. "I'm Blackie Melrose: you can rely on me."

She raised an eyebrow. "Looking at you I was thinking there might be something to the recessive unit theory, after all. However, I'm not scared of any of you—least of all Dead Pan over at the controls there. I'm a girl who's been around, see. . . . And now, if you gallants have no objection, I'll find me a bunk."

She departed towards the sleeping quarters of the roomy vessel. The four men looked at each other, Conroy apparently not interested in the proceedings anyway.

"This," Pen mused, "means that one of us is going to be minus a bunk. And I shall certainly not sleep with any of you lice."

"You'll bunk with Knife, and like it!" Blackie told him curtly.

"Okay with me," Knife growled; "but I tell you straight, Blackie, I don't like this dame turning up. She may be a jinx. She looks like a leg-swinger all right, but suppose she's a special agent put on our trail by prison radio? That's possible."

"Anything," Conroy said, from the switchboard, "is possible. But I think the girl is genuine enough. I've seen her in cabarets before today—" He broke off, pulling quickly at the various switches. His sudden strained anxiety was immediately obvious.

"That's odd!" he ejaculated. "Very odd!"

"What is?" Blackie asked sharply; and the others crowded hastily round the controls.

Conroy fingered the switches agitatedly for a space, then he looked up dazedly.

"We're—in a sink hole!" he gasped. "A four-point sink hole!"

There was silence for a moment—grim silence. Each man knew what that meant. A four-point sink hole was the terror of space—a literally becalmed spot where no movement is possible . . . created by the converging of four different gravity fields, the exact central point holding a ship with equal power on every side so nothing of its own devising could move it in any direction.

"Yes," Conroy went on, figuring quickly, "we're in the foci of Neptune, Pluto, and Asteroids 67/B and 32/J. That means—"

"It means, you two-timing rat, that you've done it deliberately!" Knife Halligan shouted, whirling him to his feet. "Stalled us so a police ship can finally catch up—"

Blackie whirled them apart, sent Knife spinning to the wall with a thrust of his powerful arm. Then he eyed Conroy grimly. Conroy backed to his controls, his dead-looking eyes staring.

"It wasn't deliberate, Blackie!" he insisted. "We were on the course until we stopped to pick up that girl. I forgot to alter our path and now we—"

"How," Blackie asked deliberately, "do we get free? Better think quick, feller."

"I may be able to think of something. I can calculate—"

"I should!" Blackie's voice was ominous. "We'll grab some rest while you do it. We didn't get money drafted to your account for you to stall us here. . . . Come on, you mugs—to the sleeping quarters. And what I said about the dame still goes!"

Blackie reckoned he had been asleep in his bunk for perhaps an hour or so when he was suddenly awakened by a piercing scream. Immediately he whirled to the floor, hurried down the narrow passage whither the scream had come. It took him into the big provision chamber. At the sight before him he drew up short.

The light was fully on, dim though it was, and Rays Walford lay on the floor, clutching his chest. There was a red stain on his shirt; it brimmed through onto his fingers—But that wasn't all. Dorothy Wilson was there too, staring down at him in horror.

Blackie glanced at her, then dropped at Walford's side, raised his head and shoulders.

"I—I guess I shan't make the journey, Blackie. . . . My—my rocks! They're—they're gone—Somebody . . ."

Blackie felt along the belt. The pouches on it were empty.

"It—it—" Walford's voice failed him. He became suddenly inert and his breathing stopped. Blackie lowered him slowly to the floor and his smoldering eyes sought the girl in the dim light. She was still by the wall.

"What happened?" he snapped.

"I heard him scream, so I came in—"

"Don't hand me that! More likely Rays made a pass at you, you struggled, found the pouches on his belt while you struggled—Then you finished him off with something. Scissors mebbe. You probably carry 'em. . . . Hand over those rocks, sister!"

"What rocks? What are you talking about?"

"Minerals, then, if you want to be particular. They're worth a fortune; good meat for a gold digger like you—Come on, give!"

Blackie strode towards her, then stopped as a small pearl-handled ray pistol flashed into her hand.

"Put your brakes on, Gorilla. Nobody mauls me without getting his fingers burned. . . . I've told you the truth," the girl added curtly. "I heard this guy scream, and when I came in the light was on dimly—as it is now—and he was lying there. That's all I know."

"Those other mugs wouldn't steal from a fellow con."

"So that's what you are—convicts! Thought I knew the haircut—Well, question the others! I'm not so sure of their honor as you seem to be!"

Blackie hesitated, brows down. He was powerful enough, agile enough, to snatch the gun and fling the girl across the compartment. But he didn't. Wheeling, he strode out with a taut face through the sleeping quarters. His bellow aroused the others. In the control room he faced them, shot the facts.

"One of you guys—and that goes for you too, Conroy—killed Rays!"

"Not us," said Knife Halligan seriously. "We got honor, ain't we?"

"Whichever one of you has got those rocks had better hand 'em over," Blackie breathed. "Either that, or I beat it out of you! Rays Walford has a family to support: those rocks go to them. Come on! Hand over!"

Faces became set and there was no movement. Blackie relaxed, puzzling.

“You heard nothing?”

Every head save the girl’s shook. Blackie swung round on Conroy.

“You haven’t been asleep, Conroy; you’ve been working on this navigation problem. You heard *something*?”

“Nothing, I assure you.” Conroy’s face was expressionless.

“Perhaps,” the girl said languidly, “there’s a jinx on the ship?”

“Yeah—you!” Knife Halligan spat. “First we lose our course; then we get in a sink hole; then Rays gets bumped off—”

“Shut up!” Blackie snapped. He jerked his thumb toward the storage compartment. “Come and help me look around. Those rocks must be somewhere. Maybe they were dropped or something. Once they’re found we’ll figure out between us what comes next. . . .”

They all turned and started an examination. They were busy on the job in the dim light, poking into the various corners when Blackie whirled suddenly and pinned Knife Halligan to the wall with a mighty forearm across his throat. With his free hand he whipped Halligan’s deadly weapon from his belt and studied it keenly . . . Then he dropped his hold and handed the knife back quietly.

“Okay, it’s clean,” he said briefly. “This blade of yours is old-type steel; bound to be some signs if you’d stabbed with it.”

“Big of you!” Knife snarled, shaking himself. “I didn’t take those rocks, though I wouldn’t have minded. There’s such a thing as honor—”

“One of us killed him,” Blackie stated. “And before we are through, unless we get out of this sink hole—and even if we do—one of us is going to confess to it. Space can crack a guy wide open in time . . . and a woman too,” he finished significantly, seeing the girl searching assiduously.

There was silence for a moment, then Blackie shrugged.

“Give me a hand to put him in cold storage. If we fire him outside he’ll just lie out there and give us the jitters.”

He and Knife carried the corpse to the refrigerator and dumped it inside, slammed the door. Then with a grim face Blackie led the way back into the control room.

“When do we start to get out of this sink hole?” he demanded of Conroy.

“It begins to look,” Conroy answered slowly, “as though we don’t! I’ve figured it every way I can—but I can’t see how we can move. I’ve tried rocket blasts on every side, but the gravity field is equal in all directions.”

“Give it all you’ve got,” Blackie snapped. “The blast may free us—”

“And if we use up all that fuel, what happens then?” Conroy demanded. “We shan’t have enough to make the Earth.”

“Blast us out the other way,” Knife suggested. “We might get to the girl’s ship—”

“No use; I’m out of fuel,” she put in.

“This is what comes of having a dame on the ship!” Knife blazed, his voice a screech. “We were all right until you made us divert our path! Do you realize what’ll happen to us?” he went on desperately. “Death! Stuck here in the void! *Death!*”

“Oh, shut up!” Blackie growled. “Conroy was no more to blame than any of us. Might happen to any navigator. . . . But we’ve *got* to get free,” he finished anxiously. “We can’t stop here—becalmed. Our provisions won’t last out.”

“We might signal a ship,” Conroy speculated. “If we could get aboard and hold up the crew . . .”

“Might work as a last resort,” Blackie mused. “Damned dangerous, though. Better try figuring again, Conroy. I’m going to have another look around the provision room.”

“What for?” asked Knife malevolently, his eyes smoldering. “I suppose you’re looking for them rocks? Let your hair down, Blackie: you’re as keen on finding those rocks as any of us. For that matter, how do we know you didn’t kill Rays, anyway?”

Blackie leaned over, whirled Knife out of the wall chair, held him steadily.

“Listen, Knife!” His voice was low, deadly. “Any more cracks like that and I’ll be liable to forget you’re my pal. I’ll remember instead that you’re a cheap crook; a back-stabber. . . . I’m going to take a proper look for those rocks, sure; but I’ve already told you why. Sit down!” He flung Knife back helplessly into his chair then strode out. . . .

As before, he found nothing of particular interest. Slowly he wandered round, flashing a torch this time; then just as he was about to give up the beam caught suddenly on a strip of paper wedged in a crack between two of the welded plates. Curious, he jerked it out. It was a thrice folded note, finishing with a hasty slash of the pencil.

“Blackie—this is to warn you I expect death any minute.

There’s a jinx aboard this ship. You must—”

It stopped there. No signature, no hint of who had written it. It was not Rays Walford’s scrawl; that Blackie well knew. He frowned over it, biting his lip. Conroy? Impossible. Conroy was still alive. Then who the—

Pen Anderson came in silently, that smile of perpetual innocence on his greasy, round face.

“Anything of interest yet, Blackie?”

“Nope.” Blackie balled the note in his palm then thrust it in his pocket. “But because I haven’t found anything doesn’t say I won’t figure out who killed Rays. And I’ll find where those rocks went too—”

“I know where they are.” Pen smiled blandly. “I’ll even tell you—for a consideration.”

“Yeah? Why so generous? If you know where they are why talk about splitting them. Why tell me anything, in fact?”

Pen regarded his nails. “You misunderstand me, Blackie. I don’t want the rocks: I have no agents who can sell them for me on Earth like you have. All I want is a price for telling you where they are. If you give your word, I know you’ll pay up when you get the money. You’re a square shooter—”

“Listen, you greasy, pot-bellied rat, you don’t trust me any more than I trust you.”

“But I do,” Pen murmured. “You see, unless you pay up I shall be compelled to inform the Earth authorities of certain—er—activities. I’d tell them all about you. That is my profession.”

“What makes you think we’ll ever reach Earth, anyway? You’ll get nothing—unless it’s my fist in your face—”

Blackie stopped dead at a sudden scream from the control room and the voice of Dorothy Wilson raised high in frightened anger.

“Get away from me, you killer! Get away before I—”

Blackie jumped. In a bull rush he hurtled into the control room and was just in time to see the hapless girl pinned against the wall by Knife Halligan. The wicked blade of his weapon was pointed directly at the girl’s soft throat. Her terrified eyes stared back into his.

“A jinx,” he whispered. “More than a jinx—a dame who knows too much! You can make it easy for yourself in only one way, sister: give me a little cooperation, and—”

“And what?” Blackie roared; then without waiting for an answer he dived.

The knife whipped round, shot towards him unerringly. He jerked his head aside and the knife landed quivering in the back of the wooden chair by the table. That settled it for Blackie. He finished his plunge, gripped Knife by the throat and slammed him round. A terrific uppercut lifted him off his feet, sent him toppling over the table to land against the wall. He stirred weakly, blood trickling from his gashed mouth.

“What happened, kid?” Blackie caught the girl’s round arm.

“He—he went for me,” she panted, her eyes flashing. “I was sitting quiet as you please, but he kept watching me through slits of eyes. Then suddenly he went berserk: I hadn’t a chance to defend myself—”

“Why didn’t you stop him, Conroy?” Blackie demanded.

“Me? I’m not strong enough . . . Besides, I have this problem to work out.”

“It seems,” Blackie said bitterly, gazing at Knife, then at Pen and Conroy, “that I’m the only guardian of this dame. Okay. Any more attacks like this upon her and I’ll put the one who does it permanently out of commission. That clear enough?”

“Aw, go jump through the airlock,” Knife snarled. “One would think you’d fallen for the dame. She’s a jinx, I tell you, and the sooner she’s out cold the better for all of us—”

“To hell with your superstition,” Blackie retorted. “And watch yourself in future. In fact I’ll take your knife to be sure that you do . . .”

He whipped it out of the chair back, slipped it in his belt. Then he jerked a thumb to the girl.

“Better go and grab that sleep of yours. You’re safe enough.”

She nodded a grateful thanks and stole out. Blackie kicked the chair in position and for a long time sat watching the scowling Knife through his eyelashes. Pen Anderson sat down too, dividing his attention between them; then finally he relaxed and polished his nails gently on his tunic sleeve.

“I’m still open to discussion, Blackie,” he murmured.

“About those rocks? I’m making no terms, Pen. I’ll find them in my own time—”

“So,” Knife whispered, rising up slowly from where he had fallen, “you know where they went, you dirty sneak-thief! You!”

“Sure, and I am prepared to—”

Blackie whipped Halligan’s knife from his belt and aimed the sharp point at Pen’s big stomach.

“Where are they?” he asked ominously.

“Now wait a minute, Blackie. You ought to—”

“I said where are they? Open up, before I make you!”

Pen’s beaming expression changed to sourness. “The girl’s got them,” he growled.

Blackie’s face went livid. “You rotten liar! She wouldn’t do that, and you know it!”

“Wouldn’t she?” Knife breathed, leaning over the table. “I tell you she did, just as I—” He stopped, biting his lip.

There followed an icy silence. Blackie’s cold eyes moved slowly to the knife he was holding. He whipped it suddenly from Pen’s middle and stared at the blade. There were new, faintly brownish marks smearing it.

“So it *was* you who killed Rays Walford!” he flamed. “You, Knife! I get it now. I didn’t see these marks before because of the dim light in the storage room. Yeah, you killed him, but the girl knew it. That’s why you wanted to kill her, not because she is a jinx. You wanted to stop her before she started to—”

Blackie’s voice trailed off. He stiffened: Knife and Pen became alert too. Conroy seemed to have fallen asleep over his task at the control board. . . .

There was a queer sound abroad, the sound of footfalls coming from the sleeping quarters of the vessel. The sounds were interrupted suddenly by the precipitate arrival of the girl. For the first time she looked really scared and wild-eyed.

“I think it’s—it’s Rays Walford!” she gulped, and for a moment looked as though she were going to faint.

Blackie got up, caught her arm and steadied her; then he began to back from the table, facing the door leading to the sleeping quarters. Pen did likewise. Knife remained where he was, his paralyzed gaze fixed on the opening.

Thud—Pause. Thud—Pause. Like feet lifted by strings and dropped again. Like the footfalls of a mannikin—deliberate, implacable. Icy tension settled on the control chamber—then from the shadows of the interdoorway Rays Walford appeared! He remained motionless for a moment or two, arms hanging slackly at his sides. That red stain was still upon his heart; his eyes stared with glassy hate. Suddenly his blue lips began to move.

“Knife Halligan, you killed me! *You killed me!*”

Knife just stared, hands gripping the table edges, sweat running down his face.

“My God!” Blackie whispered, still clutching the girl. “It *is* Walford! But how in hell’s name did he—?”

The girl had nothing to say; she was shuddering with fear. As for Pen Anderson, his eyes were nearly popping out of his skull.

“You’re a ghost—a phantom!” Knife chattered, stumbling over his words. “You’ve come back—but you can’t do nothing, see? The dead can’t hurt the living! There’s a gap—a big gap—between life and death! You can’t touch me—”

Just the same he got up and in a blind rush snatched down the heavy rapid fire ray gun from the wall. He pressed the button and directed a withering sheet of fire at Walford.

The effect was terrible. Clothing and flesh scorched and blackened, but Walford did not flinch. Instead he came forward, without a vestige of expression on his face. Stunned, Knife dropped the gun, backed into the corner, came up sharp with his back to the wall.

“You can’t do nothing!” he panted. “Y’can’t, I tell you—!”

The answer was immediate. Walford’s hand flashed up, closed round Knife’s throat in a steel grip that all his struggles could not dislodge. Gurgling, choking, grunting, he slid to the floor.

Blackie’s jaws quivered: the girl hid her face on his shoulder. At last there was a dull thud and Walford dropped his length to the floor, motionless—But in the corner beside him lay Knife with protruding tongue and startling eyes . . . strangled.

Blackie dumped the girl in a chair then went over to the two bodies. Utter perplexity settled upon him. Knife was dead all right—but so was Rays Walford, as dead as he had been when stabbed!

“I don’t get it!” Blackie’s voice was bemused as he stared into Pen Anderson’s dazed eyes. “I don’t get it . . . Space can’t revive a guy from death—unless we’ve never encountered it

before. But anyway, he was locked in the refrigerator. Somebody must have opened it. The locks are on this side.”

“But nobody went that way—!” Pen stopped, added softly, “That is, nobody except the girl!”

“Do you think I had anything to do with this?” she nearly shrieked, looking up. “Do you think I was putting on an act, trying to play scared? Not me! I heard him coming and ran for it—Oh, my God, I’ve got to get off this ship! Anything! I’d sooner chuck myself headfirst into space than endure—”

“Easy!” Blackie snapped, going over and shaking her. “Get yourself in hand! You can’t get off this ship any more than any of us can—There’s an explanation for this. There *has* to be! Dead men don’t start walking without a reason.” He stopped and thought; then he asked, “Just what happened when you went to rest again?”

“Why, I—I went to sleep.”

“So soon?”

“I guess so. Then Rays’ footfalls awakened me. I caught a glimpse of him coming and made a dash for it . . .”

“She’s lying, man!” Pen growled. “She’s been back of everything that’s gone wrong so far, so why not this? We got trapped here: she was mixed up in Rays’ murder: now she’s mixed up in him coming back.”

“I’m not!” she shouted desperately. “I swear I’m not!”

“Did you, or did you not, take those mineral rocks from Walford?” Blackie asked deliberately.

She hesitated, gaze averted; then she slowly nodded.

“Yes, I did. I heard him scream. I rushed in and saw Knife just about to rob his belt. He dashed out, thinking I hadn’t recognized him in the dim light, I imagine. I examined Walford’s belt to see what Knife had been looking for, found the minerals and realized their value. I took them, hid them in my bunk after you’d finished questioning me, Blackie. Right then I was determined the rocks should be handed in to the Earth-authorities and not left to the mercies of no-account crooks. That was why Knife tried to kill me, in *case* I knew he had committed the murder . . . But *this!* I know nothing about it.”

Blackie slowly nodded.

“I believe you, sister,” he said briefly. “God knows why, but I do. Maybe because I think you’re not so tough as you make out . . .”

He turned as Conroy aroused himself, yawned, and went on with his work.

“Hey, Conroy, what do you know about this?”

But Conroy, turning in surprise, had to have all the details having slept through the astounding episode. At the finish he gave a shrug.

“So that’s what happened! I’ve heard of such things before, Blackie, out in space. Of men coming back to life. The radiations out of space do it for a brief time, particularly if the body is well preserved—as it was in the refrigerator.”

“Yeah? How come the bolts got opened on *this* side?”

“I don’t know. But a man from the dead can have powers that we haven’t got. Will power maybe—”

“Bunk!” growled Pen Anderson. “Only explanation is that he wasn’t really dead, and came back to life long enough to make us believe he was a corpse revived.”

“And yet a heavy ray gun made no impression on him,” the girl said.

Pen Anderson moistened his dry lips. “A jinx!” he whispered. “Mebbe Knife wasn’t so far wrong at that!”

“Jinx!” Blackie repeated slowly, starting. He had suddenly remembered the note he had found. “Maybe you’ve got something there . . . First, let’s get these two corpses outside. Fire ’em through the safety lock: that oughta stop any chance of them coming back to life!”

Between them, he and Pen dragged the bodies to the apparatus, slammed the percussion trap. Instantly the bodies were propelled into space outside. Bloated, grayish remains floated near the ship. Blackie watched them for a while, then a frown gathered slowly on his face.

“Say, that’s queer! Those corpses are moving away from us! There is a stronger gravity somewhere—if it doesn’t hold them in focus in this four-point hole, it can’t hold us either!”

He spun round, jaw squared. “Conroy, what’s the big idea? We *can* get free! This proves it —”

“I don’t know how they come to be—”

Blackie elbowed Conroy roughly out of the way, seated himself at the controls and snatched the notes which Conroy had been making. He glanced at them, then his expression became fixed. Slowly from his pocket he dragged the note he had found in the provision chamber.

The writing exactly matched!

But Conroy had written under the imminent expectation of death, had been almost as good as dead when—

“What,” Blackie asked ominously, “is the meaning of all this, Conroy? Blast you, spill it!” he finished with a roar.

Conroy looked at the warning message, then at his own notes. His lips compressed. But his face was still dull and expressionless. Before he could speak Pen Anderson gave a little gasp.

“Look!” he whispered, and his trembling hand pointed to a tremendous gash on the back of Conroy’s head, the blood long since congealed. Up to now he had kept himself turned from revealing it. It seemed incredible that a man could move about, even live, with a wound like that. Even *live* . . . ?

“He’s dead!” Pen shrieked, all his nerve snapping. “Dead! That’s the meaning of the note! He *did* die—and all this time he’s been alive again, holding us in this trap for reasons of his own—Blackie, I can’t stand it!”

He wheeled, raced for the safety lock and climbed inside it. The moment he slammed the percussion cap upon himself the apparatus worked, hurled him as a dead gray corpse into the deeps outside.

Conroy’s dead face seemed to come to life slowly as he gazed at the grimfaced Blackie and frightened girl.

“Okay, what’s the set up?” Blackie whispered. “You’re not scaring me with this return-to-life act—Nor Dots, here.” He flashed a glance at her. “You deliberately anchored us with that phony four point sink hole angle. But it isn’t true. We can get out!”

“Yes,” Conroy admitted slowly, “you can escape—but first there is a proposition for you to consider. I can give you power, my friend—great power. I need an Earthling like you, one without any scruples. A criminal, to put it bluntly. And for that matter an Earth woman like this with no pretensions to sentiment would be an advantage.”

Blackie and the girl looked at each other blankly: the girl indeed was looking indignant. Then Blackie snapped,

“I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about, but spill it just the same, and I’ll tell you if I like it.”

“Conroy,” Conroy stated impartially, “has been dead for some time. He moves about not through his own will, but mine. I am a mind projection from Ildiban—a small, little known asteroid. My comrades and I are interested in the vast plunder that is obtainable on Earth, only we cannot reach that planet on account of its distance. I anchored the ship at this point because it is the limit to which my mind projection can reach. You see, we need ambassadors . . . We learned of this intended prison break through radio. It was decided I should take over the ship’s pilot—Conroy. I did: killed him by shock. He fell and struck his head. Thereafter I have used his body, as I am doing now. But before he died he must have written that note, of which I knew nothing.”

“You then were back of Rays Walford’s revenge?” Blackie muttered.

“Certainly. I deserted this body of Conroy’s for a time: you will recall he was apparently asleep? First I hypnotized this woman here to open the refrigerator: she imagined she had been asleep. Then I took over Walford’s murdered body. I knew from the girl’s mind all about who had killed Rays, about the minerals—everything . . . I had a dual motive in what I did. One was to exact necessary vengeance upon an unscrupulous criminal; and the other was to put the courage of the rest of you to the supreme test. Then I became Conroy again.”

“I get it,” Blackie said, after a long silence. “What you are trying to state is that you need a criminal to steal for you on Earth, and kick the proceeds in to you?”

“I thought you would understand,” Conroy nodded, “Your world indulges in such things: it is rich in treasure. You were sent to prison for trying to obtain some of that treasure. Here is your chance for supreme revenge! Become a master, under our dictates. Have this woman as your aide. In time, you might rule the Earth!”

Blackie rubbed his jaw, then he grinned.

“Can you beat it, Dots! A mental monster from Ildiban wants to become a big time crook like me! You can even find gangsters on Ildiban, sugar—No, damn you!” he blazed suddenly. “You’re dead wrong! I escaped from that blasted prison to start going straight . . . well, nearly straight. Certainly to be my own master. I don’t work for you or no guy from a two cent asteroid. See?”

“I should not like to think my work has been for nothing,” Conroy’s voice said slowly. “I eliminated the small time cowards, leaving you two. I can perhaps force you, even as I forced this girl, to do my bidding.”

“No guy can force Blackie Melrose!” Blackie retorted.

With that Conroy stared steadily. To Blackie’s vision it looked as though the dull eyes came to life for a while and he felt the full appalling onslaught of battering mental commands. He even reeled under them . . . Then the muscles of his face bunched into knots of iron determination. He clenched his fists, stared back . . . and all of a sudden the strain relaxed.

“Quite a pity,” Conroy sighed. “You are too strong for me to break down. I was afraid of that. Maybe one of the others would have been better after all . . . No, no—not enough courage. This girl I could use only—No, not enough experience. You were the one, Blackie Melrose . . . You are *sure* you won’t take the offer?”

“I said so, didn’t I?”

“Then I shall have to find others. . . .”

Conroy stopped speaking, his knees gave way and he thudded to the floor. Blackie stooped instantly, turned him over. Then he lifted an astounded face to the girl.

“That—that mental gangster, whatever it was, has withdrawn his influence,” he whispered. “Deserted him!”

He digested the incredible fact for a moment.

“Give me anything but this,” he panted. “I always knew space crawled with queer things, but mental body stealers—No, sir!” He got up, whirled the girl suddenly to him. “Look, Dots, you and me are going back to Earth. Maybe when we’ve taken care of Rays Walford’s family there’ll be something left over from those rocks. How ’bout it? Feel like ringing doorbells?”

“Uh-huh,” she nodded tensely. “Besides, I could use a gorilla like you now and again at that. . . .”

Blackie grinned, slammed in the rocket switches, and listened to the mounting roar that drove them forward . . .

THE END.

[The end of *The Mental Gangster* by John Russell Fearn (as Thornton Ayre)]