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Title: Thunder in the Void

Date of first publication: 1942

Author: Henry Kuttner (1914-1958)

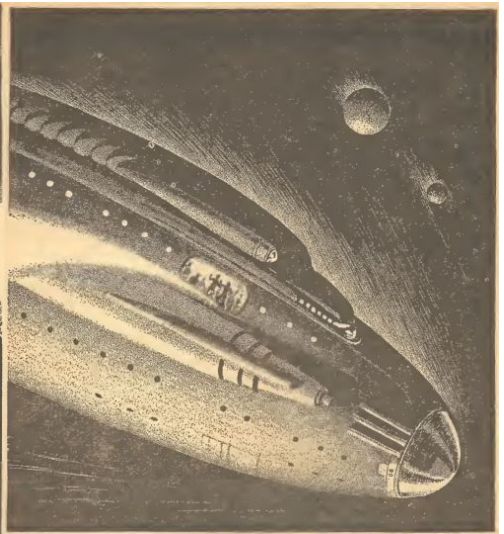
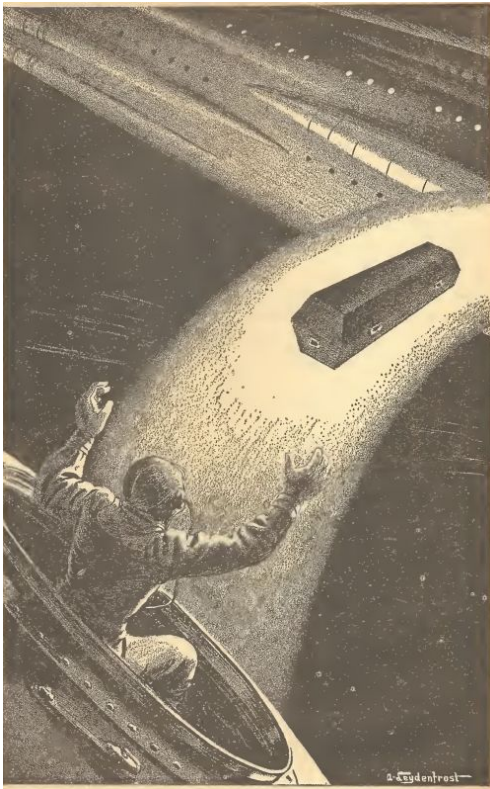
Date first posted: Feb. 3, 2022

Date last updated: Feb. 3, 2022

Faded Page eBook #20220205

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THUNDER IN THE VOID

A NOVEL

by
Henry Kuttner

First published *Astonishing Stories*, October 1942.

"I keep my promises, my friend. I'm taking this boat to Pluto, and I'll kill a lot of them before they finally get me. But—even though you have won, you have lost as well. Because you're going with me too!"

FOREWORD

Late in the Twentieth Century Man, for the first time, burst through the invisible barrier that had always kept him chained to his planet. A new and almost uncharted ocean lay before him, its vastness illimitable, its mysteries as yet unexplored. Magellan, Columbus, Leif Ericsson—these primitives expected great wonders as the searoads opened before the prows of their ships. But the first spacemen thought—mistakenly, as it proved—that the airless void between the worlds could hold little unknown to them.

They did not foresee that actual experience of a thing is far different from abstract knowledge of it. They did not foresee the death that leaped upon them from the outer dark, the strange, enigmatic horror that killed men without leaving trace or clue. The ships came back, crews decimated. Out there lay a menace that slew with blind, ravening fury.

For a time space held its secret. And then the Varra spoke to us, warned us, told us why space was forbidden.

The Varra—glowing balls of light that hung in the void, vortices of electro-magnetic energy, alive and intelligent. For generations, they said, they had tried to communicate with us. But they could not exist except in airless space, or under specialized conditions. They were not protoplasmic in nature; they were beings of pure energy. But they were intelligent and friendly.

From them we learned the nature of the menace. A race of beings dwelt on Pluto, so different from both humanity and the Varra that they were almost inconceivable. This race had never mastered space travel; it had no need to leave its dark world. Only the immense power of the Plutonians' minds reached out through the void, vampiric, draining the life-energy from living organisms over incredible distances. Like medieval robber-barons they laired on their planet, and the tentacles of their minds reached impalpably out for prey. Vampires of energy.

Vampires of life.

But the Varra they could not touch or harm. The peculiar physical structure of the Varra rendered them safe from the Plutonian creatures.

A World Fleet was sent out to subdue Pluto, against the advice of the Varra. It did not return.

In the end we made a pact with the Varra. They conveyed us through space, protecting us, as far as they were able, from the Plutonian vampires, though they did not always succeed. Each man who ventured into the void was guarded and guided by a Varra, and therefore many lived who would otherwise have died. No ship went beyond the orbit of Neptune; even that was dangerous. No ship ever landed on Pluto.

Only those guarded by the Varra were permitted to leave Earth. For the rest—space was forbidden.

CHAPTER ONE

Hijacker from Hell

The Arctic blizzard swept needles of stinging ice against Saul Duncan's face. Doggedly he plowed on, head lowered, heavy shoulders hunched against the fury of the winds. Once he heard the drone of a heliplane overhead, and flung himself flat till the sound had been swallowed by the gale. Then for a few moments his body refused to obey the grim demands of his mind. Deceptive warmth was stealing over him, inviting him to rest. But that, he knew, meant death then and there.

If he kept going, there was a chance of safety and freedom—not much of a chance, though, for few men ever escaped alive from the Transpolar Penitentiary. Situated within the Arctic Circle, the grim, guarded fortress of stone and metal and tough plastics was safer than Alcatraz had been a century and a half ago. Yet Duncan had escaped. . . .

His bitter lips twisted in a harsh smile. Escape! Into a polar blizzard—but that was the only possible time when a prisoner could evade the guard planes that patrolled the frigid waste. And Duncan could not have made his escape without aid from outside.

With stiff fingers he fumbled out a compass-like instrument that had been smuggled to him in the penitentiary. The needle held motionless, pointing directly into the teeth of the gale. If he kept on in that direction, sooner or later he would reach Olcott's plane. But how long it would take he did not know.

Still, even dying in the blizzard was better than another five years in Transpolar—five years that had ravaged and embittered Saul Duncan, hardening his no-longer-youthful face, putting ice into his glance and hatred in his heart. But physically he had thrived. If a prisoner survived the first year at Transpolar, he grew tougher, harder—and more dangerous.

Duncan trudged on, shaking with cold. Ten years for murder—second degree murder. Well, he hadn't been framed. He'd wanted to kill Moriarty. And he had succeeded, in a moment of blind, crimson rage that had flooded his brain and sent his fist smashing into Moriarty's face with the impact of a pile-driver. The man had put his filthy hands on Andrea. . . .

Damn him! Even now Duncan's muscles grew tight at the memory. He recalled how he and Andrea had fought their way up, slum-bred, facing a future of poverty and crime, and how they had seized a chance of escaping from that dark future. It meant arduous work, years of training, for learning to pilot a spaceship is no easy task. But he had done it, and Andrea had been willing to wait, scraping along on just a little more than nothing, in preparation for the day when Duncan could draw the pay of a first-rate pilot.

But Moriarty had been Duncan's superior officer. And there had been no witnesses except Andrea and Duncan. The verdict was murder, with extenuating circumstances. A recommendation for mercy.

Mercy—ten years in Transpolar, of which Duncan had already served five! Five years of knowing that Andrea, ticketed as a jailbird's wife, could scarcely earn enough to keep alive. Five years, and there were patches of iron gray along Saul Duncan's temples.

He had grown bitter. He hated the society that had sent him to a living hell, and when Olcott offered escape. . . .

At a price, of course. But Duncan was ready to pay that price. His gray eyes were savage as he marched on, staggering sometimes, snow crusting on his lashes so that he could scarcely see.

So well was the plane camouflaged that he almost lurched into the white hull before he realized that he had reached the end of the march. Sudden weakness overtook Duncan, and he found it difficult to move the few steps to the cabin's door. He pounded on the alloy with fists that had no feeling.

There was a click, and the panel slid open, letting a gust of warm air play about Duncan's cheeks.

Brent Olcott stood there, tall, dark-haired and arrogantly handsome. He was a big man, like Duncan, but so well proportioned that his movements were tigerishly graceful. His teeth flashed under a well-kept mustache as he extended a hand.

It was impossible to speak above the gale's shriek. Not till the panel had been shut, cutting off the uproar, did Olcott say tersely, "Glad you made it, Duncan. I didn't count on a storm like this."

"I made it. That's the important part." It was difficult to articulate with almost frozen lips. Olcott looked at him sharply.

"Frost-bite? Can't have that. Strip down and rub yourself with that." He nodded toward an auto-refrigerated bucket of chopped ice on a shelf. "If we're ordered down, I've a secret compartment you can slide into. Crowded quarters, but you won't be found there. Now—" He turned to the controls as Duncan, shivering, peeled off his wet garments.

It was a difficult take-off, despite the triple-powered motor. Only a gyro-equipped plane could have made it. The ship lurched and rocked dangerously in the blast.

Duncan fought his way beside Olcott. "Got rockets?"

"Auxiliaries, yes. But—"

"They won't be seen in this storm."

Olcott spread his hands in a meaning gesture. Few atmosphere pilots could handle the tricky manipulations of rocket-tubes. They were for emergency only, but this, Duncan thought, was an emergency. He thrust Olcott away and slid into the cushioned cradle-chair. His fingers, still stiff, poised over the keys.

Then his old-time skill came back, the intricate series of what were really conditioned reflexes that made a pilot capable of handling a bank of tube keys. Split-second thinking wasn't quite enough. Reactions had to be almost without thought. The ship spun down, and Duncan's hands flashed into swift movement on the studs.

The sudden acceleration hit him in the pit of the stomach. Olcott had braced himself, but was almost torn loose from his grip. For a moment the plane bucked and jolted madly, rocket fighting rocket, both fighting the gale. Then, without warning, they were above the storm, in air almost too thin for the prop, leveling off at an easy keel.

Duncan set the course due south and turned to Olcott for instructions. The latter was at another keyboard, carefully studying a visiplat before him. It showed the sky, dark blue and empty. After a moment Olcott made a few adjustments and came back to take over the controls.

"Nice work. You're a better pilot than I'd hoped. But you'll need to be—" Olcott didn't finish.

Duncan was rubbing his skin with ice. “I know rockets. Say, isn’t this dangerous? We may be spotted from below.”

“We won’t. This plane’s a chameleon. The man we’re going to see invented the trick for me. We’ve a double hull, and the outer skin’s transparent plastic. The space between the skins can be filled with certain colored gases—I’ve a wide range of colors. On the snowfield I used white, to blend with surroundings. Here it’s a blue gas. From below we’re invisible against the sky.” Olcott rose to make an adjustment. “I’d better lighten the color a bit. We’re going south fast, and the sky’s not so dark now.”

Duncan nodded appreciatively. He had heard stories about Brent Olcott, few of them savory, but all hinting at the man’s intelligence and power. He was one of those who, in the Twenty-first Century, made money without being too scrupulous about his methods. Technically Olcott owned a firm named “Enterprises, Ltd.” Unlimited would have been more suitable. His finger was in plenty of pies, but he had always managed to pull out plums without getting his hands soiled. Legally his record was clean.

But he was dangerous. When Duncan had accepted Olcott’s offer of help, he had known what that meant—a job, and a dirty one. Nevertheless, it would pay plenty—and it would mean freedom from Transpolar, and being with Andrea again.

Duncan dressed in the clothes Olcott had provided, an unobtrusive dark fabricoid blouse and trousers, gathered at the ankles in the conventional fashion. In the heated cabin no more clothing was necessary.

“There’s a bottle over there,” Olcott suggested.

Duncan gulped whiskey, feeling the hot tingling of the liquid spread out from his stomach. He felt better, though there was a curious air of unreality about the whole thing. A port, showed him the storm cloud, below and behind now. Somewhere in that troubled darkness lay the grim fortress of Transpolar Penitentiary, the hell that had swallowed five years of Duncan’s life, and drained him of hope and ideals.

There was hope again. But ideals—
He up-ended the bottle.

Olcott looked up from the controls. The air was clear, and the tremendous power of the engines hurled them southward at fantastic speed.

“Sit over here, Duncan,” he invited. “I want to talk to you.”

“Okay. Let’s have it. You’ve got a job lined up for me, I know that. The question is—why me?”

Olcott picked his words carefully. “There aren’t many qualified space pilots in the system. And those are well paid; I couldn’t get at any of ’em. I tried, I’ll admit—but not after I heard about you. Would you like to make half a million credits?”

“Keep talking.”

“With that many credits, you’d never need to work again. I know a good surgeon who’d remold your face and graft new fingers on your hands, so you wouldn’t have to worry about prints. You probably couldn’t be convicted even if they arrested you—not without complete identification.”

Duncan didn’t answer, but his lips had gone pale and thin. One is seldom transported instantly from hell to heaven. Yet Olcott’s offer was—well, it meant everything, including Andrea.

“Go on,” Duncan said hoarsely. “What d’you want me to do?”

Olcott’s cool, watchful eyes met his own.

“Go into space,” he said, “without a Varra Helmet.”

The plane thundered on, and miles had been left behind before Duncan spoke again.

“Suicide.”

“No. There’s a way.”

“When I was piloting, no one was allowed to space-travel without a Helmet. Even with the Varra convoys, people were sometimes killed by the Plutonians. I remember a few screwballs tried to slip out without the Varra, but they didn’t live.”

Olcott said, “I’ve found a way of leaving Earth without a Helmet, and without being detected by the Plutonians. It isn’t sure-fire, but all the chances are in your favor. Shall I go on?”

“Yeah,” Duncan said tonelessly.

“I need money. I need it bad, just now. And there’s a ship heading for Earth now that’s got a pound of Martian radium aboard.”

“A pound!”

“A hell of a lot, even considering the big radium deposits on Mars. With my connections, I can sell the stuff. You’re going to hijack the *Maid of Mercury*, Duncan, and get that radium.”

“Hijacking a spaceship? It’s crazy.”

“It’s never been done, sure. Nobody’s dared go into space without a Helmet. And the government issues the Helmets. But look at the other side of it. We’ve got a few patrol boats—the Interplanetary Police. Which is a loud, raucous laugh. Rickety tubs with no real armament. You won’t have to worry about them.”

Duncan took another drink. “It still sounds like suicide.”

“Hartman will explain—the man we’re going to see now. Take my word for it that you can go into space without a Helmet and be safe. Fairly safe.”

“Half a million credits—”

“The only danger,” Olcott said carefully, “is that the *Maid* might send out an S. O. S. The I. P. ships are rickety, but they’re fast, and they might stay on your trail. We can’t have that. So we’ve planted somebody on the *Maid* who’ll smash the radio apparatus just before you make contact. You can pick her up with the radium and head back to Earth.”

“Her?”

“You know her, I think,” Olcott said quietly, his eyes impassive. “Andrea Duncan.”

Duncan moved fast, but there was a gun in Olcott’s hand covering him.

The latter said, “Take it easy. You killed one man with your fists. I’m taking no chances.”

A tiny scar on Duncan’s forehead flamed red. “You rotten—”

“Don’t be a fool. She’s wearing a Varra Helmet. Of course she’ll take it off when she joins you, or she’d have a Varra *en rapport* with her, one who’d spill the beans completely.”

“Andrea wouldn’t—”

“She doesn’t know all of my plans. And she was willing to help me—as the price of your freedom. Listen!” Olcott spoke persuasively. “The girl’s already on the ship. She’s got her instructions. Tomorrow, at three p. m., she’ll smash the radio. If you’re not on hand to pick her up—and the radium—she’ll get into trouble. Destroying communications in space is a penal offense. She might go to Transpolar.”

Duncan snarled deep in his throat. His face was savage.

Olcott kept the gun steady. “Everything’s planned. Be smart, and in a couple of days you’ll be back on Earth, with Andrea and half a million credits. If you want to be a damned fool—”

the pistol jutted—“it’s a long drop. And it’ll be tough on the girl.”

“Yeah,” Duncan whispered. “I get it.” His big fists clenched. “I’ll play it your way, Olcott. I have to. But if anything happens to Andrea, God help you!”

Olcott only smiled.

CHAPTER TWO

Invisible Pirate

Rudy Hartman was drunk. An overtured bottle of *khlar*, the fiery Martian brew, lay beside his cot, and he stumbled over it and cursed thickly as he blinked at tropical sunlight. The gross, shapeless body, clad in filthy singlet and dungarees, lumbered over to a crude laboratory bench, and Hartman, blinking and grunting, fumbled for a syringe. He shot thiamin chloride into his arm, and simultaneously heard the roar of a plane's motor.

Hastily Hartman left the *godown* and headed for the island's beach near by. The camouflaged amphibian was gliding across the lagoon—a quick flight, that had been, from the Polar Circle to the South Pacific! Hartman's eyes focused blearily on the plane as it slid toward the rough dock.

Two men got out—Olcott and Duncan.

"Everything's ready," Hartman said. His tongue was thick, and he steadied himself with an effort.

"Good!" Olcott glanced at his wrist-chronometer. "There's no time to waste."

"When do I take off?"

"Immediately. You'll pick up the *Maid* this side of the Moon, but it's a long distance."

Hartman was blinking at the convict. "You're Saul Duncan. Hope you're a good pilot. This is—um—ticklish work."

"I can handle it," Duncan said shortly. Olcott was already moving toward a trail that led inland from the beach. The other two followed for perhaps half a mile, till they reached the dead-black hull of a small cruiser-type spaceship, camouflaged from above with vines and *pandanus* leaves. The boat showed signs of hard usage. Duncan walked around to the stern tubes and carefully examined the jointures.

"Crack-up, eh?" he said.

Olcott nodded. "How do you suppose we got our hands on the crate? It was wrecked south of here, near a little islet. There weren't any survivors. It cost me plenty to have the ship brought here secretly, where Hartman could work on it. But it has been put in good shape now."

"She—um—runs," the scientist said doubtfully, blinking. "And she has strong motors. Unless they're too strong. I spot-welded the hull, but there is—um—a certain amount of danger."

Olcott made an impatient gesture. "Let's go in."

The control cabin showed signs of careful work; Duncan decided that Hartman knew his job. He moved to the controls and examined them with interest.

"Made any test-runs?"

"Without a pilot?" Olcott chuckled. "Hartman says it'll fly, and that's enough for me."

"Uh-huh. Well, I see you've painted the ship black. That'll make it difficult to spot. I'll have only occlusion to worry about, and a fast course with this little boat will take care of that." Duncan pulled at his lower lip. "I noticed you put rocket-screens on, too."

"Naturally." Rocket-screens, like gun-silencers, were illegal, and for a similar reason. The flare of the jets are visible across vast distances in space, but a dead-black ship, tubes

screened, would be practically invisible.

“Okay,” Duncan said. “What about the Plutonians?”

It was Hartman who spoke this time. “Just what do you know about the Plutonians?”

“No more than anyone else. No ship’s ever landed on Pluto. The creatures are mental vampires. They can reach out, somehow, across space and suck the energy out of the brain.”

Hartman’s ravaged face twisted in a grin. “So. But their power can’t break through the Heaviseid Layer. That’s why Earth hasn’t been harmed. Only space travelers, unprotected by a Varra convoy, are vulnerable. Even with Varra Helmets, men are sometimes killed. All right. How do you suppose the Plutonians find their victims?”

“Nobody knows that,” Duncan said. “Mental vibrations, maybe.”

Hartman snorted. “Space is big! The electrical impulses of a brain are microscopic compared to interplanetary distances. But the ships—there’s the answer. A spaceship is visible for thousands of miles—reflection, and the rocket-jets. It’d be easy for the Plutonians to locate our ships, if they have any sort of telescopes at all. So, we have here a ship they cannot find. Therefore, we do not need a Varra escort to protect us from the Plutonians.”

“It would have been safer if we could have hired a Varra,” Olcott said. “Still, that was impossible. They’re hand in glove with the government.”

“I know. They’ve convoyed me, in the old days,” Duncan grunted. “Let me go over it again. I take this ship out, pick up the *Maid*, Earthside of Luna, and get the radium—and Andrea.”

“Right,” Olcott nodded. “Then back here, and I hand over half a million credits.”

“Going into space without a Helmet is risky.”

“You will not be near Pluto,” Hartman put in. “There is danger, yes, but it is minimized.”

“But there is danger. I’m thinking of Andrea. When I pick her up, she’s got to leave her Helmet in the *Maid*.”

“Naturally,” Olcott snapped, his lips thinning. “If she continues to wear it, she brings a Varra back to Earth with her—a spy.”

Duncan looked at Hartman. “What armament are we carrying?”

“Six four-inch blaster cannons, fully charged.”

“Okay.” Duncan turned again to the controls, slipping into the cushioned basket-seat. “Everything oiled and clean, eh? Doors?” He touched a stud; the valve of the door closed silently.

“Everything is ready,” Hartman said.

“Air-conditioning?” Duncan tried it. “Good. Course?” He checked the space-chart before him. His back to the others, he said quietly, “You’re asking Andrea to take a big risk, Olcott. You too, Hartman, going into space without a Helmet.”

Olcott moved uneasily; Duncan could see him in the mirror above the instrument panel. “Hell! It was her own choice—”

“You blackmailed her into it.”

Olcott’s lips thinned. “Backing out? If you are, say so.”

“No,” Duncan said, “I’m not backing out. I’m going into space. But you two are going with me—*right now!*”

His poised fingers shot down on the instrument board. Olcott’s oath and Hartman’s startled yell were both drowned in a sudden raging fury of rockets. In the mirror Duncan could see the gun that flashed into Olcott’s hand, but at the same instant terrific acceleration clamped hold of the little ship.

Olcott's gun was never fired. The three men's senses blacked out instantly, mercifully, as the stress of abnormal gravities lifted the cruiser bullet-fast from the islet. Three figures lay motionless on the plasticoid floor, while the rockets' bellow mingled with the shrieking of the atmosphere. The insulated hull scarcely had time to heat before the ship was in free space, shuddering through all its repaired beams and joists, the dull, heavy thunder of the screened tubes vibrating like a tocsin of doom in every inch of the cruiser.

The hull was dead black, the jets screened. No eye detected the swift flight of the ship. Toward the Moon it plunged, rockets bellowing with insensate fury. . . .

Duncan was first to awaken. Space flight was nothing new to him, and his body had been hardened and toughened by five years at Transpolar. Nevertheless, his muscles throbbed with pain, and he had a blinding headache as he dragged his eyelids up and tried to remember what had happened.

Realization came back. Spaceman's instinct made Duncan look first at the controls. The chronometer on the board told him that he had been unconscious for many hours. Watching the star-map, he figured swiftly. Fair enough. They were off their course, but the cruiser had been traveling at breakneck speed. It was still possible to keep the rendezvous with the *Maid*. Duncan readjusted the controls.

After that, he turned to Olcott and the scientist. Neither was seriously injured. Duncan relieved Olcott of his gun; Hartman was unarmed. Then he took a drink and sat down to wait.

Presently Olcott stirred slightly. His lashes did not move, but without warning his hand streaked toward his pocket.

"I've got your gun," Duncan said gently. "Stop playing possum and get up."

Olcott obeyed. There was a streak of blood on his cheek, and he swayed a little as he stood, straddle-legged, facing the pilot.

"What's the idea?"

Duncan grinned. "I'm carrying out your orders. I just thought I'd like company."

Olcott fingered his mustache. "You're the first man who ever played a trick like that on me."

For answer Duncan stood up and waved negligently at the controls. "Take over, if you like. Head the ship back to Earth."

The irony was evident. In free space, almost anyone could pilot a cruiser. But emergencies and landings were different matters. Years of training in split-second, conditioned reactions were necessary to make a pilot—and only Duncan had had that training. Olcott could easily turn the ship around, but he probably could not control it in atmosphere, and he certainly could not make a safe landing. Olcott was in a prison, and Duncan held the only key.

"What do you want?"

"Not a thing. I'm going through with the job. I'll get the radium-for you, and pick up Andrea. But if the Plutonians harm her, without a Helmet, she won't die alone. We're all in the same boat now."

Olcott came to a decision. "All right. You've got aces. Later, we can settle things—not now."

Duncan turned to the star-map. "Fair enough."

In the mirror he watched Olcott kneel beside the unconscious Hartman and break an ammonia capsule under the scientist's nose. Yes, fair enough. He had Olcott in a trap.

Dangerous as the man was—and Duncan made no mistake about that—he would scarcely be fool enough to cause trouble till his own safety was assured.

It wouldn't be assured till the cruiser was back on Earth. Meanwhile, they were in free space—without Varra Helmets. Duncan shivered a little. His eyes sought the enigmatic blackness where Pluto swung in its orbit, invisible and menacing. The Plutonian mind-vampires. Apparently Hartman's trick had worked. The creatures had not yet discovered the blacked-out cruiser.

Not yet. But the scope of their powers was unknown. After all, the Plutonians were the reason why space was forbidden.

Instinctively Duncan's teeth showed in a snarl of savage defiance.

There was hilarious excitement aboard the *Maid of Mercury*. The big passenger-cargo ship had just crossed the Line—Luna's orbit—and that entailed a ceremony involving those who had never crossed before. An officer, grotesquely costumed as the Man in the Moon, presided from a makeshift throne in the main salon, and Andrea Duncan, smiling a little, watched the victims each get their dose of crazy-gas. She'd already had her initiation, and the effects of the mildly intoxicating gas were wearing off.

It was difficult to believe that outside the hull lay empty space, dark and limitless. Andrea turned her mind away from the thought. But another came—Saul—and she bit her lip and caught her breath in a tiny gasp. Saul! Had Olcott managed the escape? Was Saul Duncan free from Transpolar?

He must be. Olcott wouldn't fail. That meant that in a few hours Andrea must destroy the communication system. Olcott had told her the best way. Yes, she was ready. It would mean freedom for Saul.

If she failed, Olcott had said, her husband would be sent back to Transpolar, with an additional heavy sentence—ten more years, perhaps. Well, she wouldn't fail.

A man brushed past her. "Your hair's mussed up—"

Instinctively Andrea lifted a hand, only to be checked by the hard plastic curve of her Helmet. It was an old gag, but she forced herself to smile. The necessity of wearing Helmets in space had become a joke to most of the passengers. Probably only the officers realized the true danger of the Plutonian mind-vampires.

Everyone in the salon, of course, wore a Helmet—even the Man in the Moon, under his disguise. Cumbersome as they looked, they rested lightly on the wearers' shoulders, and were actually so light that one easily became accustomed to them. Andrea studied her reflection in a nearby mirror. Her small, heart-shaped face seemed dwarfed by the Helmet. Experimentally, like an interested child, she pressed a stud and saw the transparent, air-tight shield slide into place an inch from her nose. Within the ship the shields were not necessary, nor were complete space-suits. But the Helmets were vital.

Andrea knew little or nothing of the technical details. The secret of the Helmets lay in the luminous, intertron knob atop each one. It was this that provided a two-way hook-up with the Varra. She remembered what an officer had told her, when she had first donned a Helmet at the Atlantic Spaceport.

"Never done it before, eh, miss? Well, don't be frightened. Let me help you." He had adjusted the bulky Helmet. "The power won't be turned on till we hit the Heaviside Layer. The Varra can't safely enter our atmosphere, you know."

“I didn’t know. It seems so strange—”

The officer chuckled. “Not really. It’s like being in radio communication with somebody. You see, when the juice is turned on, a Varra instantly hooks itself up to your Helmet. You can even talk to him—it—if you like. They’re intelligent; nice people, in fact.”

“Can they read thoughts?”

“Everybody asks me that. No, they can’t. The idea is that without a Helmet, you’d be exposed to the Plutonian mind-vampires. As it is, the Varra throws up a mental shield that protects you.”

Andrea hesitated. “It doesn’t always work, though, does it?”

“Almost always. You were warned of that—” His manner became officially rigid. “You signed a release blank, in case of accident. But there’s no danger to speak of. Space flight is exhausting; you’ll feel pretty bad by the time we hit Mars. Somehow there’s an energy drain that even the Varra can’t neutralize.”

“The Plutonians?”

“We think so. But without the Helmets—” He grinned in a comforting fashion. “You’ll be okay, miss.”

Later, at the Heaviside Layer, the power had been turned on in each Helmet. There was no apparent change, except for the sudden luminosity of the intertron knobs. But a voice, friendly despite its curious alienage, had spoken wordlessly inside Andrea’s brain.

“I’m taking over now. Don’t remove your Helmet or turn off the power till you’re in atmosphere again.”

“Atmosphere—” Andrea had spoken aloud without realizing it. The Varra answered her.

“Each planet has a Heaviside Layer, an electronic barrage that disrupts mental-energy vibrations. We find it dangerous to pass that Layer, but so do the Plutonians.”

Another passenger had told Andrea somewhat more—that the Varra, even before space travel, were not unknown to science. Charles Fort had been one of the first to collect data about them—inexplicable balls of fire appearing on Earth, with their life-forces warped and harmed by the Heaviside Layer, moving at random out of their native element.

Two hours after crossing the Lunar Line Andrea slipped noiselessly into the radio room. The long space trip had told on her; like all the others, she was conscious of exhaustion and mental drain. Glancing at her chronometer, she realized that in a few minutes Saul would make contact with the *Maid*.

She clicked off the power in her Helmet. She wanted no Varra spying on her now.

The radio operator did not turn. He had not seen her or heard her silent approach. Andrea’s hand poised over an intricate array of wires and tore the cables free.

A lance of cold fire plunged into her brain. It was too quick for pain. Her terrified thought, *The Plutonians!* was cut off instantly. Her mind drowned, as in dark water, chill and horrible.

The radio operator whirled, startled, at the thud of Andrea’s falling body.

CHAPTER THREE

Destination—Death!

“CQX! CQX! Calling *Maid of Mercury!*”

Saul Duncan looked up from the mike. “No answer. Their radio’s dead.”

“Your wife did her job,” Olcott grunted, fingering his mustache. He had regained his usual impassivity, though Hartman, in the background, had not. The scientist, without his daily quart of *khlar*, was a nervous wreck, puffing cigarette after cigarette in a vain attempt to calm himself.

“There she is.” Duncan nodded at the visiplane, where the bulk of the *Maid* lay, occulting stars. “We’ll use visual signals. First, though, we’ll have to—”

His fingers moved swiftly. A four-inch blaster cannon sent its bolt of electronic energy ravaging through space, across the *Maid’s* bow. Lights on the cruiser’s hull blinked into rainbow colors.

Paralleling the *Maid*, steadily drawing closer, the smaller ship kept on its course.

Duncan said, “They noticed that. They’ll be watching the visiplane—”

“What are you telling them?”

“To send over the radium, or we’ll blast ’em to hell.”

“Good!”

But Duncan’s lips were tight. He was bluffing, of course. Blasting an unarmed ship full of passengers—well, if it came to a showdown, he could not do it, even if Andrea had not been on board. However, the *Maid’s* captain couldn’t know that. He wouldn’t dare take the risk.

Answering lights flashed on the larger ship’s hull. Duncan read them aloud with the ease of long practice.

“No radium aboard. Is this a joke?”

“Send another blast,” Olcott suggested.

Duncan’s response was to fire a bolt that melted two of the *Maid’s* stern tubes into slag. That didn’t harm anyone in the passenger ship, but it showed that he was presumably in earnest. And he had to get Andrea aboard now. She had smashed the radio, and probably was already under arrest. Well—

“Sending radium. Don’t fire again.”

“Send one of your passengers also. Jane Horton.” Andrea was booked under that alias, Olcott had said.

There was a pause. Then—“Jane Horton victim of Plutonians. Must have turned off power in Helmet. Found dead in radio room just before you made contact.”

Saul Duncan’s fingers didn’t move on the keys. Deep within him, something turned into ice. He was hearing a voice, seeing a face, both phantoms, for Andrea was dead.

Andrea was dead.

The words were meaningless.

He became conscious of Olcott at his side, talking angrily.

“What’s wrong? What did they say?”

Duncan looked at Olcott. The dead, frozen fury in the pilot’s eyes halted Olcott in mid-sentence.

Automatically Duncan’s hand moved over the keyboard.

“Send the body to me.”

Then he waited.

On the visiplate was movement. A port gaped in the *Maid's* hull, the escape-hatch with which all ships were provided. Based on torpedo-tube principle, powered by magnetic energy, the projector was built to hurl crew or passengers out of the ship's sphere of attraction. Sometimes the rockets would fail, in which case the vessel would crash on any nearby body. If that danger threatened, a man in a spacesuit, equipped with auxiliary rockets, could survive for days in the void, provided he was not dragged down with the ship. The projector took care of that.

Now, tuned to minimum power, it thrust a bulky object out into space, pushing it toward the cruiser. Gravitation did the rest. The spacesuit dropped toward the smaller vessel, thudded against the hull. Duncan threw a series of hull magnets, one after another, till the suit was at an escape valve.

Five minutes later the space coffin lay at Duncan's feet.

Through the bars that protected the transparent face-plate he could see Andrea, her long lashes motionless on her cheeks. Duncan's face was suddenly haggard. Olcott's voice jarred on his taut nerves.

“What happened? Did they—”

“The Plutonians killed her,” Duncan said. “She turned off her Helmet, and they killed her.”

Hartman was staring at a lead box attached to the spacesuit. “They sent the radium!”

Duncan's lips twisted in a bitter smile. With a quick movement he went to the controls and turned the cruiser into a new course. On the visiplate, the *Maid* began to draw away.

Olcott said, “How long will it take us to get back to Earth?”

“We're not going back.” Duncan's voice held no emotion.

“What?”

“Andrea's dead. The Plutonians killed her. You and Hartman helped.”

Olcott's big body seemed to tense. “Don't be a fool. What good will it do to murder us? What's done is done. You—”

“I'm not going to murder you,” Duncan said. “The Plutonians will take care of that.”

“You're crazy!”

Briefly a flash of murderous fury showed in Duncan's eyes. He repressed it.

“I'm taking this boat to Pluto. I'm going to blast hell out of the Plutonians. They'll get us eventually, all of us. That'll be swell. I don't want to live very long now. But before I die, I'm going to smash as many of the Plutonians as I can, because they killed Andrea. And you two are going with me, because you got Andrea into this mess.”

Hartman said shakily, “It's suicide. No ship can get within a million miles of Pluto!”

“This ship can. It's dead black, with rocket screens. And the Plutonians haven't found us yet—which proves something. Hold it!” The gun flashed into Duncan's hand as Olcott jerked forward. “I'll kill you myself if I have to, but I'd rather let the Plutonians do it.” He motioned the others to the back of the cabin as a light flashed on the board. After a moment Duncan nodded.

“That was the *Maid*. They managed to repair their radio. Andrea didn't have time to smash it thoroughly before. They're talking to a patrol boat.”

Olcott's teeth showed. “Well?”

“We don’t want to be stopped—now.” Duncan fingered the controls. The bellow of rockets grew louder. A shuddering vibration rocked the little cruiser.

“Not too fast!” Hartman said warningly. “This ship crashed once. It’s still weak.”

For answer Duncan only increased the power. The thunder of the tubes grew deafening. Already they had crossed the Lunar Line, heading outward in the plane of the ecliptic.

Duncan rose and went to the spacesuit that held Andrea’s body. He wrenched the intertron knob free from the Helmet.

“We want no Varra spy here.” The knob was not glowing, and, without power, the Varra was not *en rapport* with the Helmet, but Duncan was taking no chances.

Grimly he went back to the controls. Hartman and Olcott watched him, vainly trying to fight back their fear.

The heavy, crashing roar of the rockets mounted to a deafening crescendo.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Destroying Avenger

Named after the Greek god of the underworld, desolate, lifeless and forbidding as Hell itself, Pluto revolved in its tremendous orbit, between thirty-seven hundred million and four thousand million miles from the Sun. Such distances are staggeringly inconceivable when we attempt to use human yardsticks. Men cannot stand the strain of such voyages without special precautions. Suspended animation is usual on the long hops, and Duncan had made use of the cataleptic drug he found at hand in the cruiser's emergency supply locker.

For a long time the three men had been unconscious as the ship, with increasing acceleration, hurled itself toward Pluto. Duncan had carefully measured the Sherman units of the drug, calculating so that he would awaken hours before the others. But he forgot one thing—the terrific resistance *khlar* builds up within the human body.

So it was Rudy Hartman who first opened his eyes, groaned, and stared uncomprehendingly about him. He was strapped in a bunk, Duncan and Olcott near by. Memory came back.

Sick and weak from the long period of catalepsy, Hartman nevertheless forced his aching limbs into motion. Staggering, he presently reached Duncan and took the latter's gun. That done, he searched for a means of binding his captive securely.

The bunk-straps were of flexible metal—not long enough, but they might serve a purpose. Hartman, scarcely conscious of his actions, fumbled at a panel and slid it back. Within the cubicle space-suits were stacked, each with its Varra Helmet, Olcott had ordered them removed when Hartman was repairing the vessel, but the scientist had not obeyed. He had not felt entirely certain that the cruiser would not be detected by the Plutonians, and perhaps he had felt a twinge of compunction at the thought of sending a helpless man to possible suicide, if his theory proved wrong. So he had concealed the Helmets behind a panel. Now he blessed the lucky chance that had made him do so.

Duncan was still unconscious. Hartman rolled him out of the bunk and dressed him in a suit, fitting the Varra Helmet in place. With the flexible straps he bound Duncan's arms to his side; a makeshift job, but it would serve. Finally he pried the intertron knob from the Helmet and sighed with relief.

Hesitantly he went to the controls. The star-map told him little, except that they were approaching Pluto. Should they begin deceleration? Hartman's fingers hovered over the studs—Damn! He dared not alter the course. He wasn't a pilot, and it took trained hands to control a spaceship.

Well, that didn't matter. There was another way—with the Varra Helmets.

He broke an ammonia capsule under Olcott's nose and applied artificial respiration. After a time Olcott stirred.

"Hartman?" His tongue was thick. "Where—what's happened?"

"A great deal. Lie still and get back your strength. I'll tell you—"

But Olcott struggled to rise. "Duncan!"

"He's safe." Hartman nodded toward the bound figure. Then he sucked in his breath and sprang up. Duncan's eyes were open.

“Stay where you are,” Hartman said, showing the gun. “I won’t hesitate to kill you, you know.”

Duncan grinned. “Go ahead. You can’t pilot this ship. I can wait.”

Olcott got up unsteadily. “You’ll pilot it—back to Earth. Damn you, Duncan—”

“I’ll pilot it to Pluto. Nowhere else.”

Hartman intervened. “Wait. Listen, Duncan. We have several Varra Helmets aboard. You didn’t know that.”

“So what?”

“We do not need you as a pilot. If we make connections with the Varra, we can chart a course back to Earth by letting them instruct us.”

Duncan’s eyes changed.

He said, “You’re crazy.” But his voice lacked conviction.

“The Varra!” Olcott scowled. “But—”

Hartman whirled on him. “I know! It will mean giving up the radium. But there’s no other way. We’re near Pluto. The Plutonians may detect us at any moment. If they do—” He shrugged. “We can keep the radium and die here. Or we can use the Helmets, summon the Varra, and have them guide us back to Earth.”

“Can they do that?”

“Easily. If they had tangible bodies, they could pilot spaceships as well as Duncan, or anyone else. As it is, they can tell us how to handle the controls.”

“We’ll lose the radium. It’ll mean prison too.”

“Not necessarily. Our lives are worth more than the radium—eh? And the Varra can’t read minds. Suppose we have a convincing story to tell? We planned this space-flight as a scientific expedition, nothing more. We didn’t know Duncan was an escaped convict. We didn’t know he planned to hi-jack the *Maid*—”

Olcott rubbed his mustache. “Plenty of holes in that. But you’re right. We can fix up some sort of story. And there’ll be no legal proof—”

He looked toward the helpless Duncan. “Except him. We don’t want him talking.”

Hartman touched the gun, but Olcott shook his head. “No. Listen. Duncan. You’re licked. We can get back to Earth, with you or without you. But if we get the Varra to help, we lose the radium. Why not be smart? Play along with us, and you’ll still get your half a million credits.”

“Go to hell!” Duncan suggested.

Hartman said, “We’ve no time to waste. We’re not far from Pluto—” He didn’t finish, but there was a suggestion of panic fear in his voice.

“Right. This ship’s got an escape hatch, hasn’t it? Good.” Olcott hurriedly began to don spacesuit and Varra Helmet. At a gesture, Hartman followed his example.

“Don’t use the power yet. Help me.” Olcott picked up Duncan by the shoulders. Grunting and straining, the two men carried their captive into the air-tight bow chamber, sealing the valve behind them. The magnetic projector, looking like an oversized cannon, faced the circular transparent port through which they could see the starry darkness of empty space.

“Know how to work one of these?”

“They’re simple,” Hartman said. “This switch—” He indicated it. “Obviously it closes the circuit. Yes, I can operate this.”

Duncan remained silent as he was roughly thrust into the projector’s gaping muzzle, feet-first. Olcott bent over him.

“You’ve got auxiliary-suit rockets and enough oxygen. And you can untie yourself, if you work fast, before you hit Pluto. You can make a safe landing—till the Plutonians find you. Well?”

Duncan didn’t answer.

Olcott said, “Don’t be a fool! You’ll die rather unpleasantly on Pluto. You know that. Will you take us back to Earth?”

There was a long silence. Abruptly, with a muffled curse, Olcott snapped Duncan’s faceplate shut, and then his own. Hartman did the same, and, with a wry face, touched the power-button on his Helmet that would summon the Varra.

In a moment the intertron knob began to glow, with a cold, unearthly brilliance. Olcott hastily turned the power on in his own Helmet. Now there was no time to waste. Soon the Varra would come. . . .

Cold eyes dark with fury, Olcott gestured. Hartman, in response, swung the projector’s muzzle into position; both men closed their faceplates. The transparent shield of the bow port slid aside, and the air within the escape hatch blasted out into space.

Hartman moved a lever. Electro-magnetic energy blasted out from the projector, blindingly brilliant. One flashing glimpse the men had of Duncan’s bound, space-suited body hurtling into the void—and then it was gone, racing toward Pluto at breakneck speed.

Hartman closed the port and pumped air back into the tiny chamber. Abruptly a voice spoke within his brain.

“Who are you? Why do you summon the Varra? And why are you so near to Pluto?”

Olcott had heard the message too. He framed the thought: “You are a Varra? We need help.”

“We are Varra. What help do you require?”

Olcott explained.

He had fallen for many minutes. Beneath him the jagged darkness of Pluto lay, cryptic and forbidding. It was time to use the rockets, but still Duncan hesitated, though he had freed himself from his bonds. The flares would certainly attract the attention of the Plutonian mind-vampires, and then—

A shadow occulted the stars. For a moment Duncan thought it was a meteor; then he recognized the cruiser. Jets screened, almost invisible, it was still driving on its course toward Pluto!

He did not stop to ponder the reason. Instinct sent his gloved fingers to the studs built into his suit. The tiny emergency rockets burned white in the darkness of space. Duncan was hurled toward the cruiser. Involuntarily he held his breath, looking downward at the vast circle of Pluto. Would he die now?

The rockets had flared only briefly; perhaps they had not been noticed. He did not use them again. Instead, he waited, moving steadily onward with no atmosphere to slow him down by its friction. The gravitation of Pluto pulled at both man and ship, but each fell at the same rate—no! The cruiser was pulling away! That meant its masked tubes were still on.

Duncan risked another jet. This time his space-boots thumped solidly on the hull. He levered himself toward the side port, which could be opened from without, unless it had been locked. True, when the valve slid aside, the ship’s air would be lost in space, and anyone within the cruiser would die. Duncan grinned savagely. Bracing himself awkwardly, he tugged at levers.

The port opened. Duncan was almost flung away from the ship by the blast of air that gusted out. He recovered his balance, swung himself across the threshold—

At his feet lay two space-suited bodies, Olcott and Hartman. The faceplates of their Varra Helmets were open, but they had not died of lack of oxygen. That was evident. The frozen, strained whiteness of their features told a different story that Duncan read instantly. The Plutonians had brought death to Hartman and Olcott; they had died in the same manner as Andrea.

Duncan closed the port behind him, his face expressionless. Inwardly he was tense as wire, in momentary expectation of cold fury striking at his brain. He stood waiting.

The star-map on the instrument panel flared. That meant atmosphere ahead. Duncan was at the controls in two strides. His number might be up, but he had no intention of dying in a crash—not while there was still a possibility of revenging himself on the Plutonian creatures.

He checked the ship's course, decelerating as much as he dared. So keyed-up were his nerves that he jumped sharply when a voice spoke inside his brain.

“Who are you, Earthman? Why are you here?”

Before Duncan could frame a response, he felt a thrill of sudden urgency flame through him. Something, cold and deadly as space itself, reached into his mind. There was an instant of sickening giddiness—

It was gone. The sky-screen flamed crimson. The cruiser was within Pluto's atmosphere blanket.

Duncan gasped for breath. He was scarcely conscious of manipulating the cruiser, leveling off into a long, swooping glide. Death had touched him very nearly—and had been avoided miraculously by a fantastically small margin. The implications of what had happened turned Duncan white with incredulous shock.

For the thing that had been *en rapport* with his mind had tried to kill him. And that thing had been not a Plutonian, but a Varra! Duncan was certain of that. In his space-piloting days he had been in close touch with the Varra, and had learned the distinctive *feel* of the creatures—there was no other word—within his mind.

But the Varra were friendly to Earthmen!

The rough terrain of Pluto lay below. A cold, bluish radiance, almost invisible, seemed to flicker here and there. Duncan set the ship down with trained skill, landing on a broad plateau at the base of a high range of alps.

He was on Pluto, shunned and feared by Earthmen for a hundred and fifty years. He was in the very lair of the mind-vampires.

And nothing happened.

Slowly Duncan rose and turned the valves on the oxygen tanks. He divested himself of his spacesuit and made a careful examination of the two bodies. Both Olcott and Hartman had been killed, apparently, by the Plutonians. They had the stigmata.

But Duncan was thinking a rather impossible thought—that there were no Plutonians.

With half of his mind he made tests. There was atmosphere, almost pure chlorine. Nor was it unduly cold. An electroscope gave him the answer. Pluto was a radioactive planet, warmed from within by the powerful radiations of the ore.

Duncan took the dead Olcott's helmet and adjusted it upon himself. Turning on the power made the intertron knob glow, but there was no other result. The Varra, of course, could not

safely venture within the Heaviside Layer of any planet, and Pluto had a Layer, since it had an atmosphere. Chlorine—radium—Duncan shook his head, trying to fit the puzzle together.

There were no Plutonians. Why, then, had the Varra fostered the legend of the mind-vampires? Creatures composed of pure energy could not exist on a radioactive planet; the radiations would be fatal to their complicated electronic structures.

Duncan thought for a long time. At last he had the answer, so astoundingly simple that he found it difficult to believe. But it checked. And that meant—

He rose and went slowly to where Andrea's body lay, still in the spacesuit, her face composed and lovely in death. Duncan's lips twisted. He knelt.

"Andrea—"

She was trying to tell him something, he thought. What?

"Tell Earth what I've found out? Is that it?"

He hesitated. "It's no use. We're forty thousand million miles from the Sun. The radio won't carry that far, even if it'd get through the Heaviside Layer on Pluto. There's no way to send a message back."

There was no way. Nor could the cruiser retrace its course. There was not enough fuel left. The jets would be exhausted before Saturn's orbit was reached, and the speed would increase as the ship plunged Sunward, increase to a point where deceleration would be impossible.

"There's no way, Andrea. I can't send the message—"

Duncan stopped. There was a way, after all, though it meant death.

He seated himself before the radio-recorder and adjusted it to automatic-repeat. His message would be imprinted on metal wire-tape, and continue to be sent out into the void till the ship itself was destroyed.

Duncan pulled the microphone toward him. His voice was coldly emotionless.

"CQX. CQX. Recorded on Pluto. All ships copy. Relay to proper authorities. Pluto is uninhabited. Its atmosphere is pure chlorine. No life-form known to science can exist in a chlorine atmosphere or on a radioactive world. The Plutonian mind-vampires do not exist. The legend was created by the Varra for their own purposes. The actual mind-vampires are the Varra themselves."

Now it would be theorizing, but Duncan was certain that his guess was correct.

"The Varra live on life energy. When man conquered space, they foresaw danger to themselves. They are vulnerable, and if Earth suspected their motives, they'd be relentlessly destroyed. So—as I see it—they pretended to be friendly, and blamed the mind-vampirism on imaginary creatures living on Pluto. The Varra can communicate with us without the need for Helmets. They can kill too. But they seldom do that. Instead, pretending to protect space-travelers from the Plutonians, they drain a certain amount of life-energy from each person wearing a Helmet. We're like cattle to them. We think they're friendly, and so far we haven't suspected the truth. As long as we didn't suspect, the Varra were safe, and could keep on vampirizing us, without our knowledge. Once in a while a Varra badly in need of energy would drain too much, which would kill its host."

That was what had happened to Andrea. The Varra had tried to stop her from wrecking the *Maid's* radio, and—Duncan's teeth showed.

He went on telling his story, explaining what had happened. He made no excuses; there was no need for them now.

Finally he said: "The Varra can be destroyed. And we can protect ourselves against them. That'll be up to the scientists. If this ship gets through, it will mean that the Varra couldn't stop me. I've got radium aboard. So I'll put a Heaviside Layer around the cruiser—and blast off Sunward."

Duncan clicked the switch. No need to say more. Earth would understand, would believe.

But now—

He opened the port, after donning a suit and Helmet, and let the ship fill with the chlorine atmosphere. It would be better than oxygen, for his purposes. Iodine vapor would be even more effective, but he could not create that. If only he were a scientist, a technician, he could probably discover some other way of creating an artificial Heaviside Layer.

But it didn't matter. This way was surest and quickest, and there would be no machinery to fail him.

Sealed within the ship once more, Duncan found the shipment of Martian radium, hijacked from the *Maid*, and removed it from its thick leaden container. He left it exposed, and went to the controls.

The cruiser lifted from the surface of the plateau. It slanted up through the chlorine atmosphere, rockets bellowing.

There was no need for split-second timing or unusual accuracy—within certain limits. He was heading Sunward. Nothing more was necessary. Except power—

The tubes thundered with ravening fury. The cruiser blasted up, acceleration jamming Duncan back into his seat. Then they were out of the air-envelope, in free space, controls locked. There was nothing more to do now but to drive on. The rockets would blast their fury into the void till the fuel was exhausted. Even then, the ship would speed on, into the tracks of commerce and the orbits of the inhabited planets.

On the visiplate specks of light glimmered, resolving themselves into a nebulous cloud—the Varra.

It was the final proof. Duncan was the first man who had ever landed on Pluto. The Varra intended to destroy him, giving him no opportunity of telling what he knew to Earth.

Duncan checked the radio. It was repeating his message, sending it steadily into space. At this distance from the Sun there was no chance that it would be picked up. But later—

He clicked the power on in his Helmet. There was no response. The Varra, as he had thought, could not penetrate his artificial barrier, his pseudo-Heaviside Layer.

It was nothing, actually, but a blanket of ionization. But the Varra could not break through it. Duncan glanced at the exposed radium on the floor. A pound of it, sending out its powerful emanations, gamma, beta and electrons, ionizing the chlorine even more effectively than it would have affected oxygen—invisible armor, protecting Duncan from the Varra.

They were massing ahead, determined to stop him. Thoughts began to penetrate his mind, furtive, random, but indications that the group power of the Varra was stronger than he had expected.

Duncan seated himself at a panel, the one controlling the blaster cannons. His face, haggard and strained, twisted in a bitter smile.

"Okay, Andrea," he whispered. "I'm taking the message back for you. But I'm doing this—for myself! Because they killed you, damn them—"

The chill tentacles probed deeper into Duncan's brain. He swung a cannon into position, pressed a stud, and watched a streak of electronic energy go blasting across space, silent

thunder in the void, smashing relentlessly at the Varra. It struck in a maelstrom of flame.

“Vulnerable!” Duncan said, “Yeah, they’re vulnerable as all hell!”

The Varra closed in. Through their massed ranks the cannon blazed and pounded, till space seemed afire. The rocking recoil of the blasts, mingled with the booming of the rockets, thudded in Duncan’s ears even through the Helmet.

And he fought them. There were no witnesses to that battle, none to see the black cruiser plunging on through the cloud of attackers, belching Jove’s lightning, shaking with the vibrations of its murder-madness. For the spaceship was mad, Duncan thought, a relentless, destroying avenger, a dark angel bringing the terror of Armageddon to the Varra. And the energy-beings never paused; their life and their future was in the scales. If Duncan broke through, they were doomed. He must be stopped.

They could not stop him! Almost blind with the agony burning within his brain, Saul Duncan nevertheless hunched over the controls, while the cannons thundered their demoniac message into space. By dozens and hundreds the Varra died, their energy-matrices wrenched and broken by the electronic bolts. Duncan and the ship were one—and both were mad.

He got through. He had to. Nothing could have stopped Saul Duncan, not even the Varra. In the end, the black cruiser raced Sunward, cannons silent, for the Varra were scattered.

Duncan got up wearily. He stood above Andrea’s body, watching the still features, the long lashes that would never rise.

“It’s done,” he said. “Finished. Earth will get the message—”

Earth would get the message. The Varra could not stop the cruiser now, and the radio would continue to send out its signal till the fires of the Sun swallowed the black ship.

Duncan knelt. His legs were weak. The radium, of course. His suit could not protect him from the fatal radiations of a pound of the pure ore. But the stuff had served its purpose. It had kept the Varra at a distance till Duncan could fulfill his vengeance.

And now it would kill him—unless he replaced it in the leaden casket. But even that might not work now.

Duncan shrugged. It was better to die of radium burns than by the power of the Varra.

He would be dead long before then.

But the Varra would be hunted down, ruthlessly slain, their power broken forever. Earth-science would destroy them, as they themselves had slain so many, as they had killed Andrea.

The bellow of the rockets died. The ship held true to its course, plunging on faster and faster toward the sunlit worlds where men knew joy and laughter and happiness. It would go on, to the funeral pyre of the Sun.

But it would leave a message in its wake.

[The end of *Thunder in the Void* by Henry Kuttner]