

THUNDER IN THE VOID

A NOVEL

By Henry Kuttner

THUNDER IN THE VOID

“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 Heaviside 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.”

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

