

Planet of the Black Dust

by Jack Vance

The pirates held all the cards but one—the soul of the man who was determined not to let them win!

An ANN/A Preservation Edition.

[Notes](#)

ABOUT the middle of the dog watch Captain Creed came up on the bridge of the space-freighter *Perseus*. He walked to the forward port and stood gazing at the blood-red star which lay ahead and slightly to the left.

It was a nameless little sun in the tail of the Serpens group, isolated from the usual space routes. The Earth-Rasalague route ran far to one side, the Delta Aquila ran far to the other and the Delta Aquila-Sabik inter-sector service was yet a half light-year further out.

Captain Creed stood watching the small red star, deep in thought—a large man, with a paunch, a bland white face, a careful coal-black beard. His heavy black eyes, underhung with dark circles, were without expression or life. He wore a neat black suit, his boots shone with a high polish, his hands were white and immaculately kept.

Captain Creed was more than mere master of the *Perseus*. In partnership with his brother he owned the European-Arcturus Lane—a syndicate impressive to the ear.

The home office, however, was one dingy room in the old Co-Martian Tower in Tran, and the firm's sole assets consisted, first, of the *Perseus* itself, and second, of the profit anticipated from a cargo of aromatic oils which Captain Creed had taken on consignment from McVann's Star in Ophiuchus.

The *Perseus* could not be considered the more valuable of the two items. It was an old ship, slow, pitted by meteorites, of little more than 600 tons capacity.

The cargo was another matter—flask upon flask of rare aromatics. essence of syrang blooms, oil of star-poppies, attar of green orchids, musk of crushed mian flies, distillation of McVann's blue bush—exotic liquids brought in by the bulb-men of McVann's Star a half ounce at a time. And Captain Creed was highly annoyed when the insurance evaluator permitted but an eighty-million-dollar policy and had argued vehemently to have the figure moved closer to the cargo's true value.

Now, as he stood on the bridge smoking his cigar, he was joined by the first mate, Blaine, who was tall and thin and, except for a scrub of black hair, egg-bald. Blaine had a long knife-nose, a mouth twisted to a perpetual snarl. He had a quick reckless way of talking that sometimes disconcerted careful Captain Creed.

"They're all fixed," he announced. "They'll go in about ten minutes—" Captain Creed quelled him with a frown and a quick motion of the head, and Blaine saw that they were not alone. Holderlin, second mate and quartermaster, a young man of hard face and cruel blue eyes, stood forward at the helm.

He wore only loose tattered trousers, and the scarlet glare from the star ahead gave a devilish red glow to his body, put a lurid cast on his face. Like two hawks they watched him, and his expression did not entirely reassure them. After a moment Captain Creed spoke smoothly.

"I doubt if you are right, Mr. Blaine. The period of that type of variable star is slower and more even, as I think you'll find if you check your observations."

Blaine shot another quick look at Holderlin, then, mumbling indistinguishably, left for the engine room.

Creed presently stepped across the bridge.

“Take her five degrees closer to the star, Mr. Holderlin. We’re somewhat offcourse, and the gravity will swing us back around.”

Holderlin gave him one look of surprise, then silently obeyed. What nonsense was this? Already the ship was gripped hard by gravity. Did they still hope to beguile him with such slim pretexts? If so they must think him stupid indeed.

Even a child would by now have been warned by the happenings aboard the *Perseus*. First at Porphyry, the space-port on McVann’s Star, Captain Creed had discharged the radioman and the two ship’s mechanics for reasons unexplained.

Not an unusual circumstance, but Captain Creed had neglected to hire replacements. Thus, the only other man aboard beside Captain Creed. Blaine and Holderlin, was Farjoram, the half-mad Callistonian cook.

ON SEVERAL occasions, after Porphyry had been cleared, Holderlin had surprised Blaine and Creed intent at the radio. Later, when he inspected the automatic frequency record, he found no trace of calls.

And four or five days ago, while on watch below and supposedly asleep, he had noticed while leaving his tiny compartment that the entrance port to the starboard lifeboat was ajar. He had said nothing, but later, when Blaine and Captain Creed were both asleep, had inspected the life-boats, port and starboard, to find that the fuel in the starboard life-boat had been drained except for the slightest trickle and that the radio transmitter had been tampered with.

The port boat was well fueled and provisioned. So Holderlin quietly refueled the starboard boat and thoughtfully stowed away spare fuel.

Now came Blaine’s unwary statement to Captain Creed, and Creed’s peculiar orders to steer toward the star. Holderlin’s tough brown face was unexpressive as he watched Creed’s great bulk by the port, blotting out the sun ahead.

But his brain searched through all angles of the situation. For fourteen years of his thirty-three he had roved space and of necessity had learned how to care for Robert Holderlin.

A slight shock shook the hull. Captain Creed turned his head negligently, then once again looked out on space. Holderlin said nothing, but his eyes were very alert.

A few minutes passed, and Blaine came back to the bridge. Holderlin sensed, but did not see the look which passed between Creed and the gaunt mate.

“Ah,” said Captain Creed. “We seem to be close enough. Starboard ten degrees and set her on the gyroscope.”

Holderlin turned the wheel. He could feel the surge of power into the jets, but the ship did not respond.

“She doesn’t answer, sir,” he said.

“What’s this!” cried Captain Creed. “Mr. Blaine! Check the steering jets! The ship does not answer the wheel!”

Creed must dislike too blunt action, thought Holderlin, to insist on such elaborate circumstances—or perhaps they suspected the gun in his pocket. Blaine ran off, and returned in a very short time, a wolfish grin lifting his already contorted lip.

“Steering jets fused, Captain. That cheap lining they put in at Aureolis has given out.”

Captain Creed looked from the furious little sun ahead to Blaine and Holderlin. With his entire fortune at stake, he seemed strangely unperturbed by the prospect of disaster. But then Captain Creed’s white face was always controlled. He gave the order that Holderlin had been expecting.

“Abandon ship!” he said. “Mr. Blaine, despatch the distress signal! Mr. Holderlin, find Farjoram and stand by the starboard life-boat!”

Holderlin left to find the cook. But he noted as he passed that Blaine, at the transmitter, had not yet flipped down the big red “Emergency” relay.

Presently Captain Creed and Blaine joined Holderlin and the cook on the boat walk.

“Shall I accompany your boat, Captain, or Mr. Blaine’s?” asked Holderlin, as if he had not understood Captain Creed’s previous order, or was challenging it. Blaine looked in sudden alarm at the captain.

“You will take charge of the starboard boat, Mr. Holderlin,” replied the Captain silkily. “I wish Mr. Blaine to accompany me.” He turned to enter the port boat. But Holderlin stepped forward and produced a sheet of paper he had been carrying for several days.

“A moment, if you please, sir. If I am to be in charge of the boat, for the protection of myself and the cook—in the event your boat is lost—will you sign this certification of shipwreck?”

“Neither boat will be lost, Mr. Holderlin,” replied Captain Creed, smoothing his black beard. “Mr. Blaine contacted a patrol cruiser only a hundred million miles away.”

“Nevertheless, sir, I believe the Astronautic Code requires such a document.”

Blaine nudged the captain slyly.

“Well certainly, Mr. Holderlin, we must observe the law,” said Captain Creed, and so signed the certification. Without more ado, he and Blaine entered their lifeboat.

“Take off, Mr. Holderlin!” Captain Creed ordered through the port. “We will wait till you clear.”

HOLDERLIN turned. The cook had disappeared.

“Farjoram!” he cried. “*Farjoram!*”

Holderlin ran to find him and at last discovered the fuzzy-skinned little Callistonian huddled in his cabin, red eyes bulging in great terror. There was foam at his mouth.

“Come,” said Holderlin gruffly.

The Callistonian babbled in frenzy.

“No, no—I not go in life-boat. Get away, you go! I stay!”

Then Holderlin remembered a tale which had gone the rounds of how this Farjoram and eight others had drifted in a life-boat for four months through the Phenesian Blackness. When at last they had been

picked up, there was only Farjoram among the picked bones of his fellows. So now even Holderlin shuddered.

“Hurry!” came Captain Creed’s call. “We are almost into the sun!”

“Come!” said Holderlin roughly. “They’ll kill you if you don’t.”

For answer the Callistonian whipped out a long knife and spasmodically stabbed himself in the throat. He fell at Holderlin’s feet Holderlin returned alone.

“Where’s Farjoram?” queried Creed sharply.

“He killed himself, sir. With a knife.”

“Humph,” murmured Creed. “Well, take off alone then. The rendezvous is at a hundred million miles on the line between this star and Delta Aquila.

“Right, sir,” said Holderlin. Without further words, he sealed himself in the boat and took off.

The sun was close, but not too close. It would have pulled an unfueled life-boat to doom, but it was not so near as to prevent another ship from approaching the *Perseus*, shackling into the fore and aft chocks and towing it off to safety.

Holderlin used his blasts for a few seconds, then cut them as if his fuel were exhausted. Presently as he drifted away from the *Perseus*, apparently helpless in the red star’s gravity, he saw the port boat break clear and speed, not out toward Delta Aquila, but back along the blast-track.

Holderlin drifted quietly a few minutes, in the event that Captain Creed or Blaine were watching him through glasses. But there was little time to waste. The ship lying astern would presently draw alongside and, after transferring the precious cargo, would let the *Perseus* hurtle into the scarlet sun.

Holderlin had different plans. He assured himself that the certificate signed by Captain Creed was safe—then, judging the interval to be adequate, started his blasts and whisked himself back to the *Perseus*.

He brought the bow of the lifeboat against the *Perseus*’ forward tow ring, then slipped into his air-suit, clambered out into space and shackled the two together. Then, back in the life-boat, he eased open the throttle and nudged the bow of the *Perseus* to a safe position of space.

He pushed himself across the emptiness, this time to the *Perseus*’ entrance port and, shedding his space-suit, ran up to the bridge. He sent out a detector wave, and the almost instant contact bell told him the other ship stood close—too close for flight to the only refuge he could think of—the lone planet of the red star.

He picked up this ship in the teleview. It was a long black vessel with high-straked bow, great thick-ribbed tubes and a bridge built smooth into the hull. Holderlin instantly recognized the type—a class of fast heavily-armed ships designed for the Scorpio Sagittarius frontier run, built by the Belisarius Corporation of Earth.

Two years before he had shipped aboard one of the same class, and he recollected an incident of the voyage. Out past Fomalhaut, they were engaged in a running battle with a war-sphere of the Clantlalan system, and there had been a lucky shot into the main generator which had put them out of action.

Only the arrival of three Earth cruisers had staved off capture and slavery. Holderlin recollected the exact details of that lucky shot The bolt had struck amidships, just forward of the lower drive-jet. It had broken into the hull through a small drain, the Achilles’ heel of the heavy armor.

So Holderlin watched and waited as the sleek black vessel cruised close. The lifeboat dangling against the *Perseus*' bow was turned partly away in the shadow, and was, he hoped, not too conspicuous.

But the ship came easing up with an insolent leisure, and there seemed to be no suspicions aboard. Holderlin's hard face creased in a grin as he sighted along the *Perseus*' ancient needle-beam.

THE encounter was of dream-like simplicity. Like a tremendous black shark, the ship drifted over him, her little black drain drawing the sights of his needle-beam like a magnet.

He pulled the trigger and laughed aloud as a great hole opened where the drain had once been. As before, the lights died, the driving beams cut off, all evidence of life vanished, and the black ship rolled sluggishly in recoil from the blast, a great helpless hulk.

Holderlin ran to the bank of jet controls. He could consider himself safe now, for at least a few hours, when, with luck, he would be so well concealed that the black ship could seek in vain. And if those aboard were not able to rig up an auxiliary generator quickly, they themselves might be forced to take to their life-boats—for the red star glowed close ahead.

He threw on acceleration and, with the lifeboat dragging crazily from the bow, blasted away toward the lone planet of the scarlet sun.

An hour later the planet loomed large, and he entered the green-tinted atmosphere. In order to escape the televue plates of the raider, he circled to the far side, nudging the *Perseus*' bow around with the lifeboat.

Through his own televue, the planet showed as a world of about half Earth's size, scarred with gorges and precipitous crags, interspersed with plains. These plains brimmed with a black froth, which the televue presently revealed to be thick, fronded, vegetation.

The atmosphere, of a marked green tint, supported great fleecy clouds, glowing in the lurid sunlight in all shades of orange, gold, red and yellow.

Holderlin let the *Perseus* fall toward the base of a great black peak where dense forests indicated good concealment. Single-handed he landed the ship with its steering jets fused, an epic in itself.

For two tense hours he crouched in the lifeboat, jockeying the nose of the *Perseus* back and forth as it settled on its landing blasts through the green murk past the hot-colored clouds.

He had led two cords into the lifeboat with him—one made fast to the throttle that he might blast the ship to safety if the terrain were too soft or too rough, the other to kill the tubes when the ship finally settled solidly.

The *Perseus* teetered low through the green air and crashed down through the black forests onto solid soil. Holderlin yanked his cut-off cord, and the roaring blasts died. He fell limply back in his bucket seat.

He stirred himself. The green of the atmosphere hinted unhealthiness—and once more climbing into his air-suit he returned to the *Perseus*.

He twisted the dial at the radio. There was only silence. Through the skyport, he saw that the soft black fronds had closed over the ship. The *Perseus* was well concealed. Holderlin slept.

When he awoke all was as before, the radio still silent. He tested the atmosphere with the Bramley Aiolyzer, and as he suspected the dials showed poison. But apparently there were no tissue-irritant

gasses, and there was a sufficiency of oxygen.

So he charged a respirator with appropriate filters and jumped out on the planet to inspect the steering jets. He sank to his ankles in an impalpable black dust like soot, which every passing puff of air blew into whirls of black smoke.

As he walked, he stirred up clouds of this dust, which settled in his clothes and into his boots. Holderlin cursed. He could see that a grimy period lay before him. He plodded around to the steering jets.

They were both better and worse than he had expected. The linings were split and broken, and fragments had wedged across the throat of the tube. The electron filaments were destroyed, but the backplates of telex crystal were still whole.

The tubes themselves were sound, neither belled, warped nor cracked, and apparently the field coils were not burnt out. Holderlin surmised that a small charge of vanzitrol had been exploded in each.

He could not recall seeing any spare linings aboard, but to make sure he ransacked the ship—to no avail. However, the Naval Regulation Lining Oven and a supply of flux was in its place as provided by Article 80 of the Astronautic Code, a law from the early days of space-flight, when durable linings were unknown.

Then every ship carried dozens of spares—yet often as not these would burn out or split in the heat and pressure, and the ship would be forced to land on a convenient planet and mold another supply. Now Holderlin's concern was to find a bed of clean clay.

The ground at his feet was covered by the black dust. Perhaps, if he dug, he might find clay.

As he stood by the jets, Holderlin heard a heavy shuffling tread through the forest. He ran back to the entrance port, knowing that on strange planets prudence and agility are better safeguards than a needle-beam and steel armor.

The creature of the footsteps passed close beside the ship, a thin shambling being fifteen feet high, vaguely manlike, with a spider's gaunt construction. The arms and legs were skin and bone, the skin was greenish-black, the face peculiarly long and vacant.

It had a fierce shock of reddish hair at the back of its head, the eyes were bulging milky orbs, the ears were wide and extended. It passed the *Perseus* with hardly a glance and showed neither awe nor interest.

"Hey!" cried Holderlin, jumping to the ground. "*Come here!*"

The thing paused a moment to regard him dully through the red light, then slowly shambled off in its original direction, stirring up black clouds of dust. It disappeared through the feathery black jungle.

Holderlin returned to the problem of repairing the tubes. He must find clay enough to mold four new linings—three or four hundred pounds. He brought a spade from the ship and dug into the surface.

He worked half an hour and turned up nothing but hot black humus. And the deeper he dug, the thicker and tougher grew the roots of the fungus trees. He gave up in disgust.

AS HE climbed, sweating and dusty, from his hole, a little breeze raced along the top of the jungle stirring the fronds, and in the black fog which floated down, Holderlin discovered the origin of the black powder at his feet—spawn.

He must find clay, clean yellow clay, the nearer the better. He did not fancy carrying this clay on his shoulder any great distance. He looked to where the lifeboat dangled by its nose from the bow of the *Perseus*.

He saw that the shackle, with the entire weight of the lifeboat hanging on it, was locked. Holderlin scratched his head. He would have to balance the boat on the gravity units, releasing the shackle from all strain, to remove it.

But when he finally poised the boat in mid-air and climbed out on the nose, he discovered that his shift of position had weighted the bow and that if he unscrewed the shackle, the boat very likely would nose down and throw him to the ground.

Cursing both shackle and lifeboat, Holderlin let the boat hang against the hull as before and made his way to the ground. He entered the ship and outfitted himself with a sack, a light spade, a canteen of water and spare charges for his respirator.

“Aboard the *Perseus!* Aboard the *Perseus!* Respond, *Perseus!*”

Holderlin chuckled grimly and sat down beside the speaker.

“Aboard the *Perseus!*” came the call again. “This is Captain Creed speaking. If you are alive and listening, respond immediately. You have bested us fair and square, and we hold no grudge. But no matter how you reached this planet you cannot go farther.

“A detector screen surrounds you, and we will heterodyne any distress call you broadcast.”

Evidently Captain Creed had not yet surmised who had run off with his ship, or how it had been accomplished. Another voice broke in, harder and sharper.

“Respond immediately,” said the new voice, “giving your position, and you will receive a share in the venture. If you do not, we shall know how to act when we find you, and we will find you if it means searching the planet foot by foot!”

All during this pronouncement, the strength of the radio carrier wave had increased rapidly, and now Holderlin heard a low mutter, rapidly waxing to a roar. Running to the port, he spied the black pirate ship sweeping toward him across the green sky, just under the canopy of many-colored clouds.

Almost overhead the brake-blasts spewed forward, and the ship slowed in its majestic course. Trapped—thought Holderlin. With racing pulse he leapt for the lifeboat. The shackle he’d blast away with his needle-beam!

But the black ship passed across the mountain, where it slowly sank from sight, sunlight glinting from its sides. Holderlin breathed easily again. This world was small, and the mountain made a prominent landmark. Probably the same reasons that had brought him here to hide, led them here to seek him.

At least he knew where his enemies were stationed, a matter of some advantage. How to escape them, he as yet had no notion. They seemed invulnerable with a fast well-armed ship against his wrecked hulk, and certainly no less than thirty or forty in the crew.

Holderlin shrugged. First he must repair the tubes. Then he would try his luck at winning clear. And if he could bring that scented cargo only as far as Laroknik on Gavnad, the sixth of Pelta Aquila, the universe lay open to him.

He’d buy a space-yacht, a villa on Fan, the Pleasure Planet. He’d buy an asteroid and create a world to his whim, as did the Empire’s millionaires.

Holderlin put aside his dreaming. He took his sack and plodded off through the black dust in the direction of the mountain, seeking clay. A half mile from the ship, the feathery black canopy overhead thinned, and he entered a clearing.

Within this clearing moved a score of the tall manlike creatures. But their hair was not reddish like that of the creature that had passed him in the wood. It was greenish black. They stood busy with an enormous beast, evidently domesticated.

This had a great round body, as big as a house, supported on a circle of wide arching legs. With two long tentacles it stuffed the black tree-fronds into a maw on top of its hulk. Below hung a number of teats at which the black things worked, squirting a thin green liquid into pots.

HOLDERLIN passed through the clearing, full in the red sunglow, but beyond a few dull glances, they took no heed of him. Continuing a mile or so, he came to the edge of the forest and the steep rises of the mountains.

Almost at his feet he found what he sought. In the diminished gravity he loaded into his sack a great deal more than he might have carried on Earth—perhaps a half of his needs—and set out in return.

But as he waded through the black dust the sack grew heavy, and by the time he reached the clearing where the natives tended their beast, his arms and his back ached.

He stood resting, watching the placid natives at their work. It occurred that possibly one of them might be induced to serve him.

“Hey—*you!*!” he called to the nearest, as best he could through the respirator. “Come here!”

This one looked at Holderlin without interest.

“Come here!” he called again, although plainly the creature could not understand him. “I need some help. I’ll give you—” he fumbled in his pockets and pulled out a small signal mirror—“this.”

He displayed it, and presently the native shambled across the glade to him. It stooped to take the mirror, and a hint of interest came over the long doleful face.

“Now take this,” said Holderlin, giving over the sack of clay, “and follow me.”

At last the creature understood what was required of him, and with no show of either zeal or reluctance, took the bag in its rickety arms and shuffled along behind Holderlin to the ship. When they arrived. Holderlin went within and brought out a length of shiny chain, and showed it to his helper.

“One more trip, understand? One more trip. Let’s go.” The creature obediently followed him.

Holderlin dug the clay, loaded the bag into the native’s arms.

Above them came the sound of voices, footsteps, scuffling and grating on the rock. Holderlin crept for cover. The native stood stupidly, holding the sack of clay.

Three figures came into sight, two of them, panting through respirators—Blaine and a tall man whose pointed ears and high-arched eyebrows proclaimed Trankli blood. The third was a native with a red mop of hair.

“What’s this?” cried the Trankli half-breed, spying Holderlin’s helper. “That sack is—”

They were the last words he spoke. A needle-beam chattered and cut him down. Blaine whirled about, grabbing for his own weapon. A voice brought him up short.

“Drop it, Blaine! You’re as good as dead!”

Blaine slowly dropped his hands to his sides, glaring madly in the direction of the voice, his malformed lip twitching. Holderlin stepped from the shadow into the scarlet sunlight, and his face was as ruthless as death itself.

“Looking for me?”

He walked over and took Blaine’s needle-beam. He noted the native’s reddish mop of hair. This was the one that had passed him in the woods, was evidently in league with his enemies.

The needle-beam spoke once more, and the tall black body crumpled like broken jack-straws. Holderlin’s worker watched impassively.

“Can’t have any tale-bearers,” said Holderlin, turning his ice-blue eyes on Blaine.

“Why don’t you give up, Holderlin?” snarled Blaine. “You can’t get away alive.”

“Do you think you’ll outlive me?” mocked Holderlin. “What’s that you’ve got? A radio, hey? I’ll take that.” He did so. “The native was taking you to the *Perseus*, and you were going to flash back the position. Right?”

“That’s right,” admitted Blaine sourly, wondering at what moment he was to be killed.

Holderlin mused.

“What ship are you in?”

“The *Maetho*—Killer Donahue’s. You can’t get away, Holderlin. Not with Donahue after you.”

“We’ll see,” said Holderlin shortly.

So it was Killer Donahue’s *Maetho*! Holderlin had heard tales of Donahue—a slight man of perhaps forty years, with dark hair and a pair of black eyes which saw around corners and into men’s minds. He had a droll clown’s face, but past deeds of blood and loot did not echo the humor of his countenance.

Holderlin thought a moment, staring at the flaccid Blaine. The native stood uninterestedly holding the clay.

“Well, you wanted to see the *Perseus*,” Holden said at last. “Start moving.” He gestured with the needle-beam.

Blaine went slowly, sullenly.

“Do you want to die now,” inquired Holderlin, “or are you going to do as I say?”

“You got the gun,” growled Blaine. “I got no say at all.”

“Good,” said Holderlin. “Then move faster. And tonight we’ll cook linings for the steering jets.” He motioned to the waiting native. With Blaine ahead, they plodded off toward the ship.

“What’s over the mountain? Donahue’s hideout?” Holderlin asked.

BLAINE nodded dourly, then decided he had nothing to lose by truckling to Holderlin.

“He gets thame-dust here, sells it on Fan.”

Thame was an aphrodisiac powder.

“The natives collect it, bring it in little pots. He gives them salt for it. They love salt.”

Holderlin was silent, saving his energy for plowing the black dust.

“Suppose you did get away,” Blaine presently put forward, “you never could sell those oils anywhere. One whiff of sorang and you’d have the Tellurian Corps of Investigation on your neck.”

“I’m not selling them,” said Holderlin. “Think I’m a fool? What do you think I got that certification of shipwreck for? I’m going to claim salvage. That’s ninety per cent of the value of ship and cargo, by law.”

Blaine was silent.

When at last they arrived, weary and begrimed with black dust, the native dropped the sack and held out a gangling arm.

“*Fawp, fawp,*” it said.

Holderlin looked at him in puzzlement.

“It wants salt,” said Blaine, still intent on ingratiating Holderlin. “They do anything for salt.”

“Is that so?” said Holderlin. “Well, we’ll go in the galley and find some salt.”

So Holderlin gave the native the bit of chain and a handful of salt and dismissed it. He turned back to Blaine and gave him the radio.

“Call up Creed or Donahue and tell them that the native says you won’t reach the ship till tomorrow night—it’s that far off.”

Blaine hesitated only an instant, long enough for Holderlin to lay a significant hand on his needle-beam. He did as was told. He called Creed, and Creed seemed satisfied with the information.

“Tell him you won’t call again till tomorrow night,” said Holderlin. “Say that’s because Holderlin might catch an echo of the beam from the mountain.”

Blaine did so.

“Good,” said Holderlin. “Blaine. we’re going to get along very well. Maybe I won’t even kill you when I’m done with you.”

Blaine swallowed nervously. He disliked this kind of talk. Holderlin stretched his arms.

“Now we’ll make tube linings. And because you ruined the last set, you’ll do most of the work.”

All night they baked linings in the atomic furnaces, Blaine, as Holderlin had promised, working the hardest. His bald head glistened in the glow from the furnace.

As soon as the linings were finished—no longer clay, but heavy metallic tubes—Holderlin clamped them in place. And when the angry little sun came over the horizon, the *Perseus* was once more in condition to navigate.

With Blaine’s help, Holderlin unshackled the lifeboat from the hull and brought it to the ground beside the *Perseus*. Then Holderlin locked Blaine in a storage locker.

“You’re lucky,” he observed. “You can sleep. I have to work.” Holderlin had seen a ten-pound can of vanzitrol in the *Perseus* armory a compound stable chemically, but uncertain atomically. Holderlin

ladled about a pound into a paper sack, enough to blast the *Perseus* clear through the planet.

He found a detonator and, entering the lifeboat, took off. Feeling safe from observation after Blaine's information, he skimmed low over the black jungle until, about thirty miles from the *Perseus*, he found a clearing which suited him, not too large, not too small.

He landed and buried the vanzitrol and the detonator in the center. Then he returned to the *Perseus* and slept for four or five hours.

When he awoke, he aroused Blaine. They got in the lifeboat, flew to the mined clearing. Holderlin set the lifeboat down two hundred yards out in the jungle.

"Now Blaine," he said, "you're to call Creed and tell him you've found the *Perseus*. Tell him to take a bearing on the radio beam and come at once. Tell him there's a clearing handy for him to land in."

"Then what?" asked Blaine doubtfully.

"Then you'll wait in the clearing until the *Maetho* is about to land. After that I'll give you a choice. If you want to return aboard the *Maetho*, you can stay where you are. If you want to stay with me, you'll run like mad for the lifeboat. Suit yourself."

Blaine did not answer, but a suspicious look crept into his eyes, and his lips curled craftily.

"Send the message," said Holderlin.

Blaine did so, and Holderlin was satisfied. They had cornered Holderlin in the *Perseus*, said Blaine, and Mordang, the Trankli half-breed, was holding him while Blaine radioed.

"Very good, Blaine!" came back Creed's voice. Then Donahue asked a few sharp questions. Had the *Perseus* Crashed? No, replied Blaine, she was sound. Could the *Perseus* bring her needle-beam to bear on the clearing? No, the clearing was quite safe, a half mile astern of the *Perseus*. Donahue ordered Blaine to wait in the clearing for the ship.

Twenty minutes later Holderlin, hidden in the jungle, and Blaine standing nervously in the clearing, saw the hulk of the *Maetho* come drifting overhead.

IT HOVERED about five hundred yards above. Blaine, nakedly caught in the red sunlight, waved an arm to the ship at Holderlin's brittle command.

There was a pause. The cautious Donahue apparently was inspecting the situation.

Presently Holderlin, waiting tensely at the edge of the forest, saw a small scout boat leave the *Maetho*, drift down toward the clearing. His mouth tightened. He cursed once, bitterly.

This meant either Creed or Donahue had smelled a rat. His plan could not succeed—he'd have to move fast to escape with his skin! Blaine also knew the jig was up, was uncertain which way to jump.

He decided that under the circumstances Holderlin offered the least immediate danger, and casually began to leave the clearing. At once Donahue's voice crackled from a loud speaker.

"Blaine! Stay where you are!"

Blaine broke into a frightened run, but the black dust hampered him. From the *Maetho* a needle-beam spoke, and amid a great puff of black dust, Blaine exploded to his component atoms.

Holderlin was already to the lifeboat. A slim chance remained that the lifeboat on landing would miss

the mine, and the *Maetho* would land and be blown to scrap. But this he doubted, as the detonator was sensitive, the clearing small.

An air-rending blast as he entered his boat assured him he was right. The ground swayed like jelly, and a hail of earth, rocks, bits of trees spattered far over the jungle. The *Maetho* was tossed upward like a toy balloon. A tremendous choking pall of black dust thickened the sky.

Holderlin jerked his lifeboat into the air and dashed away, low to the ground, through the trees. He drove for his life, threading the trees as best he might, crashing through those he could not dodge.

Nor was he too early, for all the *Maetho's* armament had opened a savage fire on the jungle, blasting at each square yard. Twice million-watt bolts missed him by feet.

After rocking minutes he gained clear of the area, and slowing his mad flight, wove a more careful course through the trees.

When the *Maetho* was finally finished, the jungle lay torn into great craters and tangled rubbish for miles around. Holderlin, gingerly raising the boat so he could peer through the tree tops, saw the great sullen shape of the war-ship winging back across the mountain to its base. Over the clearing towered a black sky-filling cloud.

He returned to the *Perseus*, and sat brooding in his quarters. His bolt seemed to be shot, and it would only be a matter of hours before Creed and Donahue found another native to guide them to his ship.

He sprawled on his bunk, hands behind his head. A nucleus of information Blaine had given him suddenly blossomed to a plan of action. He got up, spooned some more vanzitrol from the can, gathered up a few sacks of salt from the galley, took off in the lifeboat.

Three or four hours later, with night fast falling across the black forest he returned, and there was a spring in his walk, a triumphant set to his jaw.

Holderlin went to the televue and boldly sent forth a call.

"Aboard the *Maetho*! Creed or Donahue, come in! *Maetho*, come in!" The screen flickered to life at once. There was Donahue, and behind him the black bearded face of Captain Creed.

"Well," said Donahue crisply. "What do you want?"

Holderlin grinned. "Nothing. In about two minutes I'm blasting your ship to bits. If you enjoy life, you'll get clear."

"What's this?" Donahue's voice snapped like breaking wood. "Are you trying to bluff me?"

"You'll know in two minutes," responded Holderlin. "Three of the pots of thame-dust you took aboard today are loaded with vanzitrol. I've got a gamma-ray detonator you can't jam. Now! You've two minutes to get clear."

Donahue whirled, cut in the ship's loud speaker.

"Abandon ship! All hands!" he shouted. "*Get clear!*"

Then like a cat, he whirled about. Holderlin watched in interest. Captain Creed was striding for the door. He met Donahue's eyes, and saw murder. He stopped in his tracks and slowly turned to face Donahue.

Donahue began talking, and Holderlin saw he was not sane. Obscenities poured from his lips.

“You white-faced dog, you’ve ruined me!” screamed Donahue in a high-pitched crazy voice, and his thin body was as tense as an epileptic’s.

“Let’s leave the ship and argue later,” Creed suggested coolly.

“You’ll stay here, you fat filth!” cried Donahue, and whipped out his needle-beam.

Creed fired his sleeve gun, and Donahue fell to the ground, screaming, his shoulder mangled.

He picked up the needle-beam with his left hand and began throwing wild shots at Creed. Creed crouched behind the radio locker, unable to gain the door. A bolt smashed the televue feeder lines. The screen went dark.

Holderlin sat looking at his watch. He held one hand poised over a little black key.

Twenty seconds, ten seconds, eight seconds, seven, six, five, four, three, two—“I’ll give them five seconds more.” he told himself. One—two—three—four—five! He snapped closed the key, and sat like a statue, waiting for the shock from across the mountain.

Whoom!

Holderlin stood up, a grin on his face. He sealed all the ports and sat himself at the controls. Ahead of him lay a busy week, wherein he must do the work of four men. He cracked back the throttle, and took off for Laroknik on Gavnad.

The End.

Notes and proofing history

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