

SPACE STATION #1



FRANK BELKNAP LONG

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INTRIGUE IN EARTH'S OUTER ORBIT

Tremendous and glittering, the Space Station floated up out of the Big Dark. Lieutenant Corrison had come to see its marvels, but he soon found himself entrapped in its unsuspected terrors.

For the grim reality was that some deadly outer-space power had usurped control of the great artificial moon. A lovely woman had disappeared; passengers were being fleeced and enslaved; and, using fantastic disguises, imposters were using the Station for their own mysterious ends.

Pursued by unearthly monsters and hunted with super-scientific cunning, Corrison struggles to unmask the mystery. For upon his success depended his life, his love and the future of Earth itself.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

CORRISTON

He saw all the sights of the Space Station ... in fact, he saw too much....

HAYES

His decision would mean the beginning or the end for a world.

CLKEY

This bodyguard needed special protection himself.

CLEMENT

Sometimes it seemed as if he were leading a double life.

HENLEY

With him for a friend one didn't need an enemy.

HELEN RAMSEY

Her father had made her a virtual prisoner.

1

It was a life-and-death struggle—cruel, remorseless, one-sided. Corrison was breathing heavily. He was in total darkness, dodging the blows of a killer. His adversary was as lithe as a cat, muscular and dangerous. He had a knife and he was using it, slashing at Corrison when Corrison came close, then leaping back and lashing out with a hard-knuckled fist.

Corrison could hear the swish of the man's heels as he pivoted, could judge almost with split-second timing when the next blow would come. He was bleeding from a cut on his right shoulder, and there was a tumultuous throbbing at his temples, an ache in his groin.

The fact that he had no weapon put him at a terrifying disadvantage. He had been close to death before, but never in so confined a space or in such close proximity to a man who had certainly killed once and would not hesitate to kill again.

His determination to survive was pitted against what appeared to be sheer brute strength fortified by cunning and a far-above-average agility. He began slowly to retreat, backing away until a massive steel girder stopped him. He was battling dizziness now and his heart had begun a furious pounding.

He found himself slipping sideways along the girder, running his hands over its smooth, cold surface. To his sweating palms the surface seemed as chill as the lid of a coffin, but he refused to believe that it could trap him irretrievably. The girder had to end somewhere.

The killer was coming close again, his shoes making a scraping sound in the darkness, his breathing just barely audible. Corrison edged still further along the girder. Inch by inch he moved parallel to it, fighting off his dizziness, making a desperate effort to keep from falling. The wetness on his shoulder was unnerving, the absence of pain incredible. How seriously could a man be stabbed without feeling any pain at all? He didn't know. But at least his shoulder wasn't paralyzed. He could move his arm freely, flex the muscles of his back.

How unbelievably cruel it was that a ship could move through space with the stability of a completely stationary object. How unbelievably cruel at this moment, when the slightest lurch might have saved him.

The girder was stationary and immense, and in his tormented inward vision he saw it as a strand in a gigantic steel cobweb, symbolizing the grandeur of what man could accomplish by routine compulsion alone.

In frozen helplessness Corrison tried to bring his thoughts into closer accord with reality, to view his peril in a saner light. But what was happening to him was as hard to relate to immediate reality as a line half remembered from a play. *See how the blood of Caesar followed it, as if rushing out of doors to be resolved if Brutus so unkindly knocked or no....*

But the killer wasn't Brutus. He was unknown and invisible and if there had been any Brutuslike nobility in him, it hardly seemed likely that he would have chosen for his first victim a wealthy girl's too talkative bodyguard and for his second Corrison himself.

The killer was within arm's reach again when the barrier that had trapped Corrison fell away abruptly. He reeled back, swayed dizzily, and experienced such wild elation that he cried out in unreasoning triumph. Swiftly he retreated backwards, not fully realizing that no real respite had been granted him. He was free only to recoil a few steps, to crouch and weave about. Almost instantly the killer was closing in again, and this time there was no escape.

Another metal girder stopped Corrison in midretreat, cutting across his shoulders like a sharp-angled priming rod, jolting and sobering him.

For an eternity now he could do nothing but wait. An eternity as brief as a dropped heartbeat and as long as the cycle of renewal and rebirth of worlds in the flaming vastness of space. Everything became impersonal suddenly: the darkness of the ships' between-deck storage compartment; the Space Station toward which the ship was traveling; the Martian deserts he had dreamed about as a boy.

The killer spoke then, for the first time. His voice rang out in the darkness, harsh with contempt and rage. It was in some respects a surprising voice, the voice of an educated man. But it was also a voice that had in it an accent that

Corrison had heard before in verbal documentaries and hundreds of newsreels; in clinical case histories, microfilm recorded, in penal institutions, on governing bodies, and wherever men were in a position to destroy others—or perhaps themselves. It was the voice of an unloved, unwanted man.

The voice said: "You're done for, my friend. I don't know what the Ramsey girl told you, but you came looking for me, and it's too late now for any kind of compromise."

"I wasn't looking for a deal," Corrison said. "If it's any satisfaction to you, Miss Ramsey told me nothing. But I saw a man killed; and I couldn't find her afterwards. I think you know what happened to her. Knife me, if you can. I'll go down fighting."

"That's easy to say. Maybe you *didn't* come looking for me. But you know too much now to go on living. Unless you—wait a minute! You mentioned a deal. If you're lying about the Ramsey girl and will tell me where she is, I might not kill you."

"I wasn't lying," Corrison said.

"Hell ... you're really asking for it."

"I'm afraid I am."

"It won't be a pleasant way to die."

"Any way is unpleasant. But I'm not dead yet. Killing me may not be as easy as you think."

"It will be easy enough. This time you won't get past me."

Corrison knew that the conversation was about to end unless something unexpected happened. And he didn't think there was much chance of that. Had he been clasping a metal tool, he would have swung hard enough to kill with it. But he wasn't clasping anything. He was crouching low, and suddenly he leapt straight forward into the darkness.

His head collided with a bony knee and his hands went swiftly out and around invisible ankles. He tightened his grip, half expecting the knife to descend and bury itself in his back. But it didn't. The other had been taken so completely by surprise that he simply went backwards, suddenly, and with a strangled oath.

Instantly Corrison was on top of him. He shifted his grip, releasing both of the struggling man's ankles and remorselessly seizing his wrists. He raised his right knee and brought it savagely downward, again and again and again. A cry of pain echoed through the darkness. The killer, crying out in torment, tried to twist free.

For an instant the outcome remained uncertain, a see-saw contest of strength. Then Corrison had the knife and the struggle was over.

Corrison made a mistake then of relaxing a little. Instantly, the killer rolled sideways, broke Corrison's grip, and was on his feet. He did not attempt to retaliate in any way. He simply disappeared into the darkness, breathing so loudly that Corrison could tell when the distance between them had dwindled to the vanishing point.

Corrison sat very still in the darkness, holding on tightly to the knife. His triumph had been unexpected and complete. It had been close to miraculous. Strange that he should be aware of that and yet feel only a dark horror growing in his mind. Strange that he should remember so quickly again the horror of a man gasping out his life with a thorned barb protruding from his side.

It had begun a half-hour earlier in the general passenger cabin. It had begun with a wonder and a rejoicing.

Tremendous and glittering, the Space Station had come floating up out of the Big Dark like a golden bubble on an onrushing tidal wave. It had hovered for an instant in the precise center of the viewscreen, its steep, climbing trail shedding radiance in all directions. Then it had descended vertically until it almost filled the lower half of the screen, and finally was lost to view in a wilderness of space.

When it appeared for the second time, it was larger still and its shadow was a swiftly widening crescent blotting out the nearer stars.

"There it is!" someone whispered.

It had been unreasonably quiet in the general passenger cabin, and for a moment no other sound was audible. Then the whisper was caught up and amplified by a dozen awestruck voices. It became a murmur of amazement and of wonder, and as it increased in volume, the screen seemed to glow with

an almost unbelievable brightness.

Everyone was aware of the brightness. But how much of it was subjective no one knew or cared. To a man in the larger darkness of space, a dead sea bottom on Mars, or a moon-landing ship wrapped in eternal darkness on a lonely peak in the Lunar Apennines may glow with a noonday splendor.

"They said a space station that size could never be built," David Corrison said, leaning abruptly forward in his chair. "They quoted reams of statistics: height above the center of the Earth in kilometers, orbital velocity, relation of mass to maneuverability. The experts had a field day. They went far out on a limb to convince anyone who would listen that a station weighing thousands of tons would never get past the blueprint stage. But the men who built it had enough pride and confidence in human skill to achieve the impossible."

The girl at Corrison's side looked startled for an instant, as though the ironclad assurance of so young a man was as much of a surprise as his unexpected nearness, and somehow even more disquieting older.

She was certainly somewhat older than he was—about three or four years. She was an exceptionally pretty girl, her fair hair fluffed out from under a blue beret, her ship's lounge jacket a youth-accentuating miracle of casual tailoring that would have looked well on a woman of any age. She had the kind of eyes Corrison liked best of all in a woman: longlashed, observant, and bright with glints of humor.

She had the kind of mouth he liked too—a mouth which suggested that she could be, by turns, capricious, level-headed, and audaciously friendly with strangers without in any way inviting familiarity. There was a certain paradoxical timidity in her gaze too. It was manifesting itself now in an obvious reluctance to be startled too abruptly by space engineering talk from a young man who had taken her companionability for granted and who was obviously given to snap judgments.

She brushed back the hair on her right temple, her brown eyes upraised to study Corrison more closely.

He hoped that she would realize upon reflection that she was behaving foolishly. He had taken a certain liberty in talking to her as he would have talked to an old acquaintance in a long-awaited meeting of minds. On the big

screen a space station that couldn't be built was sweeping in toward the ship with eighty-five years of unparalleled scientific progress behind it.

First had come the Earth satellites, eight of them in their neat little orbits. They had used low-energy fuels, had kept close to the Earth, and no one had seriously expected them to do more than record weather information and relay radio signals. For fifteen years they could be seen with small telescopes and even with the unaided eye on bright, cloudless nights in both hemispheres.

First had come these small, relatively unimportant artificial moons and then, on a night in October 1972, the first space platform had been launched. Soon the sky above the Earth was swarming with radar warning platforms, a dozen men to operate them, and carrier-based jets equipped with formidable atomic warheads.

Nevertheless, how could anyone have known that in another twenty years interplanetary space flight would become a war-averting reality? How could anyone have known that by the year 2007 there would be human settlements on Mars and by the year 2022 the actual transportation to Mars of city-building materials?

2

Corrison was beginning to feel uncomfortable. He wished that the girl would say something instead of just continuing to stare at him. She seemed to be interested in his uniform. She appeared to be gazing at him interrogatively, as if she wanted to know more about him before promising anything.

He wondered what her unconscious purpose was. Did she see in him the quiet, determined type who was all set to accomplish something important. Or was she regretting he wasn't the hard-living, cynical type who had been everywhere and done everything?

Well, one way to find out was to be himself: a man average in every way, but with a hard core of idealism in his nature, a creative mind and enough independence and self-assurance to give a good account of himself in any struggle which brought his central beliefs under fire or placed them in long-range jeopardy.

And so Corrison suddenly found himself talking about the Station again.

"Not many people have grasped the importance of it yet," he said. "One station will service our needs, instead of fifty-seven, one tremendous central terminal and re-fueling depot for *all* of the ships. Do you realize what that could mean?"

Abruptly there was a startling warmth in the girl's eyes, an unmistakable look of interest and encouragement.

"Just what could it mean?" she asked.

"Any kind of steady growth across the years leads to centralization, to bigness. And that bigness becomes time-hallowed and magnified out of all proportion to its original significance. The Space Station is no exception. It started with the primitive Earth satellites and branched out into fifty-seven larger stations. Now it's tremendous, a single central station that can impose its influence in ship clearance matters with an almost unanswerable finality."

A shadow had come into the girl's eyes. "But not completely without checks

and balances. The Earth Federation can challenge its supremacy at any point."

"Yes, and I'm glad that the challenge remains a factor to be reckoned with. As matters stand now the Station's prestige can't be implemented with what might well become the iron hand of an intolerable tyranny. As matters stand, the Station is actually a big step forward. People once talked of centralization as if it were some kind of indecent human bogey. It isn't at all. It's simply a fluid means to an end, a necessary commitment if a society is to achieve greatness. If the authority behind the Station respects scientific truth and human dignity—if it remains empirically minded—I shall serve it to the best of my ability. No one knows for sure whether what is good outbalances what is bad in any human institution, or any human being. A man can only give the best of himself to what he believes in."

"Sorry to interrupt," an amused voice said, "but the captain wants you to join him in a last-minute celebration: a toast, a press photograph—that sort of nonsense. A six hour trip, and he hasn't even been introduced to you. But if you don't appear at his table in ten minutes he'll throw the book at me."

Corrison looked up in surprise at the big man confronting them. He had approached so unobtrusively that for an instant Corrison was angry; but only for an instant. When he took careful stock of the fellow his resentment evaporated. There was a cordiality about him which could not have been counterfeited. It reached from the breadth of his smile to his gray eyes puckered in amusement. He was really big physically, in a wholly genial and relaxed way, and his voice was that of a man who could walk up to a bar, pay a bill and leave an everlasting impression of hearty good nature behind him.

"Well, young lady?" he asked.

"I'm not particularly keen about the idea, Jim, but if the captain has actually iced the champagne, it would be a shame to disappoint him."

Corrison was aware that his companion was getting to her feet. The interruption had been unexpected, but much to his surprise he found himself accepting it without rancor. If he lost her for a few moments he could quickly enough find her again; and somehow he felt convinced that the big man was not a torch-carrying admirer.

"I'll have to stop off in the ladies' lounge first," she said. She had opened her vanity case and was making a swift inventory of its contents. "Two shades of lipstick, but no powder! Oh, well."

She smiled at the big man and then at Corrison, gesturing slightly as she did so.

"We've just been discussing the Station," she said. "This gentleman hasn't told me his name—"

"Lieutenant David Corrison," Corrison said quickly. "My interest in the Station is tied in with my job. I've just been assigned to it in the very modest capacity of ship's inspection officer, recruit status."

The big man stared at Corrison more intently, his eyes kindling with a sudden increase of interest. "Say, I wonder if you could spare me a few minutes. When my friends ask me I'd like to be able to talk intelligently about the terrific headaches the research people must have experienced right from the start. The expenditure of fuel alone...."

"See you in the Captain's cabin, Jim," the girl said.

She moved out from her chair, her expression slightly constrained. Was it just imagination, or had the big man's immoderate expansiveness grated on her and brought a look of displeasure to her young face? Corrison couldn't be sure, and his brow remained furrowed as he watched her cross the passenger cabin and disappear into the ladies' lounge.

"I'm Jim Clakey," the big man said.

Corrison reseated himself, a troubled indecision still apparent in his stare. Then gradually he found himself relaxing. He nodded up at the big man. "Sit down, Mr. Clakey," he said. "Ask me anything you want. Security imposes some pretty rigid restrictions, but I'll let you know when you start treading on classified ground."

Clakey sat down and crossed his long legs. He was silent for a moment. Then he said: "You know who she is, of course."

Corrison shook his head. "I'm afraid I haven't the slightest idea."

"She isn't traveling under her real name only because her father is a very sensible and cautious man. You'd be cautious too, perhaps, if you were

Stephen Ramsey."

Clakey's gaze had traveled to the ladies' lounge, and for an instant he seemed unaware of Corriston's incredulous stare.

"You mean I've actually been sitting here talking to Stephen Ramsey's daughter?"

"That's right," Clakey said, turning to grin amiably at Corriston. "And now you're talking to her personal bodyguard. I'm not surprised you didn't recognize her, though; very few people do. She doesn't like to have her picture taken. Her dad wouldn't object to that kind of publicity particularly, but she's even more cautious than he is."

The door of the ladies' lounge opened and two young women came out. They were laughing and talking with great animation and were quickly lost to view as other passengers changed their position in front of the viewscreen.

The door remained visible, however—a rectangle of shining whiteness only slightly encroached upon by dark blue drapes. Corriston found himself staring at it as his mind dwelt on the startling implications of Clakey's almost unbelievable statement.

"Biggest man on Mars," Clakey was saying. "Cornered uranium; froze out the original settlers. They're threatening violence, but their hands are tied. Everything was done legally. Ramsey lives in a garrisoned fortress and they can't get within twenty miles of him. He's a damned scoundrel with tremendous vision and foresight."

Corriston suddenly realized that he had made a serious psychological blunder in sizing up Clakey. The man was a blabbermouth. True, Corriston's uniform was a character recommendation which might have justified candor to a moderate extent. But Clakey was talking outrageously out of turn. He was becoming confidential about matters he had no right to discuss with anyone on such short acquaintance. Corriston suddenly realized that Clakey was slightly drunk.

"Look here," Corriston said. "You're talking like a fool. Do you know what you're saying?"

"Sure I know. Miss Ramsey is a golden girl. And I'm her bodyguard ... important trust ... sop to a man's egoism."

An astonishing thing happened then. Clakey fell silent and remained uncommunicative for five full minutes. Corrison had no desire to start him talking again. He was appalled and incredulous. He was debating the advisability of getting up with a frozen stare and a firm determination to take himself elsewhere when the crazy, loose-tongued fool leapt unexpectedly to his feet.

"She's taking too long!" he exclaimed. "It just isn't like her. She'd never keep the captain waiting."

As he spoke, another woman came out of the ladies' lounge. She was small, dark, very pretty, and she seemed a little embarrassed when she saw how intently Clakey was staring at her. Then a middle-aged woman came out, with a finely-modeled face, and a second, younger woman with haggard eyes and a sallow complexion who was in all respects the opposite of attractive.

"She's been in there for fifteen minutes," Clakey said, starting toward the lounge.

"It takes a good many women twice that long to apply makeup properly," Corrison pointed out. "I just don't see—"

"You don't know her," Clakey said, impatiently. "I may have to ask one of those women to go in after her."

"But why? You can't seriously believe she's in any danger. We both saw her go into the lounge. She made the decision on the spur of the moment and no one could have known about it in advance. No one followed her in. You were sitting right here watching the door."

But Clakey was already advancing across the cabin. He was reeling a little, and a dull flush had mounted to his cheekbones. He seemed genuinely alarmed. Corrison was about to follow him when something bright flashed through the air with a faint swishing sound.

A startled cry burst from Clakey's lips. He clutched at his side, staggered, and half-swung about, a look of incredulous horror in his eyes.

Corrison's mouth went dry. He stood very still, watching Clakey lose all control over his legs. The change in the stricken man's expression was ghastly. His cheeks had gone dead white, and now, as Corrison stared, a

spasm convulsed his features, twisting them into a horrible, unnatural caricature of a human face—a rigidly contorted mask with a blanched, wide-angled mouth and bulging eyes.

A passenger saw him and screamed. His knees had given way and his huge frame seemed to be coming apart at the joints. He straightened out on the deck, jerking his head spasmodically, propelling himself backwards by his elbows. Almost as if with conscious intent, his body arched itself, sank level with the floor, then arched itself again.

It was as though all of his muscles and nerves were protesting the violence that had been done to him, and were seeking by muscular contractions alone to dislodge the stiff, thorned horror protruding from his flesh.

He went limp and the barbed shaft ceased to quiver. Corrison had a nerve-shattering glimpse of a swiftly spreading redness just above Clakey's right hipbone. The entire barb turned red, as if its feathery spines had acquired a sudden, unnatural affinity for human blood.

Corrison started forward, then changed his mind. Several passengers had moved quickly to Clakey's side and were bending above him. Someone called out: "Get a doctor!"

Corrison turned abruptly and strode toward the ladies' lounge. Brushing aside such scruples as he ordinarily would have entertained, he threw open the door and went inside.

He called out: "Miss Ramsey?" When he received no answer he searched the lounge thoroughly. There was no one there. He was thinking fast now, desperately fast. He hadn't seen her come out and neither had Clakey. He'd seen four women come out: three young women and an elderly one. None of them faintly resembled the girl he'd been talking to.

The first young woman had emerged almost immediately. He remembered how intently Clakey had been watching the door. Clakey had sat down to discuss the Station with him, and in less than two minutes the first young lady had emerged. Then neither of them had taken their eyes from the door for five or six minutes. The second young lady had apparently known someone in the crowd. She had seemed annoyed by Clakey's persistent stare and had disappeared quickly. The elderly woman had looked her age. Her walk, her

carriage, the lines of her face had borne the unmistakable stamp of genteel aging, and the dignity inseparable from it. The last woman had been the drab creature.

Corrison had a poor memory for faces and he knew that he couldn't count on recognizing any of them—except perhaps the elderly woman—if he saw them again.

It was good that he could smile, even at his own inanities. It relieved tension. Almost instantly the smile vanished. His aspect became that of a man in deadly danger on the brink of a hundred foot precipice, a man completely in the dark and yet grimly determined not to go over the edge or take a single step in the wrong direction.

Where, he asked himself, do women ordinarily go when they vanish into thin air? Wasn't it pretty well established that ghosts were likely to follow the path of least resistance and fulfill obligations entered into in the flesh?

The captain's cabin! The captain would be disappointed if she failed to appear at least briefly at his table; and she had promised to do so. It was a wild, premeditated assault on the rational, but putting the irrational aspect of it aside, it was also realistic and reasonable. If by some incredible miracle she had eluded Clakey's vigilance and actually slipped from the lounge, she would almost certainly have gone straight to the captain's cabin.