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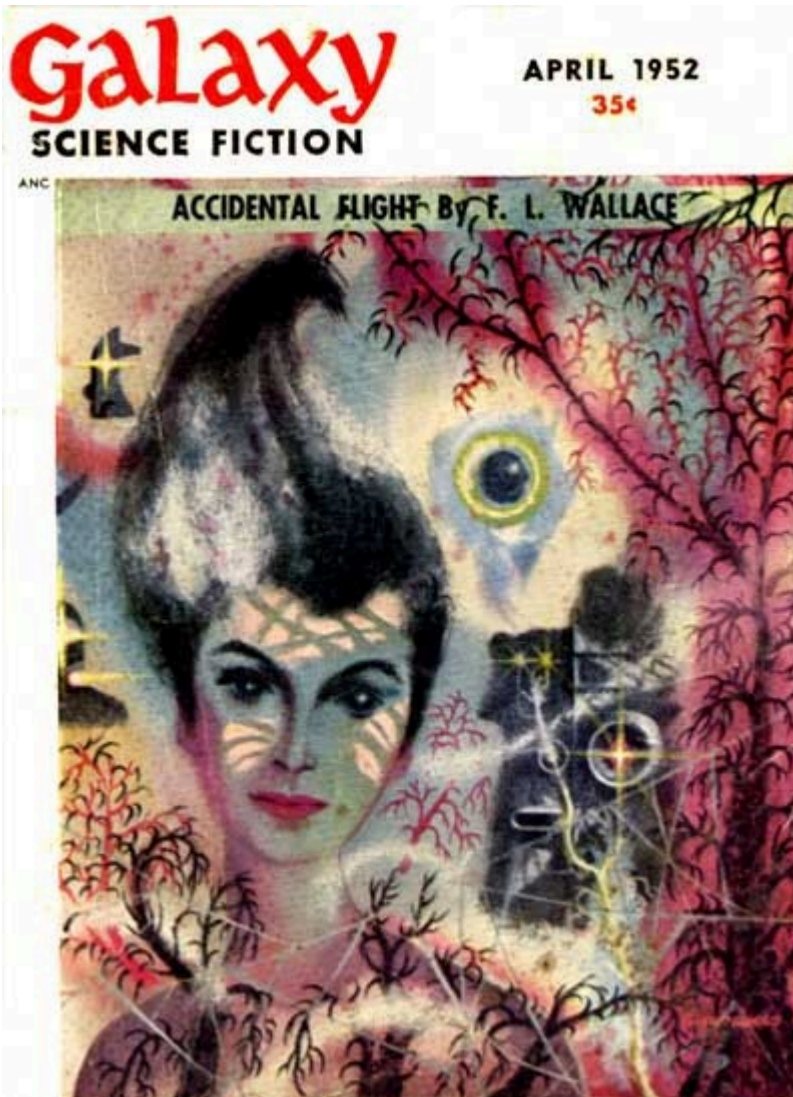
SCIENCE FICTION

APRIL 1952

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Accidental Flight

By F. L. WALLACE

Illustrated by Ed Alexander

*Outcasts of a society of physically perfect people, they couldn't stay
and they couldn't go home again—yet there had to be some escape
for them. Oddly enough, there was!*

C

ameron frowned intently at the top of the desk. It was difficult to concentrate under the circumstances. "Your request was turned over to the Medicouncil," he said. "After studying it, they reported back to the Solar Committee."

Docchi edged forward, his face literally lighting up.

Dr. Cameron kept his eyes averted; the man was damnably disconcerting. "You know what the answer is. A flat no, for the present."

Docchi leaned back. "We should have expected that," he said wearily.

"It's not entirely hopeless. Decisions like this can always be changed."

"Sure," said Docchi. "We've got centuries." His face was flushed—*blazing* would be a better description.

Absently, Cameron lowered the lights in the room as much as he could. It was still uncomfortably bright. Docchi was a nuisance.

"But why?" asked Docchi. "You know that we're capable. Why did they refuse?"

Cameron had tried to avoid that question. Now it had to be answered with blunt

brutality. "Did you think you would be chosen? Or Nona, or Jordan, or Anti?"

Docchi winced. "Maybe not. But we've told you that we're willing to abide by what the experts say. Surely from a thousand of us they can select one qualified crew."

"Perhaps so," said Cameron. He switched on the lights and resumed staring at the top of the desk. "Most of you are biocompensators. Ninety per cent, I believe. I concede that we ought to be able to get together a competent crew." He sighed. "But you're wasting your time discussing this with me. I'm not responsible for the decision. I can't do anything about it."

Docchi stood up. His face was colorless and bright.

Dr. Cameron looked at him directly for the first time. "I suggest you calm down.

Be patient and wait; you may get your chance."

"You wait," said Docchi. "We don't intend to."

The door opened for him and closed behind him.

Cameron concentrated on the desk. Actually he was trying to look through it. He wrote down the card sequence he expected to find. He opened a drawer and gazed at the contents, then grimaced in disappointment. No matter how many times he tried, he never got better than strictly average results. Maybe there was something to telepathy, but he hadn't found it yet.

He dismissed it from his mind. It was a private game, a method of avoiding involvement while Docchi was present. But Docchi was gone now, and he had better come up with some answers. The right ones.

He switched on the telecom. "Get me Medicouncilor Thorton," he told the robot operator. "Direct, if you can; indirect if you have to. I'll wait."

With an approximate mean diameter of thirty miles, the asteroid was listed on the charts as Handicap Haven. The regular inhabitants were willing to admit the handicap part of the name, but they didn't

call it haven. There were other terms, none of them suggesting sanctuary.

It was a hospital, of course, but even more like a convalescent home, *the permanent kind*. A healthy and vigorous humanity had built it for those few who were less fortunate. A splendid gesture, but, like many such gestures, the reality fell somewhat short of the original intentions.

The robot operator interrupted his thoughts. "Medicouncilor Thorton will speak to you."

The face of an older man filled the screen. "On my way to the satellites of Jupiter. I'll be in direct range for the next half hour." At such distance, transmission and reception were practically instantaneous. "You wanted to speak to me about the Solar Committee reply?"

"I do. I informed Docchi a few minutes ago."

"How did he react?"

"He didn't like it. As a matter of fact, he was mad all the way through."

"That speaks well for his mental resiliency."

"They all seem to have enough spirit, though, and nothing to use it on," said Dr.

Cameron. "I confess I didn't look at him often, in spite of the fact that he was quite presentable. Handsome, even, in a startling way."

Thorton nodded. "Presentable. That means he had arms."

"He did. Is that important?"

"I think it is. He expected a favorable reply and wanted to look his best. As nearly normal as possible."

"Trouble?"

"I don't see how," said the medicouncilor uncertainly. "In any event, not immediately. It will take them some time to get over the shock of refusal. They can't do anything, really. Individually they're helpless. Collectively—there aren't parts for a dozen sound bodies on the asteroid."

"I've looked over the records," said Dr. Cameron. "Not one accidental has ever *liked* being on Handicap Haven, and that covers quite a few years. But there has never been so much open discontent as there is now."

"Someone is organizing them. Find out who and keep a close watch."

"I know who. Docchi, Nona, Anti, and Jordan. But it doesn't do any good merely to watch them. I want your permission to break up that combination. Humanely,

of course."

"How do you propose to do it?"

"Docchi, for instance. With prosthetic arms he appears physically normal, except for that uncanny luminescence. That is repulsive to the average person.

Medically there's nothing we can do about it, but psychologically we might be able to make it into an asset. You're aware that Gland Opera is the most popular program in the Solar System. Telepaths, teleports, pyrotics and so forth are the heroes. All fake, of course: makeup and trick camera shots. But Docchi can be

made into a real live star. The death-ray man, say. When his face shines, men fall dead or paralyzed. He'd have a chance to return to normal society under conditions that would be mentally acceptable to him."

"Acceptable to him, perhaps, but not to society," reflected the medicouncilor.

"An ingenious idea, one which does credit to your humanitarian outlook. Only it won't work. You have Docchi's medical record, but you probably don't know his

complete history. He was an electrochemical engineer, specializing in cold lighting. He seemed on his way to a brilliant career when a particularly messy accident occurred. The details aren't important. He was badly mangled and tossed into a tank of cold lighting fluid by automatic machinery. It was some time before he was discovered.

"There was a spark of life left and we managed to save him. We had to amputate his arms and ribs practically to his spinal column. The problem of regeneration wasn't as easy as it usually is. We were able to build up a new rib case; that's as much as we could do. Under such conditions, prosthetic arms are merely ornaments. They can be fastened to him and they look all right, but he can't use them. He has no back or shoulder muscles to anchor them to.

"And add to that the adaptation his body made while he was in the tank. The basic cold lighting fluid, as you know, is semi-organic. It permeated every tissue in his body. By the time we got him, it was actually a necessary part of his metabolism. A corollary, I suppose, of the fundamental biocompensation theory."

The medicouncilor paused and shook his head. "I'm afraid your idea is out, Dr.

Cameron. I don't doubt that he would be successful on the program you mention.

But there is more to life on the outside than success. Can you picture the dead silence when he walks into a room of normal people?"

"I see," said Cameron, though he didn't, at least not eye to eye. The medicouncilor was convinced and there was nothing Cameron could do to alter

that conviction. "The other one I had in mind was Nona," he added.

"I thought so." Thorton glanced at the solar chronometer. "I haven't much time, but I'd better explain. You're new to the post and I don't think you've learned yet to evaluate the patients and their problems properly. In a sense, Nona is more impossible than Docchi. He was once a normal person. She never was. Her appearance is satisfactory; perhaps she's quite pretty, though you must remember that you're seeing her under circumstances that may make her seem more attractive than she really is.

"She can't talk or hear. She never will. She doesn't have a larynx, and it wouldn't help if we gave her one. She simply doesn't have the nervous system necessary

for speech or hearing. Her brain is definitely not structurally normal. As far as we're concerned, that abnormality is not in the nature of a mutation. It's more like an anomaly. Once cleft palates were frequent—prenatal nutritional

deficiencies or traumas. Occasionally we still run into cases like that, but our surgical techniques are always adequate. Not with Nona, however.

"She can't be taught to read or write; we've tried it. We dug out the old Helen Keller techniques and brought them up to date with no results. Apparently her mind doesn't work in a human fashion. We question whether very much of it works at all."

"That might be a starting point," said Cameron. "If her brain—"

"Gland Opera stuff," interrupted Thorton. "Or Rhine Opera, if you'll permit me to coin a term. We've thought of it, but it isn't true. We've tested her for every telepathic quality that the Rhine people list. Again no results. She has no special mental capacities. Just to make sure of that, we've given her periodic checkups.

One last year, in fact."

Cameron frowned in frustration. "Then it's your opinion that she's not able to survive in a normal society?"

"That's it," answered the medicouncilor bluntly. "You'll have to face the truth—

you can't get rid of any of them."

"With or without their cooperation, I'll manage," said Cameron.

"I'm sure you will." The medicouncilor's manner didn't ooze confidence. "Of course, if you need help we can send reinforcements."

The implication was clear enough. "I'll keep them out of trouble," Cameron promised.

The picture and the voice were fading. "It's up to you. If it turns out to be too difficult, get in touch with the Medicouncil...."

The robot operator broke in: "The ship is beyond direct telecom range. If you wish to continue the conversation, it will have to be relayed through the nearest main station. At present, that is Mars."

Aside from the time element, which was considerable, it wasn't likely that he would get any better answers than he could supply for himself. Cameron shook

his head. "We are through, thanks."

He got heavily to his feet. That wasn't a psychological reaction at all. He really was heavier. He made a mental note. He would have to investigate.

In a way they were pathetic—the patchwork humans, the half or quarter men and

women, the fractional organisms masquerading as people—an illusion which died hard for them. Medicine and surgery were partly to blame. Techniques were

too good, or not good enough, depending on the viewpoint.

Too good in that the most horribly injured person, if he were still alive, could be kept alive! Not good enough because a percentage of the injured couldn't be returned to society completely sound and whole. There weren't many like that; but there were some, and all of them were on the asteroid.

They didn't like it. At least they didn't like being *confined* to Handicap Haven. It wasn't that they wanted to go back to the society of the normals, for they realized how conspicuous they'd be among the multitudes of beautiful, healthy people on

the planets.

What the accidentals did want was ridiculous. They desired, they hoped, they petitioned to be the first to make the long, hard journey to Alpha and Proxima Centauri in rockets. Trails of glory for those that went; a vicarious share in it for those who couldn't.

Nonsense. The broken people, those without a face they could call their own, those who wore their hearts not on their sleeves, but in a blood-pumping chamber, those either without limbs or organs—or too many. The categories seemed endless.

The accidentals were qualified, true. In fact, of all the billions of solar citizens, *they alone could make the journey and return*. But there were other factors that ruled them out. The first point was never safe to discuss with them, especially if

the second had to be explained. It would take a sadistic nature that Cameron didn't possess.

D

occhi sat beside the pool. It was pleasant enough, a pastoral scene transplanted from Earth. A small tree stretched shade overhead. Waves lapped and made gurgling sounds against the sides. No plant life of any kind grew and no fish swam in the liquid. It looked like water, but it wasn't. It was acid. In it floated something that monstrously resembled a woman.

"They turned us down, Anti," Docchi said bitterly.

"Didn't you expect it?" the creature in the pool asked.

"I guess I didn't."

"You don't know the Medicouncil very well."

"Evidently I don't." He stared sullenly at the faintly blue fluid. "Why did they turn us down?"

"Don't you know?"

"All right, I know," he said. "They're pretty irrational."

"Of course, irrational. Let them be that way, as long as we don't follow their example."

"I wish I knew what to do," he said. "Cameron suggested we wait."

"Biocompensation," murmured Anti, stirring restlessly. "They've always said that. Up to now it's always worked."

"What else can we do?" asked Docchi. Angrily he kicked at an anemic tuft of grass. "Draw up another request?"

"Memorandum number ten? Let's not be naive about it. Things get lost so easily in the Medicouncil's filing system."

"Or distorted," grunted Docchi.

"Maybe we should give the Medicouncil a rest. They're tired of hearing us anyway."

"I see what you mean," said Docchi, rising.

"Better talk to Jordan about it."

"I intend to. I'll need arms."

"Good. I'll see you when you leave for far Centauri."

"Sooner than that, Anti. Much sooner."

Stars were beginning to wink. Twilight brought out shadows and tracery of the

structure that supported the transparent dome overhead. Soon controlled slow rotation would bring darkness to this side of the asteroid.

C

ameron leaned back and looked speculatively at the gravital engineer, Vogel. The man could give him considerable assistance, if he would. There was no reason why he shouldn't; but any man who had voluntarily remained on Handicap Haven as long as Vogel had was a doubtful quantity.

"Usually we maintain about half Earth-normal gravity," Cameron said. "Isn't that correct?"

Engineer Vogel nodded.

"It isn't important why those limits were set," Cameron continued. "Perhaps it's easier on the weakened bodies of the accidentals. There may be economic factors."

"No reason for those limits except the gravital units themselves," Vogel said.

"Theoretically it should be easy to get any gravity you want. Practically, though, we get between a quarter and almost full Earth gravity. Now take the fluctuations. The gravital computer is set at fifty per cent. Sometimes we get fifty per cent and sometimes seventy-five. Whatever it is, it just is and we have to be satisfied."

The big engineer shrugged. "I hear the units were designed especially for this asteroid," he went on. "Some fancy medical reason. Easier on the accidentals to have less gravity change, you say. Me, I dunno. I'd guess the designers couldn't help it and the reason was dug up later."

Cameron concealed his irritation. He wanted information, not a heart-to-heart confession. "All practical sciences try to justify whatever they can't escape but would like to. Medicine, I'm sure, is no exception." He paused thoughtfully.

"Now, there are three separate gravital units on the asteroid. One runs for forty-five minutes while the other two are idle. Then it cuts off and another takes over.

This is supposed to be synchronized. I don't have to tell you that it isn't. You felt your weight increase suddenly at the same time I did. What is wrong?"

"Nothing wrong," said the engineer. "That's what you get with gravital."

"You mean they're supposed to run that way? Overlapping so that for five minutes we have Earth or Earth-and-a-half gravity and then none?"

"It's not *supposed* to be that way," said Vogel. "But nobody ever built a setup like this that worked any better." He added defensively: "Of course, if you want, you can check with the company that makes these units."

"I'm not trying to challenge your knowledge, and I'm not anxious to make myself look silly. I have a sound reason for asking these questions. There is a possibility of sabotage."

The engineer's grin was wider than the remark seemed to require.

"All right," said Cameron tiredly. "Suppose you tell me why sabotage is so unlikely."

"Well," explained the gravital engineer, "it would have to be someone living here, and he wouldn't like it if he suddenly got double or triple gravity or maybe none at all. But there's another reason. Now take a gravital unit. Any gravital unit. Most people think of it as just that—a unit. It isn't really that at all. It has three parts.

"One part is a power source that can be anything as long as it's big enough. Our power source is a nuclear pile, buried deep in the asteroid. You'd have to take Handicap Haven apart to get to it. Part two is the gravital coil, which actually produces the gravity and is simple and just about indestructible. Part three is the gravital control. It calculates the relationship between the amount of power

flowing through the gravital coil and the strength of the created gravity field in any one microsecond. It uses the computed

relationship to alter the power flowing through in the next microsecond to get the same gravity. No change of

power, no gravity. I guess you could call the control unit a computer, as good a one as is made for any purpose."

The engineer rubbed his chin. "Fatigue," he continued. "The gravital control is an intricate computer that's subject to fatigue. That's why it has to rest an hour and a half to do forty-five minutes of work. Naturally they don't want anyone tinkering with it. It's non-repairable. Crack the case open and it won't work. But first you have to open it. Mind you, that can be done. But I wouldn't want to try it without a high-powered lab setup."

If it didn't seem completely foolproof, neither did it seem a likely source of trouble. "Then we can forget about the gravital units," said Cameron, arising.

"But what about hand weapons? Are there any available?"

"You mean toasters?"

"Anything that's lethal."

"Nothing. No knives even. Maybe a stray bar or so of metal." Vogel scratched his head. "There is something dangerous, though. Dangerous if you know how to take hold of it."

Instantly Cameron was alert. "What's that?"

"Why, the asteroid itself. You can't physically touch any part of the gravital unit.

But if you could somehow sneak an impulse into the computer and change the direction of the field...." Vogel was very grave. "You could pick up Handicap Haven and throw it anywhere you wanted. At the Earth, say. Thirty miles in diameter is a big hunk of rock."

It was this kind of information Cameron was looking for, though the engineer seemed to regard the occasion as merely a social call. "Is there any possibility of that occurring?" he asked quietly.

The engineer grinned. "Never happened, but they're ready for things like that with any gravital system. They got monitor stations all over—the moons of Jupiter, Mars, Earth, Venus.

"Any time the gravital computer gets dizzy, the monitor overrides it. If that fails,

they send a jammer impulse and freeze it up tight. It won't work until they let loose."

Cameron sighed. He was getting very little help or information from Vogel. "All right," he said. "You've told me what I wanted to know."

He watched the engineer depart for the gravity-generating chamber far below the surface of the asteroid.

T

he post on Handicap Haven wasn't pleasant; it wasn't an experience a normal human would desire. It did have advantages—advancement came in sizes

directly proportional to the disagreeableness of the place.

Ten months to go on a year's assignment. If Cameron could survive that period

with nothing to mar his administration, he was in line for better positions. A suicide or any other kind of unpleasantness that would focus the attention of the outside world on the forgotten asteroid was definitely unwelcome.

He flipped on the telecom. "Rocket dome. Get me the pilot."

When the robot finally answered, it wasn't encouraging. "I'm sorry. There is no answer."

"Then trace him," he snapped. "If he's not in the rocket dome, he's in the main dome. I want you to get him at once."

A few seconds of silence followed. "There is no record of the pilot leaving the rocket dome."

His heart skipped; with an effort he spoke carefully. "Scan the whole area.

Understand? You've got to find him."

"Scanning is not possible. The system is out of operation in that area."

"All right," he said, starting to shake. "Send out repair robots." They were efficient in the sense they always did the work they were set to do, but not in terms of speed.

"The robots were dispatched as soon as scanning failed to work. Are there any other instructions?"

He thought about that. He needed help, plenty of it. Vogel? He'd be ready and willing, but that would leave the gravity-generating setup unprotected. Better do without him.

Who else? The sour old nurse who'd signed up because she wanted quick credits

toward retirement? Or the sweet young thing who had bravely volunteered because someone ought to help those poor unfortunate men? Not the women, of

course. She had a bad habit of fainting when she saw blood. Probably that was

why she couldn't get a position in a regular planetary hospital.

That was all, except the robots, who weren't much help in a case like this. That and the rocket pilot. For some reason he wasn't available.

The damned place was under-manned. Always had been. Nobody wanted to

come except the mildly psychotic, the inefficient and lazy, or, conceivably, an ambitious young doctor like himself. Mentally, Cameron berated the last category. If anything serious happened here, such a doctor might end his career bandaging scratches at a children's playground.

"Instructions," he said. "Yes. Leave word in gravity-generating for Vogel. Tell him to throw everything he's got around the units. Watch them."

"Is that all?"

"Not quite. Send six general purpose robots. I'll pick them up at the entrance to the rocket dome."

"Repair robots are already in that area. Will they do as well?"

"They will not. I want geepees for another reason." They wouldn't be much help, true, but the best he could manage.

D

occhi waited near the rocket dome. Not hiding, merely inconspicuous among the

carefully nurtured shrubbery that was supposed to give the illusion of Earth. If

the plants failed in that respect, at least they contributed to the oxygen supply of the asteroid.

"Good girl," said Docchi. "That Nona is wonderful."

Jordan could feel him relax. "A regular mechanical marvel," he agreed. "But we can gas about that later. Let's get going."

Docchi glanced around and then walked boldly into the passageway that connected the main dome with the much smaller, adjacent rocket dome.

Normally, it was never dark in the inhabited parts of the asteroid; a modulated twilight was considered more conducive to the slumber of the handicapped. But

it wasn't twilight as they neared the rocket dome—it was a full-scale rehearsal for the darkness of interplanetary space.

Docchi stopped before the emergency airlock which loomed solidly in front of them. "I hope Nona was able to cut this out of the circuit," he said anxiously.

"She understood, didn't she?" asked Jordan. He reached out and the great slab moved easily aside in its grooves. "The trouble with you is that you lack confidence."

Docchi, listening with a frown, didn't answer.

"Okay, I hear it, too," whispered Jordan. "We'd better get well inside before he reaches us."

Docchi walked rapidly into the darkness of the rocket dome. He allowed his face to become faintly luminescent, the one part of his altered metabolism that he had learned to control, when he wasn't under emotional strain.

He was nervous now, but his control had to be right. Enough light so that he'd be noticed, not so much that details of his appearance would be plain.

The footsteps came nearer, accompanied by a steady volume of profanity.

Docchi flashed his face once and then lowered the intensity almost immediately.

The footsteps stopped. "Docchi?"

"No. Just a lonely little light bulb out for an evening stroll."

The rocket pilot's laughter wasn't altogether friendly. "I know it's you. I meant, what are you doing here?"

"I saw the lights in the rocket dome go out. The entrance was open, so I came in.

Maybe I can help."

"They're off, all right. Everything. Even the standby system." The rocket pilot moved closer. The deadly little toaster was in his hand. "You can't help. You'd better get out. It's against regulations for you to be in here."

Docchi ignored the weapon. "What happened? Did a meteor strike?"

The pilot grunted. "Not likely." He peered intently at the barely visible silhouette. "Well, I see you're getting smart. You should do that all the time. You look better that way, even if they're not usable arms. You look...." His voice faded away.

"Sure, almost human," Docchi finished for him. "Not like a pair of legs and a spinal column with a lightning bug stuck on top."

"I didn't say that. So you're sensitive about it, eh? Maybe that's not your fault.

Anyway, you'd better get going."

"But I don't want to go," said Docchi deliberately. "I'm not afraid of the dark.

Are you?"

"Cut the psycho talk, Docchi. All your circuits are working and you know it.

Now get out of here before I take your fake hand and drag you out."

"Now you've hurt my feelings," declared Docchi reproachfully, nimbly stepping away.

"You asked for it," growled the pilot, lunging after him. What he took hold of wasn't an imitation hand, made of plastic. It was flesh and blood. That was why the pilot screamed, once, before he was lifted off his feet and slammed to the floor.

Docchi bent double. The dark figure on his back came over his head like a sword from a scabbard.

"Jor—"

"Yeah," said Jordan.

He wrapped one arm around the pilot's throat and clamped it tight. With the other he felt for the toaster the pilot still held. Effortlessly he tore it away and

used the butt with just enough force to knock the pilot unconscious without smashing the skull. Docchi stood by until it was over. All he could offer was an ineffectual kick, not balanced by arms.

It wasn't needed.

"Let there be light," ordered Jordan, laughing, and there was, a feeble, flickering illumination from Docchi.

Jordan was balancing himself on his hands. A strong head, massive, powerful arms and shoulders. His body ended at his chest. A round metal capsule contained his digestive system.

"Dead?" Docchi looked down at the pilot.

Jordan rocked forward and listened for the heartbeat. "Nah," he said. "I remembered in time that we can't afford to kill anyone."

"Good," said Docchi, and stifled an exclamation as something coiled around his leg. His reactions were fast; he broke loose almost instantly.

"Repair robot," said Jordan, looking around. "The place is lousy with them."

Docchi blinked on and off involuntarily and the robot came toward him.

"Friendly creature," observed Jordan. "He's offering to fix your lighting system for you."

Docchi ignored the squat contrivance and stared at the pilot. "Now what?" he asked.

"Agreed," said Jordan. "He needs attention. *Not* the kind I gave him." He balanced the toaster in his hand and burned a small hole in the little wheeled monster. Tentacles emerged from the side of the machine and felt puzzledly at the damaged area. The tentacles were withdrawn and presently reappeared with a

small torch and began welding.

Jordan pulled the unconscious pilot toward him. He leaned against the machine,

raised the inert form over his head and laid it gently on the top flat surface.

Another tentacle reached out to investigate the body of the pilot. Jordan welded the joints solid with the toaster. Three times he repeated the process until the pilot was fastened to the robot.

"The thing will stay here, repairing itself, until it's completely sound again,"

remarked Jordan. "However, that can be fixed." He adjusted the toaster beam to an imperceptible thickness. Deftly he sliced through the control case and removed a circular section. He reached inside and ripped out circuits. "No further self-repair," he said cheerfully. "Now I'm going to need your help. From a time stand-point, I think it's a good idea to run the robot around the main dome a few times before it delivers the pilot to the hospital. No point in giving ourselves away before we're ready."

Docchi bent over the robot, and with his help the proper sequence was implanted. The machine scurried erratically away.

Docchi watched it go. "Time for us to be on our way." He bent double for Jordan. The arms folded around his neck, but Jordan made no effort to climb up

onto his back. For a panic moment Docchi knew how the pilot felt when strength, where there shouldn't have been strength, reached out from the darkness and gripped his throat.

He shook the thought from his mind. "Get on my back," he insisted.

"You're tired," said Jordan. "Half gravity or not, you can't carry me any farther."

His fingers worked swiftly and the carrying harness fell to the floor. "Stay down," growled Jordan. "Listen."

Docchi listened. "Geepees!"

"Yeah," said Jordan. "Now get to the rocket."

"What can I do when I get there? You'll have to help me."

"You'll figure something out when the time comes. Hurry up!"

"Not without you," said Docchi stubbornly, without moving.

A huge paw clamped around the back of his skull. "Listen to me," whispered Jordan fiercely. "Together we were a better man than the pilot—your legs and my arms. It's up to us to prove that separately we are a match for Cameron and

his geepees."

"We're not trying to *prove* anything," said Docchi.

A brilliant light sliced through the darkness and swept around the rocket dome.

"Maybe we are," said Jordan. Impatiently, he hitched himself along the ground.

"I think I am."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going up. With no legs, that's where I belong."

He grasped the structural steel member in his great hands, and in the light gravity, ascended rapidly.

"Careful," warned Docchi.

"This is no time to be careful." His voice floated down from high in the lacy structure. It wasn't completely dark; the lights were getting nearer. Docchi decided it was possible for Jordan to see what he was doing.

They hadn't expected to be discovered so soon. But the issue had not yet been settled against them. Docchi settled into a long stride, avoiding the low-slung repair robots that seemed to be everywhere. If Jordan refused to give up, Docchi had to try.

He stayed well ahead of the oncoming general purpose robots.

H

e reached the rocket and barely had time to look around. It was enough, however. The ship's passenger and freight locks were closed. Nona had either not understood all their instructions, or she hadn't been able to carry them out. The first, probably. She had put the light and scanning circuits out of commission with no tools except her hands. That and her uncanny knowledge of the inner workings of machines. It was too much to expect that she should also have the

ship ready and waiting for them.

It was up to him to get in. If he had the toaster they'd taken from the pilot, he might have been able to soften the proper area of the passenger lock. But he didn't. Not having arms, he couldn't have used it. For that reason Jordan had kept the weapon.

The alternative was to search the surrounding mechanical jungle for an external

control of the rocket. There had to be one, at least for the airlocks. Then it was a matter of luck whether he could work it.

The approaching lights warned him that he no longer had that alternative. If Cameron hadn't tried to search the rocket dome as he came along, the geepees would be solidly ringed around the ship now. That was Cameron's mistake, however, and he might make more.

In all probability Jordan was still at large. Perhaps nearby. Would Cameron know that? He might not.

Docchi descended into the shallow landing pit. Until both of them were caught,

there was always a chance. He had to hide, but the landing pit seemed remarkably ill-suited for that purpose.

He leaned against the stern tube cluster and tried to shake his brain into activity.

The metal pressed hard into the thin flesh that covered his back. In the smooth glazed surface of the landing pit, the only answer was the tubes.

He straightened up and looked into them. A small boy might climb inside and crawl out of sight. Or a grown man who had no shoulders or arms to get wedged

in the narrow cylinder.

Out in space, the inner ends of the tubes were closed with a combustion cap wherein the fuel was ignited. But in the dome, where the ship was not used for

months at a time....

Yes, there was that possibility.

He tried a lower tube. He lay on the floor and thrust his head inside. He wriggled and shoved with his feet until he had forced himself entirely in. It was dark and terrifying, but no time for claustrophobia.

He stopped momentarily and listened. A geepee descended noisily into the landing pit. The absence of any other sound indicated to Docchi that it was radio-controlled.

He drove himself on, though it was slow progress. The walls were smooth and it

was difficult to get much purchase. The going became even tougher—the tube was getting smaller. Not much, but enough to matter.

Again he stopped. Outside, there was the characteristic sputter, like frying, that

the toaster beam made when it struck metal. A great clatter followed.

"Get him!" shouted Cameron. "He's up there!"

Jordan had arrived and had picked off a geepee. And it wasn't going to be easy

for Cameron to capture him. The diversion would help.

"Don't use heat," ordered Cameron. "Get your lights on him. Blind him. Drive him in a corner and then go up and get him."

Docchi had been wrong; the geepees were controlled by voice, not radio. That would make it easier for him once he got inside the ship. If he did.

It looked as though he would. The tube wasn't getting narrower. More important, the air was not noticeably stale. The combustion cap had been retracted, which

was a lucky break. His feet slipped. It didn't matter; somehow he inched along.

Blood was pounding in his veins from the constriction, but his head emerged in

the rocket.

He stared at the retracted combustion cap a few feet away. If he had arms, he could grasp it and pull himself free. But if he had arms, he would never have gotten this far. He wriggled until his body was nearly out and only his legs were in the tube. He kicked hard, fell to the floor.

He lay there while his head cleared, then rolled to his feet and staggered forward to the control compartment. The rocket was his, but he didn't want it for himself alone.

He stared thoughtfully at the instrument panel. It had been a long time since he had operated a ship. When he understood the controls, he bent down and thrust

his chin against the gravital dial. Laboriously he turned it to the proper setting.

Then he sat down and kicked on a switch. The ship rocked and rose a few inches.

Chances were that Cameron wouldn't notice that in the confusion outside. If he

did, he had thirty seconds in which to stop Docchi. That wouldn't be enough for Cameron.

"Rocket landing," said Docchi when the allotted time passed.

"Emergency instructions. Emergency instructions. Stand by." Strictly

speaking, that wasn't necessary, for the frequency he was using assured him of complete control.

"All energized geepees lend assistance. This order supersedes previous orders.

Additional equipment necessary." After listing the equipment, he sat back and chuckled.

With his knee he turned on the external lights, got up and walked to the passenger lock, brushing against the switch. The airlock opened. He stood boldly at the threshold and looked out. The rocket dome was floodlighted by the ship.

"All right, Jordan, you can come down now," he called.

Jordan appeared overhead, hanging from a beam. He swung along it until he reached a column, down which he descended. He propelled himself over the floor and up the ramp in his awkward fashion. Balancing on his hands, he gazed

up at Docchi.

"Well, monster, how did you do it?"

"Monster yourself," said Docchi. "Do what?"

"I saw you crawl in the rocket tubes," said Jordan. "But what did you do after you got inside?"

"Cameron's a medic," said Docchi, "not mechanically inclined. He forgot that an emergency rocket landing cancels any verbal orders. So I took the ship up a few inches. Geepees aren't very bright; that satisfied them that I was coming in for a landing. What Cameron should have done was splash some heat against a gravital unit, and then, having created an artificial emergency condition in the main

dome, he could have directed the geepees from the gravity control center.

After that, he would have had top priority, not me."

"But they rushed off, carrying Cameron with them." Jordan looked puzzled.

"Easy. I told the geepees that there was danger of crashing and that they must remove any human beings nearby, whether they were willing or not. You weren't

nearby and that let you out. They took Cameron because he was."

"It's ours!" breathed Jordan. "But what about Anti and Nona?"

"Anti's taken care of. As far as the geepees are concerned, she comes under the heading of emergency landing material. They'll bring her. Nona is supposed to be waiting with Anti." Docchi frowned. "There's nothing we can do if she isn't.

Meanwhile you'd better get ready to take the ship off."

Jordan swung himself inside.

Docchi remained at the passenger lock, waiting. He heard the geepees first and

saw them seconds later. They came into sight half pushing, half carrying a huge rectangular tank. With unexpected robotic ingenuity, they had mounted it on four of their smaller brethren, the squat repair robots, which served to support the tremendous weight.

The tank was filled with blue liquid. Twisted pipes dangled from the ends; it had been torn and lifted from its foundation. Broken plants still clung to the narrow ledge on top and moist soil adhered to the

sides. Five geepees pushed it rapidly toward the ship, mechanically oblivious to the disheveled man who frustratedly

shouted and struck at them.

"Jordan, open the freight lock."

In response the ship rose a few more inches and hung quivering. A section of the ship hinged outward and downward to form a ramp. The ship was ready to take

on cargo.

Docchi stood at his post. That damn fool Cameron should have stayed in the main dome where the geepees had released him. His presence added an

unwelcome complication. Still, it should be easy enough to get rid of him when

the time came.

It was Nona who really worried him. She wasn't anywhere to be seen. He took

an uncertain step down the ramp, came back, shaking his head. It was impossible to look for her now, though he wanted to.

The tank neared the ship. A few feet of it projected onto the ramp. The geepees stopped; their efforts lost momentum. They looked bewildered.

The tank rolled backward. The geepees shook, buzzed and looked around, primarily at Docchi. He didn't wait any longer. He leaped into the ship.

"Close the passenger lock!" he shouted.

Jordan looked up questioningly from the controls.

"Vogel, the engineer," explained Docchi. "He must have seen the geepees on scanning when they entered the main dome. He's trying to do what Cameron should have done, but didn't have enough sense to do."

The passenger lock swung ponderously shut behind him.

"Now what?" Jordan asked, worried.

"First, let's see what you can get on the telecom," said Docchi.

The angle was impossible, so close to the ship, but they did manage to get a corner of the tank on the screen. Apparently it was resting where Docchi had last seen it, though it was difficult to be sure because the curve of the ship loomed so large.

"Maybe we'd better get out of here," suggested Jordan nervously.

"Without the tank? Not a chance. Vogel hasn't got complete control of them yet."

That seemed to be true. The geepees were nearly motionless, paralyzed.

"What shall I do?" asked Jordan.

"Give me full power on the radio," said Docchi. "Burn it out if you have to. I think the engineer is at the wrong angle to broadcast much power to them.

Besides, the intervening structure is absorbing most of his signal."

He waited until Jordan had complied. "The tank must be placed in the ship," he added.

Geepees were not designed to sift contradictory commands that were nearly at the same level of urgency. Their reasoning power was feeble, but the mechanism

was complicated enough. In that respect they resembled humans. Borderline decisions were difficult.

"More power," whispered Docchi.

Sweating, Jordan obeyed.

Marionettes. This string led toward a certain action. Another, intrinsically more important, but suddenly far less powerful, pulled for something else. Circuits burned within electronic brains. Micro-relays fluttered under the stress.

Choice....

Stiffly the geepees moved and grasped the tank. The quality of decision, in this case, was strained. Inch by inch the tank rolled up the ramp.

"When it's completely on, raise the ramp," Docchi whispered to Jordan in an

even lower voice.

One geepee wavered and fell. Motionless, it lay there. The remaining four were

barely equal to the task.

"Now," said Docchi.

The freight ramp began to rise. The tank picked up speed as it rolled into the ship.

"Geepees, save yourselves!" shouted Docchi.

They leaped from the ramp.

Jordan breathed deeply. "I don't think they can hurt us now."

Docchi nodded. "Get me ship-to-asteroid communication, if there's any radio left."

"There is." Jordan made the adjustment.

"Vogel, we're going out. Give us the proper sequence and save the dome some damage."

There was no reply.

"He's trying to bluff," said Jordan. "He knows the airlocks to the main dome will automatically close if we do break through."

"Sure," said Docchi. "Everyone in the main dome is safe, *if* everyone is in there.

Vogel, we'll give you time to think about that."

Jordan gave him the time until it hurt, waiting. Meanwhile he flipped on the telecom and searched the rocket dome. Nothing was moving; no geepee was in

sight. Docchi watched the screen with interest. What he thought didn't show on

his face.

Still there was no reply from Vogel.

"All right," Docchi said in a low, hard voice. "Jordan, take it out. Hit the shell with the bow of the rocket."

The ship hardly quivered as it ripped through the transparent covering of the rocket dome. The worst sound was unheard: the hiss

of air escaping through the
great hole in the envelope.

Jordan sat at the controls, gripping the levers. "I couldn't tell," he said slowly. "It happened too fast for me to be sure. Maybe Vogel did have the inner shell out of the way. In that event, it's all right because it would close immediately. The outer shell is supposed to be self-sealing, but I doubt if it could handle that much damage."

He twisted the lever and the ship leaped forward.

"Cameron I don't mind. He had enough time to get out if he wanted to. But I keep thinking that Nona might be in there."

Docchi avoided his eyes. There was no light at all in his face. He walked away.

Jordan rocked back and forth. The hemisphere that held what remained of his body was well suited for that. He set the auto-controls and reduced the gravity to one-quarter Earth normal. He bent his great arms and shoved himself into the air, deftly catching hold of a guide rail. He would have to go with Docchi. But not at the moment. He felt bad.

That is, he did until he saw a light blinking at a cabin door. He had to investigate that first.

J

Jordan caught up before Docchi reached the cargo hold. In the lesser gravity of the ship Jordan was truly at home.

Docchi turned and waited for him. Jordan still carried the weapon he had taken

from the pilot. It was clipped to the sacklike garment he wore, dangling from his midsection, which, for him was just below his shoulders. Down the corridor he

flew, swinging from the guide rails lightly, though gravity on the ship was as erratic as on the asteroid.

Docchi braced himself. Locomotion was not so easy for him.

Jordan halted beside him and dangled from one hand. "We have another passenger."

Docchi stiffened. "Who?"

"I could describe her," said Jordan. "But why, when a name will do at least as well?"

"Nona!" said Docchi. He slumped in sudden relief against the wall. "How did she get in the ship?"

"A good question," said Jordan. "Remind me to ask her that sometime when she's able to answer. But since I don't know, I'll have to use my imagination. My guess is that, after she jammed the lights and scanners in the rocket dome, she walked to the ship and tapped the passenger lock three times in the right places, or something just as improbable. The lock opened for her whether it was supposed to or not."

"As good a guess as any," agreed Docchi.

"We may as well make our assumptions complete. Once inside, she felt tired.

She found a comfortable cabin and fell asleep in it. She remained asleep throughout our skirmish with the geepees."

"She deserves a rest," said Docchi.

"She does. But if she had waited a few minutes to take it, she'd have saved you the trouble of crawling through the tubes."

"She did her part and more," Docchi argued. "We depend too much on her. Next

we'll expect her to escort us personally to the stars." He straightened up. "Let's go. Anti is waiting for us."

The cargo hold was sizable. It had to be to contain the tank, battered and twisted though it was. Equipment had been jarred from storage racks and lay in tangled

heaps on the floor.

"Anti!" called Docchi.

"Here."

"Are you hurt?"

"Never felt a thing," came the cheerful reply.

J

ordan scaled the side of the tank. He reached the top and peered over. "She seems all right," he called down. "Part of the acid's gone. Otherwise no damage."

Damage enough, however. Acid was a matter of life for Anti. It had been splashed from the tank and, where it had spilled, metal was corroding rapidly.

The wall against which the tank had crashed was bent and partly eaten through.

That was no reason for alarm; the scavenging system of the ship would handle

acid. The real question was what to do for Anti.

"I've stewed in this soup for years," said Anti. "Get me out of here."

"How?"

"If you weren't as stupid as doctors pretend to be, you'd know how. No gravity, of course. I've got muscles, more than you think. I can walk as long as my bones don't break from the weight."

No gravity would be rough on Docchi; having no arms, he would be virtually helpless. The prospect of floating free without being able to grasp something was terrifying.

"As soon as we can manage it," he said, forcing down his fear. "First we've got to drain and store the acid."

Jordan had anticipated that. He'd swung off the tank and was busy expelling the water from an auxiliary compartment into space. As soon as the compartment was empty, he led a hose from it to the tank.

The pumps sucked and the acid level fell slowly.

Docchi felt the ship lurch familiarly. "Hurry," he called out to Jordan.

The gravital unit was acting up. Presumably it was getting ready to cut out. If it did—well, a free-floating globe of acid would be as destructive to the ship and those in it as a high velocity meteor cluster.

Jordan jammed the lever as far as it would go and held it there. "All out," said Jordan presently, and let the hose roll back into the wall. Done in plenty of time.

The gravital unit remained in operation for a full minute.

As soon as she was weightless, Anti rose out of the tank.

In all the time Docchi had known her, he had seen no more than a face framed in blue acid. Periodic surgery, where it was necessary, had trimmed the flesh from her face. For the rest, she lived submerged in a corrosive liquid that destroyed the wild tissue as fast as it grew. Or nearly as fast.

Docchi averted his eyes.

"Well, junkman, look at a real monster," snapped Anti.

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umans were not meant to grow that large. But it was not obscene to Docchi, merely unbelievable. Jupiter is not repulsive because it is the bulging giant of planets; it is overwhelming, and so was Anti.

"How will you live out of the acid?" he stammered.

"How really unobservant some men are," said Anti loftily. "I anticipated our little journey and prepared for it. If you look closely, you will notice I have on a special surgery robe. It's the only thing in the Solar System that will fit me. It's fabricated from a spongelike substance and holds enough acid to last me about

thirty-six hours."

She grasped a rail and propelled herself toward the corridor. Normally that was a spacious passageway. For her it was a close fit.

Satellites, one glowing and the other swinging in an eccentric orbit, followed after her.

N

ona was standing before the instrument panel when they came back. There was

an impressive array of dials, lights and levers in front of her, but she wasn't interested in these. A single small dial, separate from the rest, held her complete attention. She seemed disturbed by what she saw or didn't see. Disturbed or excited, it was difficult to say which.

Anti stopped. "Look at her. If I didn't know she's a freak like the rest of us, the only one, in fact, who was born that way, it would be easy to hate her—she's so disgustingly normal."

Normal? True and yet not true. Surgical techniques that could take a body apart and put it back together again with a skill once reserved for the repair of machines had made beauty commonplace. No more sagging muscles, wrinkles;

even the aged were attractive and youthful-seeming until the day they died. No

more ill-formed limbs, misshapen bodies. Everyone was handsome or beautiful.

No exceptions.

None to speak of, at least.

The accidentals didn't belong, of course. In another day most of them would have been candidates for a waxworks or the formaldehyde of a specimen bottle.

Nona fitted neither category; she wasn't a repair job. Looking at her closely—

and why not?—she was an original work as far from the normal in one direction

as Anti, for example, was in the other.

"Why is she staring at the little dial?" asked Anti as the others slipped past her and came into the compartment. "Is there something wrong with it?" She shrugged. "I would be interested in the big dials. The ones with colored lights."

"That's Nona." Docchi smiled. "I'm sure she's never been in the control room of

a rocket before, and yet she went straight to the most curious thing in it. She's looking at the gravital indicator. Directly behind it is the gravital unit."

"How do you know? Does it say so?"

"It doesn't. You have to be trained to recognize it, or else be Nona."

Anti dismissed that intellectual feat. "What are you waiting for? You know she can't hear us. Go stand in front of her."

"How do I get there?" Docchi had risen a few inches from the floor, now that Jordan had released him from his grip.

"A good engineer would have enough sense to put on magneslippers. Nona did."

Anti grasped his jacket. How she was able to move was uncertain. The tissues that surrounded the woman were too vast to permit the perception of individual

motions. Nevertheless, she proceeded to the center of the compartment, and with her came Docchi.

Nona turned before they reached her.

"My poor boy," sighed Anti. "You do a very bad job of concealing your emotions, if that's what you're trying to do. Anyway, stop glowing like a rainbow and say something."

"Hello," said Docchi.

Nona smiled at him, though it was Anti that she came to.

"No, not too close, child. Don't touch the surgery robe unless you want your pretty face to peel off like a plastiwrapper."

Nona stopped; she said nothing.

Anti shook her head hopelessly. "I wish you would learn to read lips or at least recognize written words. It's so difficult to communicate with you."

"She knows facial expressions and actions, I think," said Docchi. "She's good at emotions. Words are a foreign concept to her."

"What other concepts does anyone think with?" asked Anti dubiously.

"Maybe mathematical relationships," answered Docchi. "Though she doesn't.

They've tested her for that." He frowned. "I don't know what concepts she does

think with. I wish I did."

"Save some of that worry and apply it to our present situation," said Anti. "The object of your concern doesn't seem to be interested in it."

That was true. Nona had wandered back and was staring at the gravital indicator again. What she saw to hold her attention was a puzzle.

In some ways she seemed irresponsible and childlike. That was an elusive thought, though: whose child? Not really, of course. Her parents were obscure technicians and mechanics, descendants of a

long line of mechanics and technicians. The question he had asked himself was this: where and how does she belong? He couldn't answer.

With an effort Docchi came back to reality. "We appealed to the Medicouncil,"

he said. "We asked for a ship to go to the nearest star. It would have to be a rocket, naturally. Even allowing for a better design than any we now have, the journey would take a long time, forty or fifty years going and the same length of time back. That's entirely too long for a normal, but it wouldn't matter to a biocompensator."

"Why a rocket?" interrupted Jordan. "Why not some form of gravity drive?"

"An attractive idea," admitted Docchi. "Theoretically, there's no limit to gravity drive except light speed, and even that's not certain. If it would work, the time element could be cut to a fraction. But the last twenty years have proved that gravity drives won't work at all outside the Solar System. They function very poorly even when the ship is as far out as Jupiter's orbit."

"I thought the gravity drive on a ship was nearly the same as the gravital unit on the asteroid," said Jordan. "Why won't they function?"

"I don't know why," answered Docchi impatiently. "If I did, I wouldn't be marooned on Handicap Haven. Arms or no arms, biocompensator or not, I'd be

the most important scientist on Earth."

"With a multitude of pretty women competing for your affections," added Anti.

"I think he'd settle for one. A certain one," suggested Jordan.

"Poor, unimaginative boy," said Anti. "In my youth...."

"We've heard about your youth," said Jordan.

"Youth and love are long since past, for both of you. Talk about them privately if you want, but not now." Docchi glowered at them.

"Anyway," he resumed,

"gravity drive is out. One time they had hopes for it, but no longer. It should be able to drive this ship. Actually, its sole function is to provide an artificial gravity *inside* the ship, for passenger comfort. So rocket ship it is. That's what we asked for. The Medicouncil refused. Therefore we're going to appeal to a higher authority."

"Fine," said Anti. "How?"

"We've discussed it," answered Docchi. "Ultimately the Medicouncil is responsible to the Solar Government. And in turn—"

"All right, I'm in favor of it," said Anti. "I just wanted to know."

"Mars is closer," continued Docchi. "But Earth is the seat of government. As soon as we get there...." He stopped suddenly and listened.

Anti listened with him and waited until she could stand it no longer. "What's the matter?" she asked. "I don't hear anything."

Jordan leaned forward in his seat and looked at the instrument panel. "That's the trouble, Anti. You're not supposed to hear anything. But you should be able to *feel* the vibration from the rocket exhaust, as long as it's on."

"I don't feel anything, either."

"Yeah," said Jordan. He looked at Docchi. "There's plenty of fuel."

M

omentum of the ship didn't cease when the rockets stopped, of course. They were still moving, but not very fast and not in the direction they wanted to go.

Gingerly Docchi tried out the magneslippers; he was clumsy, but no longer helpless in the gravityless ship. He stared futilely at the instruments as if he could wring more secrets than the panel had electronic access to.

"It's mechanical trouble of some sort," he said uneasily. "There's one way of finding out."

Before he could move, Anti was in the corridor that led away from the control compartment.

"Stay here, Anti," he said. "I'll see what's wrong."

She reached nearly from the floor to the ceiling. She missed by scant inches the sides of the passageway. Locomotion was easy enough for her; turning around wasn't. Anti didn't turn.

"Look, honey," her voice floated back. "You brought me along for the ride.

That's fine, but I'm not satisfied with it. I want to earn my fare. You stay and run the ship because you know how and I don't. I'll find out what's wrong."

"But you won't know what to do, Anti." There was no answer. "All right," he said in defeat. "Both of us ought to go. Jordan, you stay at the controls."

Anti led the way because Docchi couldn't get around her. Determinedly he shuffled along. There was a trick to magneslippers that he had nearly forgotten.

Slowly it was coming back to him—shuffle instead of striding.

It was a dingy, poorly lighted passageway in an older ship. Handicap Haven definitely didn't rate the best equipment that was produced. On one side was the hull of the ship; on the other, a few small cabins. None were occupied. Anti stopped. The passageway ended in a cross corridor that led to the other side of the ship.

"We'd better check the stern rocket tubes," he said, still unable to see around her.

"Open it up and we'll take a look."

"I can't," said Anti. "There are handles, but the thing won't open. There's a red light, too. Does that mean anything?"

His heart sank. "It does. Don't try to open it. With your strength, you might be unlucky enough to do it."

"That's a man for you," said Anti sharply. "First he wants me to open it, and then he tells me not to."

"There's a vacuum in there. The combustion cap has been retracted. That's the only thing that will actuate the warning signal. You'd die in a few seconds if you somehow managed to open the lock to the rocket compartment."

"What are we waiting for? Let's get busy and fix it."

"Sure, fix it. You see, Anti, that didn't happen by itself. Someone, or something, was responsible."

"Who?"

"Did you see anyone when we were loading your tank in the ship?"

"Nothing. I heard Cameron shouting, a lot of noise. All I could see was what was directly overhead. What does that have to do with it?"

"I think it has to do with a geepee. I thought they all dropped outside. Maybe there was one that didn't."

"Why a geepee?" she asked blankly.

"In the first place, no man is strong enough to move the combustion cap. But if he should somehow manage to exert super-human effort, as soon as the cap cleared the tubes, rocket action would cease. The air in the compartment would

exhaust into space and anyone in there would die."

"So we have a dead geepee in there."

"A geepee doesn't die. Not even become inactive; it doesn't need air." Docchi tried to think the thing through. "Not only that, a geepee might be able to escape from the compartment. The lock would close as soon as the pressure dropped.

But a geepee...."

Anti settled down grimly. "Then there's a geepee on the loose, intent on sabotage?"

"I'm afraid so," he admitted worriedly.

"What are we standing here for? We'll go back to controls and pick up the robot on radio. What it damaged, it can repair." She was partly turned around now and saw Docchi's face. "Don't tell me," she said. "I suppose I should have thought of it. The signal doesn't work inside the ship."

Docchi nodded. "It doesn't. Robots are never used aboard, so the control is set in the bow antenna and the ship, of course, is insulated."

"Well," said Anti happily, "we've got a robot hunt ahead of us."

"We do. And our bare hands to hunt it with."

"Oh, come now! It's not as bad as all that. Look, the geepee was back here when the rockets stopped. Could it get by the control compartment without our seeing it?"

"It couldn't. There are two corridors leading through the compartment, one on each side of the ship."

"That's what I thought. We came down one corridor and no geepee was in it. It has to be in the other. If it goes into a cabin, a light will shine on the outside. It can't really hide from us."

"Sure, we'll find out where it is. But what are we going to do with it when we find it?"

"I was thinking," said Anti. "Can you get around me when I'm standing like this?"

"I can't."

"Neither can a geepee. All I need is a toaster, or something that looks like one, and I can drive the robot into the control compartment for Jordan to pick off."

Determinedly, she began to move toward the opposite corridor.

"Hurry back to Jordan and tell him what we're doing. There ought to be another toaster on the

ship. Probably there's one somewhere in the control compartment. Bring it back

to me."

Docchi bit his lip and stared at the back of the huge woman. "All right," he answered. "But stay where you are. Don't try anything until I get back."

Anti laughed. "I value my big, fat life," she said. There were other things she valued, but she didn't mention them.

Docchi went as fast as the magneslippers would allow, which wasn't very fast.

The strategy was simple, but it didn't follow that it was sound—a toaster for Jordan and one for Anti, if another could be found.

Anti would block the corridor. A geepee might go through her, but it could never squeeze past her. The robot would have to run for it. If it came toward Anti, she might be able to burn it down. But she would be firing directly into the control room. If she missed even partially—

The instruments were delicate.

It wasn't better if Jordan got the chance to bring down the robot. Anti would be in the line of fire. No, that wasn't good, either. They'd have to think of something else.

"Jordan," called Docchi as he entered the control compartment. Jordan wasn't there. Nona was, still gazing serenely at the gravity indicator.

Lights were streaming from the corridor on the opposite side of the compartment. Docchi hurried over. Jordan was just inside the entrance, the toaster clutched grimly in his hand. He was hitching his truncated body slowly toward the stern.

Coming to meet him was Anti—unarmed, enormously fat Anti. She wasn't

walking; somehow it seemed more like swimming, a bulbous, flabby sea animal

moving through the air. She waved her fins against the wall and propelled herself forward.

"Melt him down!" she cried.

It was difficult to make out the vaguely human form of the geepee. The powerful, shining body blended into the structure of the ship itself—

unintentional camouflage, though the robot wasn't aware of that. It was crouched at the threshold of a cabin, hesitating between the approaching dangers.

Jordan raised the weapon and as instantly lowered it. "Get out of the way," he told Anti.

There was no place for her to go. She was too big to enter a cabin, too massive to let the geepee squeeze by her even if she wanted it to.

"Never mind that. Get him," she answered.

A geepee was not a genius even by robot standards. It didn't need to be. Heat is deadly; a human body is a fragile thing. This it knew. It ran toward Anti. Unlike man, it didn't need magneslippers. It had magnetic metal feet which could move

fast, and did.

Docchi couldn't close his eyes, though he wanted to. He had to watch. The geepee torpedoed into Anti. And it was the robot that was thrown back. Relative mass favored the monstrous woman.

The electronic brain obeyed its original instructions, whatever those were. It got

to its feet and rushed toward Anti. Metal arms shot out with dazzling speed and crashed against the flesh of the fat woman. Docchi could hear the thud. No ordinary person could take that kind of punishment and live.

Anti wasn't ordinary; she was strange, even for an accidental, living far inside a deep armor of flesh. It was possible that she never felt the crushing force of those blows. Amazingly, she grasped the robot and drew it to her. And the geepee lost the advantage of leverage. The bright arms didn't flash so fast nor with such lethal power.

"Gravity!" cried Anti. "All you've got!"

She leaned against the struggling machine.

Gravity. That was something he could do. Docchi turned, took two steps before

the surge of gravity hit him. It came in waves, the sequence of which he was never able to disentangle. The first wave staggered him; at the second his knees buckled and he sank to the floor. After that his eardrums hurt. He thought he could feel the ship quiver. He knew dazedly that an artificial gravity field of this magnitude was impossible, but that knowledge didn't help him move.

It vanished as suddenly as it had come. Painfully his lungs expanded. Each muscle ached. He rolled to his feet and lurched past Jordan.

He didn't find the mass of broken flesh he expected. Anti was already standing.

"Oof!" she grunted and gazed with satisfaction at the twisted grotesque shape at her feet. The electronic brain had been smashed, the body flattened.

"Are you hurt?" asked Docchi gently, awed.

She wagged the extremities of her body. "Nope, I can't feel anything broken,"

she said solemnly. She moved back to get a better view of the robot. "I'd call that throwing my weight around. At the right time, of course. The secret's timing.

And I must say you picked up your cue with the gravity well." Her laughter rolled through the ship.

"It wasn't I," said Docchi.

"Jordan? No, he's just getting up. Then who?"

"Nona," said Docchi. "It had to be her. She saw what had to be done and did it.

But how she got that amount of gravity—"

"Ask her," said Anti with fond irony.

Docchi grimaced and limped back into the control room, followed by Anti and

Jordan. Nona was at the gravity panel, her face pleasant and childlike.

"Gravity can be turned on or off," said Docchi puzzledly, searching her face for some sign. "And regulated, within certain narrow limits. But somehow you doubled or tripled the normal amount. How?"

Nona smiled questioningly.

"Gravity engineers would like to know that too," said Jordan.

"Everybody would like to know," Anti interrupted irritably. "Except me. I'm too pragmatic, I suppose, but I want to know when we start the rockets and be on our way."

"It isn't that easy," sighed Jordan. "A retracted combustion cap in flight generally means at least one burned-out tube." He made his way to the instrument panel and looked at it glumly. "Three."

"A factor." Docchi nodded. "But I was thinking about the robot."

Anti was impatient. "An interesting subject, no doubt. What about it?"

"Where did it get instructions? Not radio; the hull of the ship cuts off all radiation. The last we knew, it was in our control."

"All right, how?"

"Voice," said Docchi. "Cameron's voice, to be exact."

"But he was in the rocket dome," Jordan objected.

"Think back to when we were loading the tank. We had to look through the telecom and the angle of vision was bad. We couldn't see much of the cargo lock.

Anti couldn't see anything that wasn't directly overhead. Both Cameron and the

geepee managed to get inside and we didn't know it."

Jordan hefted his weapon. "Looks like we've got another hunt on our hands. This time a nice normal doctor."

"Keep it handy," said Docchi, glancing at the toaster. "But be careful how you use it. One homicide and we can forget what we came for. I think he'll be ready

to surrender. The ship's temporarily disabled; he'll consider that damage enough."

J

ordan found the doctor in the forward section of the ship. Cameron knew better

than to argue with a toaster. In a matter of minutes he was in the control room.

"Now that you've got me, what are you going to do with me?" he asked.

Docchi swiveled away from the instrument panel. "I don't expect active cooperation, of course, but I like to think you'll give your word not to hinder us hereafter."

Cameron glared. "I promise nothing of the kind."

"We can chain him to Anti," suggested Jordan. "That will keep him out of trouble."

"Like leading a poodle on a leash? Nope," said Anti indignantly. "A girl has to have some privacy."

"Don't wince, Cameron," objected Docchi. "She really was a girl once, an attractive one."

"We can put him in a spacesuit and lock his hands behind his back," said Jordan.

"Something like an ancient straitjacket."

Cameron laughed.

"No, that's inhuman," said Docchi.

Jordan juggled the toaster. "I can weld with this. Let's put him in a cabin and weld the door closed. We can cut a slot to shove food in. A very narrow slot."

"Excellent. I think you have the solution. That is, unless Dr. Cameron will reconsider his decision."

Cameron shrugged. "They'll pick you up in a day or less anyway. I suppose I'm not compromising myself by agreeing to your terms."

"Good."

"A doctor's word is as good as his oath," observed Anti. "Hippocratic or hypocritic."

"Now, Anti, don't be cynical. Doctors have an economic sense as well as the next person," said Docchi gravely. He turned to Cameron. "You see, after Anti grew too massive for her skeletal structure, doctors reasoned she'd be most comfortable in the absence of gravity. That was in the early days, before successful ship gravital units were developed. They put her on an interplanetary ship and kept transferring her before each landing.

"But that grew troublesome and—expensive. They devised a new treatment; the asteroid and the tank of acid. Not being aquatic by nature, Anti resented the change. She still does."

"I knew nothing about that," Cameron pointed out defensively.

"It was before your time." Docchi frowned at the doctor. "Tell me, why did you laugh when Jordan mentioned a spacesuit?"

Cameron grinned. "That was my project while you were busy with the robot."

"To do what? Jordan—"

But Jordan was already on his way. He was gone for some time.

"Well?" asked Docchi on his return. It really wasn't necessary; Jordan's gloomy face told the story.

"Cut to ribbons."

"All of them?"

"Every one. Beyond repair."

"What's the excitement about?" rumbled Anti. "We don't need spacesuits unless something happens to the ship and we have to go outside."

"Exactly, Anti. How do you suppose we go about replacing the defective tubes?"

From the outside, of course. By destroying the spacesuits, Cameron made sure we can't."

Anti opened her mouth with surprise and closed it in anger. She glowered at the

doctor.

"We're still in the asteroid zone," said Cameron. "In itself, that's not dangerous.

Without power to avoid stray rocks, it is. I advise you to contact the Medicouncil. They'll send a ship to pick us up and tow us in."

"No, thanks. I don't like Handicap Haven as well as you do," Anti said brusquely. She turned to Docchi. "Maybe I'm stupid for asking, but exactly what is it that's deadly about being out in space without a spacesuit?"

"Cold. Lack of air pressure. Lack of oxygen."

"Is that all? Nothing else?"

His laugh was too loud. "Isn't that enough?"

"I wanted to be sure," she said.

She beckoned to Nona, who was standing near. Together they went forward, where the spacesuits were kept.

Cameron scowled puzzledly and started to follow. Jordan waved the toaster around.

"All right," said the doctor, stopping. He rubbed his chin. "What is she thinking about?"

"I wouldn't know," said Docchi. "She's not scientifically trained, if that's what you mean. But she has a good mind, as good as her body once was."

"And how good was that?"

"We don't talk about it," said Jordan shortly.

I

t was a long time before the women came back—if the weird creature that floated into the control compartment with Nona *was* Anti.

Cameron stared at her and saw shudderingly that it was. "You need a session with the psycho-computer," he said. "When we get back, that's the first thing we

do. Can't you understand...."

"Be quiet," growled Jordan. "Now, Anti, explain what you've rigged up."

"Any kind of pressure is good enough as far as the outside of the body is concerned," answered Anti, flipping back the helmet.

"Mechanical pressure will do as well as air pressure. I had Nona cut

the spacesuits into strips and wind them around me—hard. Then I found a helmet that would fit over my head when

the damaged part was cut away. It won't hold much air pressure, even taped very tight to my skin. But as long as it's pure oxygen—"

"It might be satisfactory," admitted Docchi. "But the temperature?"

"Do you think I'm going to worry about cold?" asked Anti. "Me? Way down below all this flesh?"

"Listen to me," said Cameron through his teeth. "You've already seriously threatened my career with all this childish nonsense. I won't permit you to ruin it altogether by a deliberate suicide."

"You and your stinking career," retorted Jordan tiredly. "We're not asking your permission to do anything." He turned away from the doctor. "You understand the risk, Anti? It's possible that it won't work at all."

"I've thought about it," Anti replied soberly. "On the other hand, I've thought about the asteroid."

"All right," said Jordan. Docchi nodded. Nona bobbed her head; it was doubtful that she knew what she was agreeing to.

"Let's have some telecom viewers outside," said Docchi. "One directly in back, one on each side. We've got to know what's happening."

Jordan went to the control panel and flipped levers. "They're out and working,"

he said, gazing at the screen. "Now, Anti, go to the freight lock. Close your helmet and wait. I'll let the air out slowly. The pressure change will be gradual. If anything seems wrong, let me know over the helmet radio and I'll yank you in immediately. Once you're

outside I'll give you further instructions. Tools and equipment are in a compartment that opens into space."

Anti waddled away.

Jordan looked down at his legless body. "I suppose we have to be realistic about

it—"

"We do," answered Docchi. "Anti is the only one of us who has a chance of doing the job and surviving."

Jordan adjusted a dial. "It was Cameron who was responsible for it. If Anti doesn't come back, you can be damn sure he'll join her."

"No threats, please," said Docchi. "When are you going to let her out?"

"She's out," said Jordan. Deliberately, he had diverted their attention while he had taken the burden of emotional strain.

Docchi glanced hastily at the telecom. Anti was hanging free in space, wrapped

and strapped in strips torn from the useless spacesuits—that, and more flesh than any human had ever borne. The helmet sat jauntily on her head; the oxygen cylinder was strapped to her back. She was still intact.

"How is she?" he asked anxiously, unaware that the microphone was open.

"Fine," came Anti's reply, faint and ready. "The air's thin, but it's pure oxygen."

"Cold?" asked Docchi.

"It hasn't penetrated yet. No worse than the acid, at any rate. What do I do?"

Jordan gave her directions. The others watched. It was work to find the tools and examine the tubes for defectives, to loosen the tubes in the sockets and pull them out and push them spinning into space. It was still harder to replace them, though there was no gravity and Anti was held to the hull by magneslippers.

But it seemed more than work. To Cameron, who was watching, an odd thought

occurred: In her remote past, of which he knew nothing, Anti had done something like this before. Ridiculous, of course. Yet there was a rhythm to her motions, this shapeless giant creature whose bones would break with her weight

if she tried to stand at even only half Earth gravity. Rhythm, a sense of purpose, a strange pattern, an incredible gargantuan grace.

The whale plowing the waves is graceful; it cannot be otherwise in its natural habitat. The human race had produced, accidentally, one unlikely person to whom interplanetary space was not an alien thing. Anti was at last in her element.

"Now," said Jordan, keeping the tension out of his voice, "go back to the outside tool compartment. You'll find a lever. Pull. That will set the combustion cap in place."

"Done," said Anti, some minutes later.

"That's all. You can come in now."

"That's all? But I'm not cold. It hasn't reached any nerves yet."

"Come in," repeated Jordan, showing the anger of alarm.

She walked slowly over the hull to the cargo lock and, while she did, Jordan reeled in the telecom viewers. The lock was no sooner closed to the outside and the air hissing into the compartment than Jordan was there, opening the inner lock.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

She flipped back the helmet. There was frost on her eyebrows and her nose was

a bright red. "Of course. My hands aren't a bit cold." She stripped off the heated gloves and waggled her fingers.

"It *can't* be!" protested Cameron. "You should be frozen stiff!"

"Why?" asked Anti, laughing. "It's a matter of insulation and I have plenty of that."

Cameron turned to Docchi. "When I was a kid, I saw a film of a dancer. She did a ballet, *Life of the Cold Planets*, I believe it was called. For some cockeyed reason, I thought of it when Anti was out there. I hadn't thought of it in years."

He rubbed his hand fretfully over his forehead. "It fascinated me when I first saw it. I couldn't get it out of my mind. When I grew older, I found out a tragic thing happened to the dancer. She was on a tour of Venus and the ship she was in disappeared. They sent out searching parties, of course. They found her after she had spent a week on a fungus plain. You know what that meant. The great ballerina was a living spore culture medium."

"Shut up," growled Jordan.

Cameron didn't seem to hear. "Naturally, she died. I can't remember her name, but I've always remembered the ballet she did. And that's funny, because it

reminded me of Anti out there—"

A fist exploded in his face. If there had been more behind the blow than shoulders and a fragment of a body, his jaw would have been broken. As it was

he floated through the air and crashed against the wall.

Angrily, he got to his feet. "I gave my word I wouldn't cause any trouble. The agreement evidently doesn't work both ways." He glanced significantly at the weapon Jordan carried. "Maybe you'd better be sure to have that around at all times."

"I told you to shut up," said Jordan. After that he ignored the doctor. He didn't have a body with which to do it, but somehow Jordan managed a bow. "A flawless performance. One of your very best, Antoinette."

"Do you think so?" sighed Anti. The frost had melted from her eyebrows and was trickling down her cheek. She left with Jordan.

Cameron remained behind. He felt his jaw. It was too bad about his ambitions.

He knew now that he was never going to be the spectacular success he had once

imagined. Not after these accidentals had escaped from Handicap Haven. Still, he would always be able to practice medicine somewhere in the Solar System.

He'd done his best on the asteroid and this ship, and he'd been a complete ass both times.

The ballerina hadn't really died, as he had been told. It would have been better for her if she had. He succeeded in recalling her name. It had been Antoinette.

Now it was Anti. He could have found that out by checking her case history— *if* Handicap Haven had one on file. Probably not, he comforted himself. Why keep

case histories of hopeless cases?

W

e'll stick to the regular lanes," said Docchi. "I think we'll get closer. They have no reason to suspect that we're heading toward Earth. Mars is more logical, or one of the moons of Jupiter, or another asteroid."

Jordan shifted uneasily. "I'm not in favor of it. They'll pick us up before we have

a chance to say anything."

"But there's nothing to distinguish us from an ordinary Earth-to-Mars rocket. We have a ship's registry on board. Pick out a ship that's in our class. Hereafter, we're going to be that ship. If Traffic blips us, and they probably won't unless we try to land, have a recording ready. Something like this: 'ME 21 zip crackle 9

reporting. Our communication is acting up. We can't hear you, Traffic.' Don't overdo the static effects but repeat that with suitable variations and I don't think they will bother us."

Shaking his head dubiously, Jordan swung away toward the repair shops.

"You look worried," said Anti.

Docchi turned around. "Yeah."

"Won't it work?"

"Sure. We'll get close to Earth. They're not looking for us around here. They don't really know why we escaped in the rocket. That's why they can't figure out where we're going."

His face was taut and his eyes were tired. "It's not that. The entire Solar Police Force has been alerted for us."

"Which means?"

"Look. We planned to bypass the Medicouncil and take our case directly to the Solar Government. If they want us as much as the radio indicates, it's not likely they'll be very sympathetic. If the Solar Government doesn't support us all the way, we'll never get another chance."

"Well?" said Anti. She seemed trimmer, more vigorous. "What are we waiting for? Let's take the last step first."

He raised his head. "The Solar Government won't like it."

"They won't, but there's nothing they can do about it."

"I think there is—simply shoot us down. When we stole the ship, we automatically stepped into the criminal class."

"We knew that in advance."

"Is it worth it?"

"I think so," said Anti.

"In that event," he said, "I'll need time to get ready."

She scrutinized him carefully. "Maybe we can fix you up."

"With fake arms and grease-paint? No. They'll have to accept us as we are."

"A good idea. I hadn't thought of the sympathy angle."

"Not sympathy. Reality. I don't want them to approve of us as handsome accidentals and have them change their minds when they discover what we're really like."

Anti looked doubtful, but she kept her objections to herself as she waddled away.

Sitting in silence, he watched her go. She, at least, would derive some benefit.

Dr. Cameron apparently hadn't noticed that exposure to extreme cold had done more to inhibit her unceasing growth than the acid bath. She'd never be normal

again; that was obvious. But some day, if the cold treatment were properly investigated, she might be able to stand gravity.

He examined the telecom. They were getting closer. No longer a bright point of

light, Earth was a perceptible disc. He could see the outline of oceans, shapes of land; he could imagine people.

Jordan came in. "The record is rigged up, though we haven't had to use it. But we have a friend behind us. An official friend."

"Has he blipped us?"

"Not yet. He keeps hanging on."

"Is he overtaking us?"

"He would like to."

"Don't let him."

"With this bag of bolts?"

"Shake it apart if you have to," Docchi impatiently said. "How soon can you break into a broadcasting orbit?"

"I thought that was our last resort."

"Right. As far as Anti and I are concerned, this is it. Any argument against?"

"None that I can think of," answered Jordan. "With a heavy cruiser behind us, no argument at all."

T

hey were all in the control compartment. "I don't want a focus exclusively on me," Docchi was saying. "To a world of perfect normals I may look strange, but we have to avoid the family portrait effect."

"Samples," suggested Anti.

"In a sense, yes. A lot depends on whether they accept those samples."

For the first time Dr. Cameron began to realize what they were up to. "Wait!" he exclaimed. "You've got to listen to me!"

"We're not going to wait and we've already done enough listening to you," said Docchi. "Jordan, see that Cameron stays out of the telecom transmitting angle and doesn't interrupt. We've come too far for that."

"Sure," Jordan promised harshly. "If he makes a sound, I'll melt the teeth out of his mouth." He held the toaster against his side, out of line with the telecom, but aimed at Cameron's face.

Cameron began to shake with urgency, but he kept still.

"Ready?" Docchi asked.

"Flip the switch and we will be, with everything we've got. If they don't read us, it'll be because they don't want to."

The rocket slipped out of the approach lanes. It spun down, the stern tubes pulsing brightly, coming toward Earth in a tight trajectory.

"Citizens of the Solar System!" began Docchi. "Everyone on Earth! This is an unscheduled broadcast, an unauthorized appeal. We are using the emergency bands because, for us, it is an emergency. Who are we? Accidentals, of course,

as you can see by looking at us. I know the sight isn't pretty, but we consider other things more important than appearance. Accomplishment, for example.

Contributing to progress in ways normals cannot do.

"Shut away on Handicap Haven, we're denied this right. All we can do there is exist in frustration and boredom; kept alive whether we want to be or not. Yet we have a gigantic contribution to make ... if we are allowed to leave the Solar System for Alpha Centauri! You can't travel to the stars now, although eventually you will.

"You must be puzzled, knowing how slow our present rockets are. No normal person could make the round trip; he would die of old age. But we accidentals

can go! We would positively *not* die of old age! The Medicouncil knows that is true ... and still will not allow us to go!"

At the side of the control compartment, Cameron opened his mouth to protest.

Jordan, glancing at him, imperceptibly waggled the concealed weapon. Cameron

swallowed his words and subsided without a sound.

"Biocompensation," continued Docchi evenly. "You may know about it, but in case information on it has been suppressed, let me explain: The principle of biocompensation has long been a matter of conjecture. This is the first age in which medical technology is advanced enough to explore it. Every cell, every organism, tends to survive, as an individual, as a species. Injure it and it strives for survival according to the seriousness of the injury. We accidentals have been maimed and mutilated almost past belief.

"Our organisms had the assistance of medical science. *Real* medical science.

Blood was supplied as long as we needed it, machines did all our breathing, kidneys were replaced, hearts furnished, glandular products supplied in the exact quantities necessary, nervous and muscular systems were regenerated. In the extremity of our organic struggle, because we had the proper treatment, our bodies were wiped virtually free of death."

Sweat ran down his face. He longed for hands to wipe it away.

"Most accidentals are nearly immortal. Not quite—we'll die four or five hundred years from now. Meanwhile, there is no reason why we can't leave the Solar System. Rockets are slow; you would die before you got back from Alpha Centauri. We won't. Time doesn't matter to us.

"Perhaps better, faster rockets will be devised after we leave. You may get to there long before we do. We won't mind. We will simply have made our contribution to progress as best we could, and that will satisfy us."

With an effort Docchi smiled. The instant he did, he felt it was a mistake, one that he couldn't rectify. Even to himself it felt more like a snarl.

"You know where we're kept That's a politer word than imprisoned. We don't call it Handicap Haven; our name for it is the *junkpile*. And to ourselves we're junkmen. Does this give you a clue to how we feel?"

"I don't know what you'll have to do to force the Medicouncil to grant their permission. We appeal to you as our last resort. We have tried all other ways and failed. Our future as human beings is at stake. Whether we get what we want and need is something for you to settle with your conscience."

He nudged the switch and sat down.

His face was gray.

"I don't like to bother you," said Jordan, "but what shall we do about them?"

Docchi glanced at the telecom. "They" were uncomfortably close and considerably more numerous than the last time he had looked.

"Take evasive action," he said wearily. "Swing close to Earth and use the planet's gravity to give us a good push. We've got to keep out of their hands until people have time to react."

"I think you ought to know—" began Cameron. There was an odd tone to his voice.

"Save it for later," said Docchi. "I'm going to sleep." His body sagged. "Jordan, wake me up if anything important happens. And remember that you don't have to

listen to this fellow unless you want to."

Jordan nodded and touched the controls. Nona, leaning against the gravital panel, paid no attention to the scene. She seemed to be listening to something nobody else could hear. That was nothing new, but it broke Docchi's heart whenever he saw it. His breath drew in almost with a sob as he left the control room.

T

he race went on. Backdrop: planets, stars, darkness. The little flecks of light that edged nearer didn't seem cheerful to Jordan. His lips were fixed in a straight, hard line. He could hear Docchi come in behind him.

"Nice speech," said Cameron.

"Yeah." Docchi glanced at the telecom. The view didn't inspire further comment.

"That's the trouble, it was just a speech. It didn't do you any good. My advice is to give up before you get hurt."

"It would be."

Cameron stood at the threshold. "I may as well tell you," he said reluctantly. "I tried to before the broadcast, as soon as I found out what you were going to do.

But you wouldn't listen."

He came into the control compartment. Nona was huddled in a seat, motionless,

expressionless. Anti was absent.

"You know why the Medicouncil refused to let you go?"

"Sure," said Docchi.

"The general metabolism of accidentals is further from normal than that of creatures we dredge from the bottom of the sea. Add to that an enormously elongated life span and you ought to see the Medicouncil's objection."

"Get to the point!"

"Look at it this way," Cameron continued almost desperately. "The Centauri group contains quite a few planets. From what we know of cosmology,

intelligent life probably exists there to a greater or lesser extent. You will be our representatives to them. What *they* look like isn't important; it's their concern.

But our ambassadors have to meet certain minimum standards. They at least—

damn it, don't you see that they at least have to *look* like human beings?"

"I know you feel that way," said Jordan, rigid with contempt.

"I'm not talking for myself," Cameron said. "I'm a doctor. The medicouncilors are doctors. We graft on or regenerate legs and arms and eyes. We work with blood and bones and intestines. We know what a thin borderline separates normal people from—from you.

"Don't you understand? They're perfect, perhaps too much so. They can't tolerate even small blemishes. They rush to us with things like hangnails, pimples, simple dandruff. Health—or rather the appearance of it—has become a fetish.

They may think they're sympathetic to you, but what they actually feel is something else."

"What are you driving at?" whispered Docchi.

"Just this: if it were up to the Medicouncil, you would be on your way to the Centauri group. But it isn't. The decision always had to be referred back to the Solar System as a whole. And the Medicouncil can't go counter to the mass of public opinion."

Docchi turned away in loathing.

"Don't believe me," said Cameron. "You're not too far from Earth. Pick up the reaction to your broadcast."

Worriedly, Jordan looked at Docchi.

"We may as well find out," said Docchi. "It's settled now, one way or the other."

They searched band after band. The reaction was always the same. Obscure private citizen or prominent one, man or woman, they all told how sorry they were for the accidentals, but—

"Turn it off," said Docchi at last.

"Now what?" Jordan asked numbly.

"You have no choice," said the doctor.

"No choice," repeated Docchi dully. "No choice but to give up. We misjudged who our allies were."

"We knew you had," said Cameron. "It seemed better to let you go on thinking that way while you were on the asteroid. It gave you something to hope for. It made you feel you weren't alone. The trouble was that you got farther than we

thought you would ever be able to."

"So we did," Docchi said. His lethargy seemed to lift a little. "And there's no reason to stop now. Jordan, pick up the ships behind us."

Tell them we've got Cameron on board. A hostage. Play him up as a hero. Basically, he's not with those who are against us."

Anti came into the control compartment. Cheerfulness faded from her face.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Jordan will explain to you. I've got to think."

Docchi closed his eyes. The ship lurched slightly, though the vibration from the rockets did not change. There was no reason for alarm; the flight of a ship was

never completely steady. Docchi paid no attention.

At last he opened his eyes. "If we were properly fueled and provisioned," he said without much hope, "I would be in favor of the four of us heading for Alpha or Proxima. Maybe even Sirius. It wouldn't matter where, since we wouldn't intend

to come back. But we can't make it with our small fuel reserve. If we can shake the ships behind us, we might be able to hide until we can steal the necessary fuel and food."

"What'll we do with Doc?" asked Jordan.

"We'd have to raid an unguarded outpost, of course. Probably a small mining asteroid. We can leave him there."

"Yeah," said Jordan. "A good idea, *if* we can run away from our personal escort of bloodhounds. Offhand, that doesn't seem very likely. They didn't come any closer when I told them we had Doc with us, but they didn't drop back—"

He stopped and raised his eyes to the telecom. He blinked, not believing what he saw.

"They're gone!" His voice broke with excitement.

Almost instantly Docchi was beside him. "No," he corrected. "They're still following, but they're very far behind." Even as he looked, the pursuing ships visibly lost ground.

"What's our relative speed?" asked Jordon. He looked at the dials himself, frowned, tapped them as if the needles had gone crazy.

"What did you do to the rockets?" demanded Docchi.

"Nothing! There wasn't a thing I *could* do. We were already running at top speed."

"We're above it. Way above it. How?"

There was nothing to explain their astonishing velocity. Cameron, Anti, and Jordan were in the control compartment. Nona still sat huddled up, hands pressed tight against her head. There was no explanation at all, yet power was pouring into the gravital unit, as a long unused, actually useless dial was indicating.

"The gravital drive is working," Docchi blankly pointed out.

"Nonsense," said Anti. "I don't feel any weight."

"You don't," answered Docchi. "You won't. The gravital unit was originally installed to drive the ship. When that proved unsatisfactory, it was converted.

The difference is slight but important. An undirected general field produces weight effects inside the ship. That's for passenger comfort. A directed field, outside the ship, will drive it. You can have one or the other, not both."

"But I didn't turn on the gravital drive," said Jordan in flat bewilderment. "I couldn't if I wanted to. It's disconnected."

"I would agree with you, except for one thing. It's working." Docchi stared at Nona, whose eyes were closed. "Get her attention," he said.

It was Jordan who gently touched her shoulder. She opened her eyes. On the instrument board, the needle of a once useless dial rose and fell.

"What's the matter with the poor dear?" asked Anti. "She's shaking."

"Let her alone," said Docchi.

No one moved. No one said anything at all. Minutes passed while the ancient ship creaked and groaned and ran away from the fastest rockets in the Solar System.

"I think I know," said Docchi at last, still frowning. "Consider the gravity-generating plant. Part of it is an electronic computer, capable of making the necessary calculations and juggling the proportion of power required to produce, continuously, directed or undirected gravity. In other words, a brain, a complex mechanical intelligence. From the viewpoint of that intelligence, why should it perform *ad infinitum* a complicated but meaningless routine? It didn't know why, and because it didn't, very simply, it refused to do so.

"Now consider Nona. She's deaf, can't speak, can't communicate. In a way she's comparable to the gravital computer. Like it, she has a very high potential intelligence. Like it, she's had difficulty grasping the facts of her environment.

Unlike it, though, she has learned something. How much, I don't know, but it's

far more than the Medicouncil psychologists credit her with."

"Yeah," said Jordan dubiously. "But what's happening now?"

"If there were two humans involved, you would call it telepathy," answered Docchi hesitantly, fumbling for concepts he could only sense without grasping.

"One intelligence is electronic, the other organic. You'll have to coin a new term, because the only one I know is extrasensory perception, and that's obviously ridiculous. It is, isn't it?"

Jordan smiled and flexed his arms. Under the shapeless garment his muscles rippled. "It isn't," he said. "The power was there, but we're the only ones who know how to use it. Or rather Nona is."

"Power?" repeated Anti, rising majestically. "You can keep it. I want just enough to get to Centauri."

"I think you'll get it," Docchi promised. "A lot of things seem clearer now. For example, in the past, why didn't gravital units work well at considerable distances from the Sun? As a matter of fact, the efficiency of each unit was inversely proportional to the square of the distance between it and the Sun.

"The gravital computer is a deaf, blind, mass-sensitive brain. The major fact in its existence is the Sun, the greatest mass in the Solar System. To such a brain, leaving the Solar System would be like stepping off the edge of a flat world, because it couldn't be aware of stars.

"Now that it knows about the Galaxy, the drive will work anywhere. With Nona to direct it, even Sirius isn't far away."

"Doc," said Jordan carelessly, "you'd better be figuring a way to get off the ship.

Remember, we're going faster than man ever went before." He chuckled.

"Unless, of course, you *like* our company and don't want to leave."

"We've got to do some figuring ourselves," interposed Docchi. "Such as where we are heading now."

"A good idea," said Jordan. He busied himself with charts and calculations.

Gradually his flying fingers slowed. His head bent low over his work. At last he stopped and folded his arms.

"Where?" asked Docchi.

"There." Jordan dully punched the telecom selector and a view became fixed on the screen. In the center glimmered a tiny world, a fragment of a long-exploded planet. Their destination was easily recognizable.

It was Handicap Haven.

"But why do we want to go there?" asked Anti. She looked in amazement at Docchi.

"We're not going voluntarily," he answered, his voice flat and spent. "We're going where the Medicouncil wants us to go. We forgot about the monitor system. When Nona activated the gravital unit, that fact was indicated at some central station. All the Medicouncil had to do was use the monitor to take the gravital drive away from Nona."

"We thought we were running away from the ships, which we were, but only to beat them back to the junkpile?" asked Anti.

Docchi nodded.

"Well, it's over. We did our best. There's no use crying about it." Yet she was.

She passed by Nona, patting her gently. "It's all right, darling. You tried."

Jordan followed her from the compartment.

Cameron remained; he came over to Docchi. "Everything isn't lost," he said, somewhat awkwardly. "You're back where you started from, but Nona at least will benefit."

"Benefit?" said Docchi. "Someone will. It won't be Nona."

"You're wrong. Now that she is an important factor—"

"So is a special experimental machine. Very valuable. I don't think she'll like that classification."

Silence met silence. It was Dr. Cameron who turned away.

"That ghastly glow of yours when you're angry always did upset me. I'll come back when it's dimmer."

Docchi glared after him. Cameron was the only normal aware that it was Nona

who controlled the gravital unit. All the outside world could realize was that it was in operation, as it had been designed to work, but never had. If Cameron could be disposed of—

He shook his head. It wouldn't solve anything. He might fool them for a while.

They might think he was responsible. In the end, they'd find out. Nona wasn't

capable of that much deception, for she never knew what a test was.

He went over to her. Once he had hoped.... It didn't matter what he had hoped.

She looked up and smiled. She had a right to. No word had ever broken the silence of her mind, but now she was communicating with something, whatever

it was that an electronic brain could say. Of course she didn't understand that the conversation was taking place between two captives, herself and the gravital computer.

Abruptly he turned away. He stopped at the telecom panel and methodically kicked it apart. Delicate tubes smashed into powder. The emergency radio he thoroughly demolished.

The ship was firmly in the grip of the gravital monitor. There was nothing he could do about that. All that remained was to protect Nona from their prying minds as long as he could.

She didn't hear the noise, or didn't care. She sat there, head in her hands, calm and smiling.

T

he outer shell of the rocket dome opened before and closed behind them. Jordan

set the controls in neutral and lifted his hands, muttering to himself. They were gliding through the lip of the inner shell. Home.

"Cheer up," said Cameron breezily. "You're not really prisoners, you know."

Nona seemed content, though Jordan didn't. Docchi said nothing, the light gone

from his face. Anti wasn't with them; she was floating in the tank of acid. The gravity field of the asteroid made that necessary.

The ship scraped gently and they were down. Jordan touched a lever; passenger

and freight locks were open.

"Let's go," said Dr. Cameron. "I imagine there's a reception committee for you."

There was. The little rocket dome held more ships than normally came in a year.

The precise confusion of military discipline was everywhere in evidence. Armed

guards lined either side of the landing ramp down which they walked.

At the bottom, a large telecom unit had been set up. If size indicated anything, someone considered this an important occasion. From the screen, larger than life, Medicouncilor Thorton looked out approvingly.

The procession from the ship halted in front of the telecom unit.

"A good job, Dr. Cameron," said the medicouncilor. "We were quite surprised at the escape of the four accidentals, and your disappearance, which coincided with it. From what we were able to piece together, you deliberately followed them. A splendid example of quick thinking, Doctor. You deserve recognition for it."

"Thank you," said Cameron.

"I'm sorry I can't be there to congratulate you in person, but I will be soon." The medicouncilor paused discreetly. "At first the publicity was bad. Very bad. We thought it unwise to conceal an affair of such magnitude. Of course the unauthorized broadcast made it impossible. Fortunately, the gravital discovery came along at just the

right time. I don't mind telling you that the net effect is now in our favor."

"I hoped it would be," said Cameron. "Nona—"

"You've spoken about her before." The medicouncilor frowned. "We can discuss her later. For the moment, see that she and the rest of the accidentals are returned to their usual places. Bring Docchi to your office at once. I want to question him privately."

Cameron stared at him in bewilderment. "But I thought—"

"No objections, Doctor," snapped Thorton. "Important people are waiting for you. That is all." The telecom darkened.

"I think you heard what he said, Dr. Cameron." The officer at his side was very polite. He could afford to be, with the rank of three big planets on his tunic.

"Very well," Cameron answered. "But as commander of the asteroid, I request that you furnish a guard for the girl."

"Commander?" repeated the officer. "That's funny—my orders indicate that I am, until further notice. I haven't got that notice." He looked around at his men and crooked a finger. "Lieutenant, see that the little fellow—Jordan, I think his

name is—gets a lift back to the main dome. And you can walk the pretty lady to her room. Or whatever it is she lives in." He smiled negligently at Cameron.

"Anything to oblige another commander."

T

he medicouncilor, Thorton, was waiting impatiently on the telecom when they got to Cameron's office.

"We will arrive in about two hours," he said immediately. "When I say we, I mean a number of top governmental officials and scientists. Meanwhile, let's get on with this gravital business." He caught sight of the commander. "General Judd, this is a technical matter. I don't think you'll be interested in it."

"Very well, sir. I'll stand guard outside."

The medicouncilor was silent until the door closed behind General Judd. "Sit down, Docchi," he said with unexpected kindness. He paused to note the effect.

"I can sympathize with you. You had everything you wanted nearly within your reach. And, after that, to return to Handicap Haven—well, I can understand how

you feel. But since you did return, I think we can arrange to do something for you."

Docchi stared at the man on the screen. A spot of light pulsed on his cheek and then flared rapidly over his face.

"Sure," he said casually. "But there are criminal charges against me."

"A formality," said the medicouncilor. "With a thing like the discovery—or rediscovery—of the gravital drive to think about, no one is going to worry much about your unauthorized departure from the asteroid."

Medicouncilor Thorton sounded pleased. "I don't want to mislead you. We can't do any more for you medically than has already been done. However, you will

find yourself the center of a more adequate social life. Friends, work, whatever you want. Naturally, in return for this, we will expect your full cooperation."

"Naturally." Docchi blinked at him and got to his feet. "Sounds interesting. I'd like to think about it for a minute."

Cameron planted himself squarely in front of the screen. "Maybe I don't understand. I think you've got the wrong person."

"Dr. Cameron!" Thorton glowered. "Please explain."

"It was an easy mistake to make," said Cameron. "Cut off from communication, the gravital drive began to work. How? Why? Mostly, who did it? You knew it

wasn't I. I'm a doctor, not a physicist. Nor Jordan, he's at best a mechanic.

Therefore it had to be Docchi, because he's an engineer. He could make it work.

But it wasn't Docchi. He had nothing to do with—"

"Look out!" cried Thorton too late.

Cameron fell to his knees. The same foot that brought him down crashed into his chin. His head snapped back and he sprawled on the floor. Blood trickled from

his face.

"Docchi!" shouted Thorton from the screen.

Docchi didn't answer. He was crashing through the door. The commander was lounging against the wall. Head down, Docchi ran into him. The toaster fell from his belt to the floor. With scarcely a pause, Docchi stamped on it and continued running.

The commander got to his feet and retrieved the weapon. He aimed it tentatively at the retreating figure; a thought occurred to him and

he lowered it. He examined the damaged mechanism. After that, it went gingerly into a tunic pocket.

Muffled shouts were coming from Cameron's office. The general broke in.

The medicouncilor glared at him from the screen. "I can see that you let him get away."

The disheveled officer straightened his uniform. "I'm sorry, sir. I'll alert the guards immediately."

"Never mind now. Revive that man."

The general wasn't accustomed to giving resuscitation; it was out of his line.

Nevertheless, in a few minutes Cameron was conscious, though somewhat

dazed.

"Now then, Doctor, if it wasn't Docchi who was responsible for the sudden functioning of the gravital drive, who was it?"

With satisfaction, Cameron told him. He had not been wrong about the girl.

Listening to the detailed explanation of Nona's mental abilities, the general was perplexed, as generals sometimes are.

"I see." The medicouncilor nodded. "We overlooked that possibility altogether.

Not the mechanical genius of an engineer. Instead, the strange telepathic sense of a girl. That puts the problem in a different light."

"It does." Cameron pressed his aching jaw. "She can't tell us how she does it.

We'll have to experiment. Fortunately, it won't involve any danger. With the monitor system we can always control the gravital drive."

The medicouncilor leaned perilously backward and shook his head. "You're wrong. It's supposed to, but it doesn't. We tried. For a microsecond, the monitor did take over, but the gravital computer is smarter than we thought, if it *was* the computer that figured out the method. It found a way of cutting the power from

the monitor circuit. It didn't respond at all."

Cameron forgot his jaw. "If you didn't bring the rocket back on remote, why did she come?"

"Docchi knows," growled the medicouncilor. "He found out in this room. That's why he escaped." He tapped on his desk with blunt fingers. "She could have taken the ship anywhere she pleased and we couldn't have stopped her. Since she voluntarily came back, it's obvious that she wants the asteroid!"

Medicouncilor Thorton tried to shove his face out of the screen and into the room. "Don't you ever think, General? There isn't any real difference between gravital units except size and power. What she did to the ship she can do as easily to the asteroid." He thrust out a finger and pointed angrily. "Don't stand there, General Judd. Find that girl!"

It was late for that kind of command. The great dome overhead trembled and creaked in countless joints. The little world shivered, groaned as if it had lain too long in an age-old orbit. It began to move.

V

ague shapes stirred, crawled, walked if they could. Fantastic and near-fantastic figures came to the assembly. Huge or tiny, on their own legs or borrowed ones, they arrived, with or without arms, faces. The word had spread by voice, by moving lips, by sign languages of every sort.

"Remember, it will be hours or perhaps days before we're safe," said Docchi. His voice was growing hoarse. "It's up to us to see that Nona has all the time she needs."

"Where is she hiding?" asked someone from the crowd.

"I don't know. If I did, I still wouldn't tell you. It's our job to keep them from finding her."

"How?" demanded one near the front. "Fight the guards?"

"Not directly," said Docchi. "We have no arms in the sense of weapons. Many of us have no arms in any sense. All we can hope to do is obstruct their search.

Unless someone has a better idea, this is what I plan:

"I want all the men, older women, and the younger ones who aren't suitable for reasons I'll explain later. The guards won't be here for another half hour—it will take that long to get them together and give them the orders that the Medicouncil must be working out now. When they do come, get in their way.

"How you do that, I'll leave to your imagination. Appeal to their sympathy as long as they have any. Put yourself in dangerous situations. They have ethics; at first they'll be inclined to help you. When they do, try to steal their weapons.

Avoid physical violence as much as you can. We don't want to force them into

retaliation. Make the most of that phase of their behavior. It won't last long."

Docchi paused and looked over the crowd. "Each of you will have to decide for himself when to drop that kind of resistance and start an active battle campaign.

We have to disrupt the light and scanning and ventilation systems, for instance.

They'll be forced to keep them in repair. Perhaps they'll try to guard these strategic points. So much the better for us—there will be fewer guards to contend with."

"What about me?" called a woman from far in back. "What do I do?"

"You are in for a rough time," Docchi promised her. "Is Jerian here?"

She elbowed her way to his side through the crowd.

"Jerian," said Docchi to the accidentals, "is a normal, pretty woman—outwardly.

She has, however, no trace of a digestive system. The maximum time she can go

without food and fluid injections is ten hours. That's why she's here."

Again Docchi scanned the group. "I need a cosmetech, someone who has her equipment with her."

A legless woman propelled herself forward. Docchi conferred with her. She seemed startled, but she complied. Under her deft fingers Jerian was transformed

—into Nona.

"She will be the first Nona they'll find," explained Docchi, "because she can get away with the disguise longer. I think—I hope—they'll call off the search for a few hours while they test her. Eventually they are sure to find out. In Jerian's case, fingerprints or X-rays would reveal who she is. But that won't occur to them immediately. Nona is impossible to question, as you know, and Jerian will

act exactly as Nona would.

"As soon as they discover that Jerian isn't Nona—well, they won't bother to be polite, if that's the word for it. The guards will like the idea of finding an attractive girl they can manhandle in the line of duty, especially if they think that will help them find Nona. It won't, of course. But it will hold up the search and that's what we want."

They stood still, no one moving. Women looked at each other in silent apprehension.

"Let's go," said Jordan grimly.

"Wait," advised Docchi. "I have one volunteer Nona. I need about fifty more. It doesn't matter if you're physically sound or not—we'll raid the lab for plastissue.

If you think you can be made up to look like Nona, come forward."

Slowly, singly and by twos and threes, they came to him. There were few indeed

who wouldn't require liberal use of camouflage.

The rest followed Jordan out.

Mass production of an individual. Not perfect in every instance. Good enough to

pass in most. Docchi watched approvingly, suggesting occasional touches of makeup.

"She can't speak or hear," he reminded the volunteers. "Remember that at all times, no matter what they do. Hide in difficult places. After Jerian is taken and the search called off and then resumed, let yourselves be found one at a time.

Every guard that has to take you for examination is one less to look for the real Nona. They have to find her soon or get off the asteroid."

The cosmetechs were busy; none stopped. There was one who looked up.

"Get off?" she asked. "Why?"

"The Sun is getting smaller."

"Smaller!" exclaimed the woman.

He nodded. "Handicap Haven is leaving the Solar System."

Her fingers flew and molded the beautiful curve of a jaw where there had been

none. Next, plastissue lips were applied.

Nona was soon hiding in half a hundred places.

And one more....

T

he orbit of Neptune was far behind and still the asteroid was accelerating. Two giant gravital units strained at the core of Handicap Haven. The third clamped an abnormally heavy gravity on the isolated world. Prolonged physical exertion was awkward and

doubly exhausting. Hours turned into a day, but the units never faltered.

"Have you figured it out as precisely as you should?" asked Docchi easily. "You share our velocity away from the Sun. You'll have to overcome it before you can start going back."

The general ignored him. "If we could only turn off that damned drive!"

Engineer Vogel shrugged sickly. "You try it," he suggested. "I don't want to be

around when you do. It sounds easy: just a gravital unit. But remember there's a good-sized nuclear pile involved."

"I know we can't," admitted the general, morosely looking at the darkness overhead. "On the other hand, we can take off and blow this rock apart from a safe distance."

"And lose all hope of finding her?" taunted Docchi.

"We're losing her anyway," Cameron commented sourly.

"It's not as bad as all that," consoled Docchi. "Now that you know where the difficulty is, you can always build another computer and furnish it with auxiliary senses. Or maybe build into it the facts of elementary astronomy."

Cautiously, he shifted his frail body under the heavy gravity. "There's another solution, though it may not appeal to you. I can't believe Nona is altogether unique. There must be others like her. So-called 'born' mechanics, maybe, whose understanding of machinery is a form of empathy we've never suspected. Look

hard enough and you may find them, perhaps in the most unlikely or unlovely body."

General Judd grunted wearily, "If I thought you knew where she is —"

"You can try to find out," Docchi invited, glowing involuntarily.

"Forget about the dramatics, General," said Cameron in disgust. "We've questioned him thoroughly. Resistance we would have had in any event. He's responsible merely for making it more effective than we thought possible."

He added slowly: "At the moment, obviously, he's trying to tear down our morale. He doesn't have to bother. The situation is so bad that it looks hopeless. I can't think of a thing we can do that would help us."

The Sun was high in the center of the dome. Sun? More like a very bright star. It cast no shadows; the lights in the dome did. They flickered and with monotonous regularity went out again. The general swore constantly and emotionlessly until service was restored.

A guard approached with his captive. "I think I've found her, sir."

Cameron looked at the girl in dismay. "Guard, where's your decency?"

"Orders, sir," the man said.

"Whose orders?"

"Yours, sir. You said she was sound of body. How else could I find out?"

Cameron scowled and thrust a scalpel deep into the girl's thigh. She looked at him with a tear-stained face, but didn't move a muscle.

"Plastissue, as any fool can see," he commented dourly.

The guard looked revolted and started to lead her out.

"Let her go," snapped the doctor. "Both of you will be safer, I think."

The girl darted away. The guard followed her, shuddering, his eyes filled with a self-loathing that Cameron realized would require hours of psychiatric work to remove.

Docchi smiled. "I have a request to make."

"Go ahead and make it," snorted the general. "We're likely to give you anything you want."

"You probably will. You're going to leave without her. Very soon. When you do go, don't take all your ships. We'll need about three when we come to another solar system."

General Judd opened his mouth in rage.

"Don't you say anything you'll regret," cautioned Docchi. "When you get back, what will you report to your superiors? Can you tell them that you left in good order, while there was still time to continue the search? Or will they like it better if they know you stayed until the last moment? So late that you had to abandon

some of your ships?"

The general closed his mouth and stamped away. Wordlessly, Cameron dragged

after him.

T

he last ship had blasted off and the rocket trails had faded into overwhelming darkness. The Sun, which had been trying to lose itself among the other stars, finally succeeded. The asteroid was no

longer the junkpile. It was a small world that had become a swift ship.

"We can survive," said Docchi. "Power and oxygen, we have, and we can grow or synthesize our food."

He sat beside Anti's tank, which had been returned to the usual place. A small tree nodded overhead in the artificial breeze. It was peaceful enough. But Nona wasn't there.

"We'll get you out of the tank," promised Jordan. "When she comes back, we'll rig up a place where there's no gravity. And we'll continue cold treatment."

"I can wait," said Anti. "On this world I'm normal."

Docchi stared forlornly about. The one thing he wanted to see wasn't there.

"If you're worrying about Nona," advised Anti, "don't. The guards were pretty rough with the women, but plastissue doesn't feel pain. They didn't find her."

"How do you know?"

"Listen," said Anti. The ground shivered with the power of the gravital units.

"As long as they're running, how can you doubt?"

"If I could be sure—"

"You can start now," Jordan said. "First, though, you'd better get up and turn around."

Docchi scrambled to his feet. She was coming toward him.

She showed no sign of strain. Except for a slight smudge on her wonderfully smooth and scar-less cheek, she might just have stepped out of a beauty cubicle.

Without question, she was the most beautiful woman in the world. This world, of course, though she could have done well on any world—if she could have communicated with people as well as with machines.

"Where were you hiding?" Docchi asked, expecting no answer.

She smiled. He wondered, with a feeling of helplessness, if machines could sense and appreciate her lovely smile, or whether they could somehow smile

themselves.

"I wish I could take you in my arms," he said bitterly.

"It's not as silly as you think," said Anti, watching from the surface of the tank.

"You don't have any arms, but she has two. You can talk and hear, but she can't.

Between you, you're a complete couple."

"Except that she would never get the idea," he answered unhappily.

Jordan, rocking on his hands, looked up quizzically. "I must be something like her. They used to call me a born mechanic; just put a wrench in my hand and I

can do anything with a piece of machinery. It's as if I sense what the machine wants done to it. Not to the extent that Nona can understand, naturally. You might say it's reversed, that she's the one who can hear while I have to lip-read."

"You never just gabble," Docchi prompted. "You have something in mind."

Jordan hesitated. "I don't know if it's stupid or what. I was thinking of a kind of sign language with machines. You know, start with the simple ones, like clocks

and such, and see what they mean to her. Since they'd be basic machines, she'd

probably have pretty basic reactions. Then it's just a matter of—"

"You don't have to blueprint it," Docchi cut in excitedly. "That would be fine for determining elementary reactions, but I can't carry around a machine shop; it wouldn't be practical. There ought to be one variable machine that would be portable and yet convey all meanings to her."

"An electronic oscillator?"

Acid waves washed at the sides of the tank as Anti stirred impatiently. "Will you two great brains work it out in the lab, please? And when you get through with

that problem, you'll have plenty more to keep you occupied until we get to the

stars. Jordan and me, for instance. What future is there for a girl unless she can get married?"

"That's right," Docchi said. "I've got an idea we can do better than normal doctors. Being accidentals ourselves, we won't stop experimenting till we succeed. And we have hundreds of years to do it in."

Glowing, literally, with pleasure, he bent over for Jordan to climb on his back.

Then he kissed Nona and headed for the laboratory.

Nona smiled and followed.

"There are some things you don't need words or machines to express," Anti called out. "Keep that in mind, will you?"

She submerged contentedly in the acid bath. Above the dome, the stars gleamed

a bright welcome to the little world that flashed through interstellar space.

—**F.**

L.

WALLACE

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