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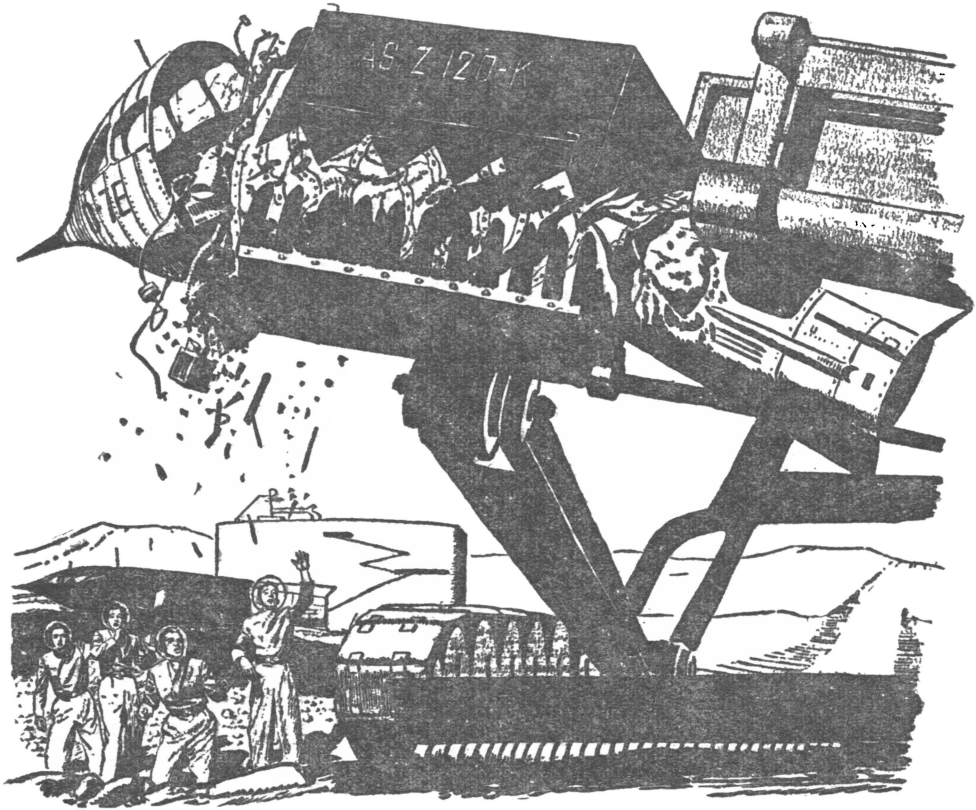
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# Alpha Say, Beta Do

by ALFRED E. MAXWELL



*"There goes our ship!" Kay screamed.*

**Precise Doyle Tindar and prim Kay Kanton had themselves duplicated, standard practice for trouble-shooting in space. But the duplicates fell in love—and what happened then was neither practice nor standard!**

**D**OYLE TINDAR WAS AWAKENED by the urgent buzzing of the visor-phone by his bed. He grumbled, rolled over, glanced at the viewplate and winced as he saw the fat, grim face of the Control Board Director, Sam Penset. He sat up, yawned, and snapped the set on. "Yeah?"

"Listen, Tindar," Penset boomed and Tindar turned the volume down. "We've got a large pile of trouble. No reports from the mines on Bolus last night. Automatic radio communication absolutely dead. Power plant may have caught a meteor, but it

would have to be a large one. Telescope won't tell us anything. Get out there, will you?"

"Say, I'm on vacation, if you don't mind," Tindar said. "What about Bedding? Or Teppen?"

"Bedding's on a honeymoon, damn him," Penset growled, "and Teppen's getting some new teeth planted. It has to be you."

"Miss Kanton's going out there tomorrow," Tindar insisted, not relishing a space trip since he was on his first vacation in a year.

"I've thought of that," Penset boomed

back. "She couldn't report fully on the state of affairs. She's a meter-reader. Strictly a control-room worker. Nothing to do with the power plant or the actual mines."

"Okay," Tindar sighed, "I'll get on it. I'll leave Hessing Field this afternoon. Do I get a bonus?"

"Yeah, you thief," Penset smiled, "but get duplicated. You'll have enough work for two men."

"Okay."

"And, Tindar—" Penset signaled him to stay on the air—"I've just thought of something. Miss Kanton had better go to Bolus with you. Might as well clean up the whole mess at once."

"Okay," Tindar said, waved and shut the set off.

He climbed out of bed very slowly and shuffled across the room in a pair of frayed slippers. He went to the bathroom, mixed and drank a stimulant to snap him out of his stupor. He lit a cigarette and rummaged around in his closet until he found his space-suit.

Since Miss Kanton was going to be on the trip with him, the job was more attractive. He mused about the very nice-looking Miss Kanton for a moment, then began dressing hurriedly. He'd have to get down to the duplication labs before the noon rush.

**W**ASHED, attired in the space suit he wanted his duplicate to wear, and considerably more awake, Tindar stood before the reception desk of the Central Commercial Duplication Laboratories of North America with his governmental certificates of permission for his "duping." The white-uniformed woman receptionist studied his certificates, handed him an identification disc and waved him on. She pressed a button on the desk and the information about him was wired to the other stations.

An attendant met and ushered him down a long, cool, white corridor to the section of the building devoted to the duplication of living matter. Another attendant took him from the first and whisked him up in an elevator to the floor where, as the somber sign stated, "Duplication of the

Human Being" was carried on. He was directed to a pneumatic chair in the waiting room and he sat down.

Tindar had never ceased to wonder at the startling work done in this massive building, which most people, over the course of the last hundred years of its use, had come to consider a natural part of the bustling, scientific worlds. C. D. Labs, holding a benevolent monopoly on the process, could duplicate anything composed of atoms and smaller than a three-storied dwelling in a matter of minutes. The products of such duplication existed only for a period of about eighty hours, but it had proved to be a tremendously utilitarian device in duplicating oil and coal for immediate use; in duplicating the bodies of persons undergoing operations for dissection before the operation; for creating microbes of diseases and studying their effects upon the body, after which they would conveniently disappear, and for duplicating persons whose talents or brawn were needed briefly for special problems. This last use had been a great aid to industries by providing living, breathing, duplicates of specially trained men in times of need; which times were frequent since the peoples of earth were spread so thinly over seven planets and thousands of asteroids.

A nurse came into the waiting room with a glass of brown fluid on a tray. Tindar, no novice at duplication, smiled at the nurse in recognition, took the glass and drank it down. It was a sedative that would put him deeply to sleep in a few minutes, so that he could be pleasantly oblivious to the slight discomfort of the duplication cell.

He followed the nurse into the "Dupe" room and ran a familiar eye over the shining and ponderous equipment. He knew the theory vaguely. Space, warped, formed positive and negative fields. These fields, subjected to warping and energy changes, formed nascent matter, unstable and simple. Warped again, the inchoate matter formed into molecular substances identical with the pattern electrically projected into it. Whatever was placed in the primary chamber was pierced back and forth at every possible angle by a thousand different

types of rays and emanations from the energy sources about the primary chambers. These rays were then the energy directed into the swirling haze of nascent matter. An identical object would take form in about five minutes time and the product's differences from the "pattern object" could not be detected by the strongest microscope.

"Simple," the man in the street might say. Tindar, more familiar with the theory of operation, was also more conscious of the hundreds and hundreds of years of research upon which the theory was based. He had always held a tremendous respect for the scientists who fathered the amazing invention.

Tindar climbed up onto the pneumatic cot and was slipped into the primary cylinder. He was slipping slowly into the mist of sleep as the door of the primary chamber clanked softly behind him. He gazed for a moment at the thousand lens-eyes on the curving walls about him. The eyes suddenly shown with all the colors of the spectrum and bathed his body in a weird and twisted rainbow of heterogeneous rays . . .

**T**WO Tindars awoke abruptly and sat up on the pneumatic cots. They saw that the cots had been moved and rested against another in a corner of the room. They looked at one another.

"Who's who?" one of them asked.

"We'll have to wait for the attendants," the other shrugged. It was odd. That was practically all you ever had to say to yourself.

Down the hall feet slapped rapidly on the floor and approached the "Dupe" chamber. A taut-faced attendant looked into the room and waved at them frantically with a trembling hand.

"Don't get off your cots, please, sirs," he quavered and was gone.

The Tindars stared at one another.

"Something novel," they both said.

"Listen to the hell they're raising in the other room," one said, breaking the identity of their thought streams.

Visor-phones were buzzing; at least a dozen voices were raised in a furious dis-

cussion. Another voice could be heard, pleading and distraught. More attendants ran up and down the hall before the "Dupe" chamber. Three uniformed men with faces as white as their uniforms rushed through the waiting room and faced the Tindars.

"Dr. Bronsky will be here in a moment, sirs," one of them said.

"What's the matter?" one of the Tindars asked.

"Dr. Bronsky will be here presently, sirs," the attendant repeated.

Dr. Bronsky came into the room with a retinue of flustered assistants. He nodded to the Tindars and worked his lips around as he waited for a pale little man to shuffle nervously into the room.

"Now, Endicott, how did you move the cots around? Try to remember." The doctor spoke with a fatherly air to the little man.

"I don't know . . . I was thinking of something else," Endicott whined. "I was polishing the floors. They have to be cleaned by ten o'clock. I was working with the sterilizer on the floors. I moved the cots to get them out of my road. I thought they were identified."

"Thought!" snorted Dr. Bronsky. "Since when does a damned fool think!"

"I'm sorry, Dr. Bronsky," the little man pleaded. "It's a rule. The floors have to be cleaned . . ."

"It is also a rule—a primary rule, Endicott, that identification of the 'pattern' is second only to the welfare of the 'pattern'," the doctor stormed. He gestured wildly in silence for a few minutes, then burst out again. "Get out! I will not have asses in my ward! Get out! You're fired!"

The little man shuffled abjectly out. One Tindar turned to Dr. Bronsky.

"What's the fury about?" he asked.

The doctor gestured the rest of his assistants and attendants out and closed the door. He worked his lips nervously for a few seconds.

"An unprecedented occurrence has blackened the record of Commercial Duplication. You shall have a perfect right to sue, but I'm sure that President Histar will settle satisfactorily with you out of court." He paused as if it were painful

to go on. "That attendant—that double, double damned fool has mixed you up before you were stamped. One minute the controller is out of the room and he does it! We have no means in our power now to tell which of you is the duplicate and which is the original. We have one hope. Perhaps one of you woke up before you were removed from the chambers? Perhaps one of you remembers which chamber he was in?"

"The last thing I recall is dozing off in the primary," one Tindar said.

"Same here," the other said.

"This is indeed regrettable!" boomed the doctor. "It's unheard of!"

"It's not that serious, doctor," one of the Tindars said. "We can still do our work. One of us shall disappear on the way back, that's all. The only inconvenience shall be having to bring the duplicate part of the way back."

"But who shall be your pilot?" the doctor mused, "if on the way back the one piloting the ship were to disappear . . ."

"We have another person with us," a Tindar said. "I think that everything will be quite all right."

"Well, we shall see. Apologies will be made to your corporation and a settlement of some kind, of course," Dr. Bronsky shrugged. "There is extremely little else that we can do. Until one of you dissipates, I suggest that you—" he indicated one Tindar—"be Alpha Tindar, and you—" he indicated the other—"be Beta Tindar. It might simplify matters."

The doctor himself checked them out at the desk and followed them to the door full of regrets at the event.

**A**LPHA and Beta Tindar ate a hearty meal at a cafe, then phoned Miss Kanton and felt better seeing her face in the view-plate. It was a nice face, a bit solemn, but nice. She had brown eyes and a burnt-honey mass of hair. They found that she was already out of the Dupe Labs and was waiting for them.

An electric car whisked to the place where Miss Kanton stayed. They liked Miss Kanton, but her coolness and aloofness they did not like. She was a woman technician, a capable intelligent young wo-

man who, the Tindars privately thought, could be an extremely nice person to have around if she would cease playing the part of the scientist for a few minutes. Her smile, her figure, her face all checked perfectly. But her mind was as sexless as an adding machine that had been left out in the snow.

She came down the walk towards the car with her dupe, each with a brief-case under one arm. The Tindars glanced simultaneously at her ankles, but found them covered by the leather boots of her space suit.

"This is my dupe," Miss Kanton said as she came up to the car, indicating her duplicate who had a white top to her suit collar.

"Hello, muscles!" greeted the dupe of Miss Kanton. "Call me Kay, will you?"

Miss Kanton looked startled and the two Tindars quietly gulped a greeting.

"I'm afraid I have a rather wild replica of myself," Miss Kanton said with surprise. "I'm glad she's only good for eighty hours. But she could ruin my reputation in thirty seconds."

"Quit worrying about your reputation," scolded the merry dupe. "Get those meter-readings out of your mind and think more about these two exciting hunks of masculinity here in the car."

"Katherine!" Miss Kanton shrieked. "I will not tolerate any such inopportune mouthing. Behave yourself!"

"It's just your inner self speaking, sister," the dupe replied with a chuckle.

"Katherine!" Miss Kanton gasped. "Mr. Tindar, you will ignore this, please?"

Miss Kanton and her dupe climbed into the car and Alpha Tindar pressed a button, sending them purring quietly down the street towards the rocket port.

"Which of you is the dupe?" Miss Kanton asked.

"We don't know," the Tindars answered.

"What!"

Together Alpha and Beta explained the unusual situation. Miss Kanton was shocked by the freak accident, but she smiled. Her dupe laughed and quickly sobered.

"Hell!" she said, "If I knew which was

the dupe we could have a wonderful eighty hours!"

The quartet arrived at Hessing Field a few minutes later and Alpha Tindar went into the Rocket Dispatcher's office to check on the ship. He came back and threw his hands up in the air.

"Another dilemma!" he exclaimed. "No four seaters. Just those damned two-seaters. We'll have to take two of them."

"Well, get a couple of Armstrongs," Beta said. "They're about the best."

"I'll take a Boison, myself," Miss Kanton said. "Armstrong's have a shimmy when they're a couple of years old."

"The strong-willed woman scientist!" her dupe sneered. "Armstrongs are the better ships."

"Katherine!" Miss Kanton ejaculated. "I'll have you dissipated if you continue this! I shall not tolerate much more!"

"You haven't time, granny," her dupe replied blithely.

The field pilots jettied the small two-seater ships out onto the field and into the launching cradles. When they were readied and equipped, the pilots signaled the Tindars and the Kantons.

"Beta, you and Miss Kanton's dupe take one," Alpha Tindar said. "Miss Kanton will drive me in the other. If there is a preliminary dissipation of one of us, no one will be hurt that way."

Beta nodded and Miss Kanton's dupe grabbed his hand and ran for one of the ships.

"I honestly believe she's been drinking," Miss Kanton murmured, watching her duplicate laughing as Beta helped her into the ship.

Alpha walked in a slow and stately manner to the other ship and opened the air-lock for the girl.

The ships flashed jets out of their rear tubes and rose slowly from the ground cradles. A thunderous roar sent them both soaring into the stratosphere, where the ships veered together and rocketed out of sight towards the band of transplanted asteroids that swung in an orbit around the earth two hundred thousand miles beyond the moon.

Alpha Tindar settled himself deeper into the tight, sponge spring chair by Miss

Kanton's side and watched with admiration the magnificent piloting job his "atomic brother" was doing. The other ship was keeping exactly abreast of Miss Kanton who was setting the pace.

Tindar was falling asleep when Miss Kanton switched on the intership radio. She called the other ship over the phones and all that came in answer were giggles. Miss Kanton quietly replaced the microphone and stared straight ahead on her course with a slightly red face.

**T**WENTY hours later they were circling Bolus preparatory to landing. As was the policy when dropping down upon open land, they switched on the anti-gravity fields, blasted themselves to a dead stop and sank slowly down onto the furrowed land of the asteroid mine.

The ships thumped down within three hundred feet of one another. Miss Kanton hurriedly snapped on her oxygen helmet, and Alpha followed her through the air-lock. Instead of going towards the control tower, which rose from the blue land like a pale yellow candle, Miss Kanton ran to the other ship and pounded on the door until Beta Tindar and the girl-dupe opened it and stepped out.

"What have you been doing, Katherine?" Miss Kanton asked over the helmet radio.

"Telling secrets to each other, granny," the dupe laughed. Alpha Tindar was a trifle envious of the smile on Beta's face.

Miss Kanton flushed and turned away towards the Central Tower. The other three caught up with her and four abreast they walked lightly over the rough plain. Through the thin atmosphere and over the helmet phones they heard the crashing drone of the mine in operation. To the Tindars it did not sound right. There was too much noise. The robot-diggers and refiners were supposedly working far below the ground.

Ahead of them, over the close horizon, sprang a great, looming metal shape that filled the air with the roar of its engines. It rushed towards them with a flat, toothed platform lowered slightly into the ground. The platform was nearly twenty feet in length, with a thousand metal claws above

it hungrily scooping the soil up into the black maw of the storage bin that swelled from it like a monstrous belly.

"It's a digger!" Alpha cried. "Get out of the way!"

In the weak gravity they were able to move by bounds out of the path of the mining machine. It roared past them, tearing up the ground in a dumb frenzy.

"The ships!" Miss Kanton shouted, screaming above the roar of the Digger.

"Too late!" Beta gasped. "It has one!"

There was a crashing clank and the cry of twisted steel as the machine grabbed the small rocket ship up and crushed it in its jaws. The ship vanished into the bulging bin that followed the mouth on swiftly spinning wheels. The digger growled over the other horizon, leaving in its wake a shallow, wide furrow.

"I'll get the other ship to safety!" Alpha cried and ran towards it.

"What are the Diggers doing on the surface?" Miss Kanton asked Beta. "They're supposed to be underground."

"Something is all wrong," Beta said. "The Controls are obviously scrambled. Radio guides the diggers, keeps them underground until they're full, then lets them come up to empty."

"Do you think you can fix it?" Miss Kanton's dupe asked.

"If it's external trouble, yes," Beta said. "But if it's inside the seals, we'd never be able to get at it. Everything is sealed against tampering. The controls are in vaults. How they ever got scrambled, I can't imagine."

"No wonder there weren't any radio reports," Miss Kanton said. "This place is a madhouse! Look, here comes another one!"

Another Digger appeared on the horizon but it was far to one side, a moving shape against the stars.

"We'd better get into the control tower," Beta said. "It's probably the only safe place on this rock."

They were illuminated momentarily by the blasting jet of the ship as it arced upwards from the uneven ground. As they hurried towards the tower, the ship blasted past them and whistled to a halt near the door of the tower.

The quartet gathered together near the door and watched with amazement as six more of the huge diggers appeared, grunting and rooting at the soil like mammoth pigs. Two crashed together with a terrific clank of metal and their wheels dug up the ground as they hung locked together, whirling thunderously.

The four went into the tower, down the metal corridors to the elevator which took them to the floor with the control boards. Beta pressed a combination on the buttons of the door which shut off the room with the central boards. The door whined slowly open.

"The door's warped," Alpha observed. "There must have been an explosion inside."

They entered the room and at first nothing seemed wrong. The great metal vault in the center of the room seemed intact, the walls were whole. Beta walked around the vault, which rose like a fat column from the metal floor to the ceiling. Alpha came to his side when he heard him exclaim.

"Look at the wall," Beta said.

THERE was a hole the size of a basketball in one side of the wall. The metal about it was melted, bulging out in a fringe around the hole and running down the wall to the floor. Alpha traced the probable trajectory of the missile which had made the hole and found another hole, much smaller, on the face of the vault. The walls of the vault were buckled slightly inward.

The two Tindars stared from one hole to the other in amazement. The Kantons came to their side.

"No meteor did that!" Miss Kanton's dupe said.

"It's hardly possible, unless . . ." Beta paused. "Power was packed into it, whatever it was!"

"It penetrated three feet of tension steel at the very least," Alpha said. "Nothing as small as this meteor seems to be could have done that."

"Unless . . ." Beta paused again. "The momentum is what counted. Suppose that the mass was terrific, the speed equally terrific?"

Alpha and Beta snapped their fingers at

the same instant. "Neutronium!" they said.

"We've found several bits of it already in space," Alpha added. "Terrific mass. That's the only possible solution."

"A piece of neutronium, of high velocity, accelerated by the gravity of Bolus, plus opposite velocities. That would have done it," Miss Kanton said.

They were speaking quickly, their keen minds suddenly tearing the veil from the problem with a scientific hunger.

"That's that, then," Alpha sighed as if it had been too easy.

"Wrong," Miss Kanton's dupe interposed. "Look at these meters!"

The other three went to her side. The meters were jumping crazily from maximum to minimum, their needles bent and twisted. Another type was rapidly clicking off numerals on its way down to zero. Miss Kanton tapped it.

"That's the fuel tanks," she said.

"They're draining somewhere!" Alpha said.

"Down, naturally!" the girl-dupe said. "The engine room covers the whole underground floor! If—"

"If the sparks from the engines touch that fuel—!" Beta cried. He turned to the door and ran from the room with the others on his heels.

The elevator dropped them to the lower floor. The corridor was filled knee-deep with a pale, bluish fluid—explosive fuel! It poured like a blue waterfall down the steps leading to the engines. Alpha opened the doors of the elevator and the syrupy liquid flooded in upon him. He waded into it and to the steps where he stumbled to the lower floor. The others were right behind him.

"What about friction?" Miss Kanton asked, conscious of the metal studs of her suit clicking against each other.

"Have to chance it," Beta snapped.

They went into the engine room, wading carefully through the azure fluid. In the main room they saw the fuel slowly creeping up the fat legs of the whirring engines towards the network of sparks that could be seen through the ventilator grills.

"Isn't there anyway to shut them off?" Miss Kanton gasped.

Alpha shook his head grimly.

"No. All controls are sealed. Can only be manipulated by Cooperation Engineers," he said.

"Six inches more," Miss Kanton said, looking at the fuel flowing beneath the engine.

"We'd best get out of here fast!" Alpha said. "In ten minutes the Corporation is out one asteroid."

They were running up the stairs, pushing into the elevator. Beta shoved the door slowly against the pressure of the blue syrup. He shot the car back to the ground level. Here there was no sign of the fuel which was pouring down a stairs around a turn in the corridor. They ran down the hall to the door, the Tindars each gripping the arm of a Kanton.

"Wait!" Miss Kanton was crying, "wait! The ship. We've only got one! We can only take two persons back. And you . . . which of you . . ." She stopped, aghast and panting, looking from Alpha to Beta.

The Tindars stiffened and gasped as the full implication of what she meant hit them.

"Take the ship!" Miss Kanton was sobbing. "Both of you! Go on!"

"Don't be foolish!" Beta snapped. "Get into the ship and get the jets warm. We'll be there in a minute."

"But if you get the wrong one?" Miss Kanton said, trembling.

"The right one will be left back here," Alpha snapped. "Now get into the ship. We've only got a few minutes!"

Miss Kanton turned and ran. She climbed into the two-seater and jettied the rockets. As the tubes roared out a tongue of flame, over the horizon came a Digger, eating the soil, dashing towards the control tower.

"We both might be able to get into the ship . . ." Beta said.

"No. The seats are tailor-made. We'd never cram into them together," Alpha said. They stood looking at one another, wasting valuable seconds in their consternation. The Digger was looming larger and larger, roaring in a straight line for the control tower.

"Oh, Doyle . . ." Miss Kanton's dupe said, tears in her eyes.

"Shut up!" Alpha snapped. He whirled



towards the thunder of the Digger. It was very near, swerving, slowly turning away from the control with a ponderous gyration.

"It's going to hit!" Alpha cried, leaping back.

The edge of the huge metal mouth struck the corner of the control tower, shaking the entire building and sending an avalanche of concrete down from the facade. Alpha was struck by pieces of the debris as he bounded away from the door of the building. The debris piled into the doorway, jamming it. Beta's head rose over the pile.

"Beat it!" he screamed, "I'll never get past that Digger!"

Alpha ran towards the ship and climbed into it. Crazy thoughts ran through his head as he squeezed himself into the seat. It was a one to one bet. A fifty-fifty chance. Better than some odds he had had. It was a decent gamble, but the stakes . . .

He sealed the door and Miss Kanton sent the rocket spiraling up into the clear sky. She drew out of the range of the imminent explosion and circled the little asteroid, waiting.

**I**NSIDE the control tower, Beta brushed the dust of the wreckage from him and hurried down the corridor, pulling the girl dupe by the arm.

"What are you doing? What if you're the real one? Oh, Doyle . . ." she moaned irrationally.

Beta went back to the engine room. He waded through the fuel with the girl dupe behind him.

"We have another bet, just in case," Beta said. "Those hoses . . ." He pointed at the wall above the humming engines.

The dupe's eyes brightened.

"If only we have time!" she said. "I'll get them. It's dangerous up there. You might be electrocuted. It doesn't matter with myself."

Beta started to protest, then he saw the logic of the girl's suggestion. He nodded curtly, and helped her climb upon the engine. She teetered precariously, slipping on the slime of the fuel which was on her feet.

She reached up and twisted the nozzle

of a hose, unscrewing it from the engine. Her face was twisted awry with effort, her slim body bent in straining against the stubborn threads. It loosened and she dropped it down to Beta who was standing in the swirling blue fluid, waiting.

He snatched it up.

"Get the others, quick!" he shouted, watching with horrified fascination as the fuel crept up to meet the network of sparks.

The girl struggled silently. Beta could hear her quick breathing in his head phones. The engines whirred, the sparks flashing down towards the explosive fluid.

She dropped another of the hoses to Beta. The third one was free and in his hands when she began working on the fourth. She slipped; the sparks danced up, touching the legs of her suit. The lower part of her suit burst into flame, soaked as it was with the fuel. She watched the flames, her face blanched white, as they ate into her suit.

"Katherine!" Beta gasped. This was no duplicate, he thought frantically; this was Katherine, blazing, burning. She would die; he knew that. If she fell back into the fuel, both of them died. He started climbing the engine, reaching for the girl as she hung onto the hose, her gloved hands frozen to it in a rigid grip.

"No!" she screamed. There was a plea in the voice that stopped Beta, brought him back to sanity. He dropped to the floor, watching her . . .

**I**N the ship that circled the asteroid, there was silence. Alpha sat in the seat by Miss Kanton, a hand gripping his knee, feeling it, waiting for it to disappear beneath his fingers—watching his fingers, lest they disappear if he looked away.

Miss Kanton was frozen in her seat, gripping the guide-triangle until her knuckles were white spots on her hand. She looked straight ahead, afraid to look at Alpha.

They circled the asteroid; again and again they rounded it.

"They must have stalled the blast," Alpha said hoarsely. "They can't stop it. They must have put it off somehow."

His words echoed within the ship above

the buzzing of the rockets. Miss Kanton said nothing. Her lips moved slightly, but no sound came.

She turned to speak to Alpha, conquering her emotion, bright tears in her eyes.

The seat beside her was empty, except for a crumpled space suit that slithered to the steel deck before her dilating eyes.

Miss Kanton's hand went to her face. She screamed. It was one, brief cry of utter horror.

**I**N the engine room Beta labored. The hoses were sucking at the fluid. The hoses were there actually to suck away the gaseous waste of the engines. Now they were sucking away the fuel with thirsty, slurping sounds, pouring it out onto the soil outside the tower.

The fuel was sinking slowly, drawing away from the sparks in the engines. The girl was nowhere around. Near the fat legs bracing the engines from the floor, the transparent sphere of a space helmet swirled and rocked with the motion of the fuel. It was the only proof that the girl had ever existed; the sole thing about her that had been real.

Beta watched the hoses and studied the transparent sphere that was floating towards him, drawn by the suction of the wide mouths of the hoses.

"You were a great girl, Katherine," he said. He sighed. He felt weariness growing inside of him.

The fuel coming down the steps into the engine room was a mere trickle. The tanks above were drained. The level of the fluid was dropping down towards his ankles.

Beta walked carefully through the fuel to the steps. He looked back, watching the

hoses. Confident that they could do the job, he mounted the stairs and reached the long corridor to the rubble-blocked doorway. He left wet, oily prints behind him as he walked. He entered the radio communication room.

The dials of the radio glowed warmly before him. He adjusted the frequency to that of the ship of Miss Kanton.

He helloed for five minutes before Miss Kanton's voice came in answer. He told her that everything was all right. She sobbed for a long time. Then she told him that he was the real one. He felt a faint quail of belated fear that was over-ridden by his weariness.

"You are a great girl, Katherine," he said. "You hung onto the hose, burning, wrapping yourself around it so that you wouldn't fall into the fuel. It's one of the greatest things I've seen. You smiled when you were disappearing. You knew that everything was all right then."

The girl on the radio was still sobbing. He told her to land. He walked out of the room into the corridor and pushed his way through the hole above the rubble pile. He saw that the Diggers were still racing around on the horizon.

The little ship came spurting into sight under full speed. It swooped recklessly within feet of the ground before the anti-gravity field crackled on and lowered it gently. A slim figure bounded out of the ship and came running towards him. He ran to meet it.

He grabbed it up into his arms and stood on the weird plain holding it to him. Together, they walked to the ship and climbed into it. There was a flash, a roar, and the ship shot up into the clear stars.

