

PLANET STORIES



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COSMIC CASTAWAY

By STANLEY MULLEN

"You aren't human, Bell. And you're not a robot. What are you?" Bell pondered the query slowly, cautiously, with his semi-mechanical superbrain . . . a brain that Plutonians dubbed the most deadly and dangerous in the universe.

ATMOSPHERE in the ticket agent's office seemed thicker and warmer than usual, but the disturbing factors were supercharged emotions, not jammed pressure-gauges or thermal adjustors. Not all the emotions were human; but they were real enough, both to Bell and to the ticket agent.

"I know all about you, Bell," the agent said, looking over the half-man curiously, with a hint of vicious resentment. Like many minor functionaries, the ticket agent took the troubles of his employers personally, and Mines, Inc. on Pluto was a subsidiary of the Power and Transport Trust. "Sure, you think you have return passage coming to you. Hasn't the company been more than generous? Actually, it must have cost a fortune to patch you up."

"It did," Bell admitted. "But that's not the problem. I'm not claiming free passage. I have money to pay."

Bell was half-man, half-robot, the result of one of those hideous accidents never mentioned in the Company's much-vaunted Public Reports. Technologically, even aesthetically, he was a work of art, but his own mother would not have known him. Item by item, his appearance was curiously humanoid, but no elasticity of definition could make him human. Every vital organ was partly or wholly artificial, 64% of his body being either reclaimed or synthetic tissue. The face was a mask of stainless steel, washed to flesh color by aluminum bronze tinted toward copper, and the brain behind it was not the one he was born with.

Closing his ledger with a bang the agent snorted. "So what? I don't care if you own half of Pluto. You're still out of luck for

passage home. We're booked solid . . . six months ahead."

"You're a liar," Bell stated flatly, "and even if you were a good one, I know better. There've been four cancellations by miners who couldn't pass physical for space. What's the gag?"

Underground Pluto is an interesting place, but it would be pleasant only for a race of troglodytes. Heated and pressurized air is uncomfortably dense; light is artificial and there is a sense of constant vibration from distant atomic boring. No one ever quite gets used to the endless maze of galleries in subsurface cities, or to the jarring quiver of vibrations in octaves above and below audible sound. Worst of all is the deadly isolation from civilized mankind, and even hardy miners accustomed to the black pits of Luna and Ganymede require weeks of readjustment before they can work. For himself, Bell had never objected to the working and living conditions, but he no longer worked, and Pluto was no place to spend his life.

"Are you sure you could pass the physical?" The ticket agent shrugged. "Don't bother me about it." With a type of insolence not uncommon in his breed, he attempted to turn away. Bell reached, got the man's collar into a strangling tourniquet around his throat. Pawing frantically, the agent tried to release himself but Bell applied force and waited until the plump face purpled artistically.

"Now that we understand each other, do I get my ticket?" Bell demanded without heat, easing pressure to permit reply.

"No!" gasped his victim, signalling wildly as the pressure of twisted cloth tightened



FD F. WALKER

Like many minor functionaries the ticket agent studied the half-man with a hint of vicious resentment.

again. "Wait! I can't sell you a ticket. Even if I did, no space-skipper would dare honor it. We have orders. You aren't going back to Earth, Bell. You can't go anywhere! . . ."

Bell dropped his prey as a terrier discards a dead rat.

"Why not? Orders from whom?"

Glaring, warily resentful, the clerk spat an unprintable reply. "I wouldn't know," he added. Then anticipating further violence of discussion, he dived into a fat sheaf of papers and came up waving a red flimsy. "Go on. Read it yourself. No ticket for you, now or ever. Nobody tells me why. If anyone had, I wouldn't tell you. Try the Psycho Lab. That's where the order came from. Maybe they'll give you a reason. Maybe they'll explain. I hope they do—"

There was no good will in the expression that followed Bell from the ticket office.

HASTINGS, in Psycho, dreaded the interview with Bell. He was warned by the visi-screen that Bell was on his way, so he braced himself and wondered how best to word an explanation that would not explain. A buzzer sounded and Hastings pressed the button-release to admit Bell to the office.

It was impossible not to stare. Hastings wanted to be kind. As a scientist he was naturally interested; as a man he recognized tragedy. Hastings did Bell the courtesy of not attempting to hide his curiosity.

From a distance, or to casual observation, illusion was both startling and complete. No functional flaws had shown up under the most exhaustive tests. Eyes looked like eyes, facial planes bore remarkable resemblance to human features, new limbs and extremities looked and worked at least as well as the originals. Design and workmanship was skillful enough to fool a layman, though a specialist might catch minute, observable differences, especially in the smooth flow of motor impulses. Synthetic muscles responded swiftly and in completed curves, rather than in the stiff, jointed, jerky effects of human locomotion. Walking became a sinuous, liquid glide; there was superhuman precision, and a sense of restrained power and agility beyond the human norm.

Bell stopped before the doctor's desk. Even the gesture of instantaneous repose jarred slightly, with its hint of high-order efficiency awaiting stimuli. Hastings catalogued Bell's visible features, and memory supplied a working picture of the rest. For an icy moment Hastings was gripped by the craftsman's awareness of his own work as a masterpiece, but in the tragic motif.

Bell laughed, the sound flat and metallic, but not unpleasant. "Take a good look, doc. I know how you feel. When I get up in the morning I always wonder if I need a shave. It's still a shock to look in a mirror. It's not shaving I miss, but not having to gripe about it jars me."

"Is it as bad as that?" Hastings asked sympathetically.

"Bad enough."

In a basically imperfect world, there are various kinds and degrees of greatness. Interviewing Bell was not Hastings' job or even moral obligation. Explanation would be difficult, probably impossible. Hastings officiated at his own request.

"You know why I'm here," Bell went on. The robot voice held curious overtones, not harshly metallic, but murmurous like an echo of low-tuned bells. "I want to go home. Back to Earth. I have a wife there. While I had a real job here it was all right, but I've been relieved since the accident. My contract is voided, they tell me. I could sign another contract but I didn't like the fine print. It said PERMANENT. No contract, no job, nor reason to stay. Now I'd like some straight answers."

Hastings sighed. His alert ears caught belligerence in the tone as well as the words.

"They refused your ticket?"

Bell nodded quickly. Light glanced from the rounded angles of his face-plate. "Right on the nose. No mistake, either. Orders. From here. Do I get my answers from you or wait until somebody slips? There could be a good reason. If so, I have a right to know about it."

"You do, Bell," Hastings admitted. He hesitated. "I had hoped this wouldn't come up just yet. What's deadly important about going back to Earth? Anything immediate? Your contract still had three years to run . . . before the accident."

Bell glanced swiftly around the office, eyeplates questing for concealed microphones, alarm scanners. Attention settled back upon Hastings, the plates fixed with mechanical intentness. The man-robot was shrewd, intelligent, possessed of odd quirks of humor and wayward caprices of thought beyond that of either electronic or human brains. A new and oddly terrifying factor had entered the equation of man versus machine.

"Before the accident," Bell chimed in. The incomplete thought seemed to satisfy him. "I have two good reasons. First, my wife. Second, I want to get back among normal people and learn what kind of adjustments I will have to make. I still have my life to live somewhere. This is not the place."

"Straight answers, both of them," Hastings said. "Now I'll try to answer your questions. I'd rather give you arguments first, then the answers. Simple answers are rarely as simple as they seem. You had a wife, Bell. She hasn't seen you. She doesn't know what has happened. In words, perhaps. She knows you were hurt and that drastic repairs were made. Can you expect her to visualize you, as you are now? Be honest with her, Bell. Get a divorce, or ask her to get one. You aren't the man she married. Legally, you may have a touchy point to argue, but legally or not, you aren't married to the woman. It's the kindest way, believe me. That's professional advice from a doctor. A lawyer would tell you the same."

"I'd rather she told me," Bell protested.

"All right. About the other item. Getting to know people and learning what adjustments you must make to live among them. Forget it. You aren't going back, Bell. Not now and maybe never."

BELL took the blow without a quiver. Hastings would have given much for any hint of reaction but dealing with a metal mask and translucent eyeplates put him at a disadvantage.

"We'll go into that later," Bell said. "I'm not convinced, but we'll waive discussion of that point. Your statements lead back to the jackpot question: What's wrong with me?"

"Does something have to be wrong with you?" The answer came too quickly, as if Hastings had readied the parry in advance.

"I don't know of anything. Do you, doc? Don't fence with me. There has to be something wrong with me. Otherwise I'd be on the Earth-Express ship briefing for space right now. I'll ask you once more, doc. Do you know something about me that I don't? What is wrong with me?"

Hastings dived reluctantly into the icy waters. "All right, Bell. But remember you asked for this. I know of nothing wrong with you. Any tests we could devise showed you without mechanical flaws. Except for a few minor irregularities that will straighten out under normal conditions, you are perfect. Your body is the best Lavery ever turned out, and the only parts he won't vouch for are those you were born with. Your brain is good, I think. I should know since I designed it. The trouble is: I don't know. What I think and hope is not evidence. Neither are our tests, for we have no yardstick to judge you by. You aren't human, Bell. And you aren't a robot. What are you?"

Bell reacted suddenly, in a manner that caused Hastings a bad moment. The chuckle was like bearings rattling in a loose casing.

"Since you designed my brain, I have a complaint for you, doc. You did too good a job, if that's an objection."

"I don't follow you."

"Let's face it. I'm not exotic enough. Neither man nor robot, as you point out. I look different to myself and feel different up to a point.

"But I don't feel different enough. Like shaving. Why do I worry about it? It's past, no longer a function. And it's only one item. I have all the same old habits and confusions, same old fears and maladjustments. Even the same loves and hatreds. There are some too silly to mention, and others vital. A few are fading, but others are part of my daily ritual. Why should the gadgets you and Lavery fudged up to replace my burned parts still fly off on the same old tangents?"

Hastings groaned. "I don't know, Bell. That's the terrible part of this whole business. The brain, human or robot, cannot be wholly charted or pigeonholed. The robots have built-in stops to short-circuit dangerous

electronic relays. But the synthetic or reclaimed tissue is a different story. There are no stops. None of us can predict what will go on in your brain. It is partly original tissue, partly something utterly unknown and challenging. It may be the most deadly and dangerous combination in our universe. You don't know yourself, Bell. And we don't know you. We can't take the risk of sending you back to Earth. Not till we know. If we ever do."

"Go on," urged Bell flatly.

"That is only half the problem. Here society is restricted. We are all used to an unreal and largely artificial environment. We are carefully selected and screened by hypnotic machines and the Psychographs. Even here life will be difficult enough for you. On Earth it is probably impossible. We are not half as worried by your possible reactions to humanity as we are by their reactions to you. They will fear and resent you. Doubtless you have been aware that something of the sort goes on even here. People fear you.

"Either man or robot can be described in familiar terms. We are accustomed to both and understand the functions of either. But you are something new. Totally different. Unpredictable, terribly unfamiliar, possibly a serious menace. You are disturbed by memory and habit patterns. These will alter gradually as you overlay the old patterns with new ones, new memories, instincts and habit impulses. We can't replace intangibles. The old groove helps you for a time but you'll outgrow it. And the new grooves may take curious directions before you're through. You may even be immortal."

Synthetic flesh puckered Bell's mouth into a curious effect as if his emotions caricatured a human grin.

"So I am the jackpot question?" he queried. "I expected such outlandish ideas from my second-hand thinkbox but you've really pulled up a dilly. What happens if I don't accept your fantastic diagnosis? Suppose I go back to Earth anyhow?"

Hastings shrugged. "I hoped you were too intelligent to insist, Bell. The people on Earth aren't prepared for you. There were other experiments, you know. Previous attempts to reconstruct a functioning being from damaged and spare parts. Their history

makes it tougher for you. They were failures but pretty hard on mankind. Some went insane. Most of them destroyed themselves. Potentially your brain is a superbrain. You're the first successful experiment. But you're new in the saddle and it's a mighty strange horse. You could trample a lot of innocent people, get thrown and perhaps badly hurt yourself. People will make it difficult enough for you here. Don't push your luck."

"I've listened," said Bell oddly. "I believe you're reasonably honest. But there's something you haven't told me. What is it?"

Hastings shook his head. "I wanted to make this easy for you, Bell. I asked for your interview. I was curious, true. Not only in the scientific sense but snoopy-curious, human-curious. That's the decent motive, curiosity combined with a desire to help. But there was another reason. You'll run into it from here on so I'll tell you straight: I'm afraid of you. Not just your interesting possibilities. I'm afraid of what you are now. You're different, you and I are civilized enough to know and accept it. But even we don't dare face how different. My chief emotion toward you is panic terror. Just how do you think other people will feel?"

"I don't have to guess," Bell admitted. "I'm wondering how my wife will feel. You're afraid of what you don't see in me. And I'm afraid of what I will see in her. But I have to see it myself. I still want to go home."

Hastings' gesture was hopeless. "And you won't be satisfied till you have a try at stowing away on the spaceship? Is that it?"

Bell refused audible comment. Hastings made a last try. "You can't do it, Bell. Ticket or no ticket. No captain or crew would dare trust you on a spaceship. Try it if you must. But don't hurt anyone. You know what that would mean."

Bell's reply was a mechanical grating. "I want people to like me. I don't want to hurt them. I'm not convinced but I'll think it over . . ."

"Be sure, Bell."

"I will be. But I haven't decided yet . . ." In silent glide, the man-robot was gone. Half an hour later, alarms blared . . .

FROWNING, Hastings dialed security police headquarters. Yes, an alarm had come in. Yes, from Spaceport No. 4. But it was only a headfire temporarily out of hand; the jetmen were clearing a fused jet in the booster rockets, a reserve fuel bin ignited.

A blunt, reassuringly human face grinned from the visiscreen.

"Stop worrying, Hastings. Two men are watching Bell every minute. There's no chance of his getting aboardship. Only one spacer in the cradles at the moment: 11-9334. That's the ship he expected to take but there's not a chance for him. Passengers are all checked aboard, briefed for space and put to bed. However, if you'll feel any better about it, go over and recheck. If you've any doubts I'll put through emergency priority and you can go along with the ship to Earth. The staff here can take care of Bell and destroy him if necessary. Yes, I know the Company wants us to take no chance with him. Seems a waste after all the trouble you took putting him back together, but nobody argues with the Company."

Hastings shrugged unhappily. No, nobody ever argued with the Company. Regretfully he punched keys and Bell's card snapped from the electronically coded files. He stamped it with the properly impregnated ink and fed the pasteboard into a pneumatic chute.

"Better pick him up for protective custody," he said. "I've put the order through. Don't take chances with him but try to avoid rough stuff unless he forces it. You'd better get clearance from the population board if you do destroy him. I'm not sure the Company has authority for that. After all, he's not a beast."

"What is he, then?" The blunt face laughed unpleasantly.

"I don't know. My nerves are like fiddle strings and my leave's overdue. Clear my passage and I'll go along . . . just in case."

Hastings reached Space Terminal No. 4 just after the police alarms went into convulsions. He checked with headquarters and the news was not reassuring. Bell had been picked up, asked to come along for questioning and agreed whimsically. Somewhere en route he had simply vanished, which is

not as simple as it sounds in security arrest. Baffled police and company guards were still searching and a cordon had been thrown around the terminal area. It took a special order to pass Hastings through.

Escape from Pluto is a practical impossibility; a man would be mad to attempt the gamble. But Bell was not a man. The cargo holds were airless and scarcely insulated against the temperatures of space. Leakage from atomic fuel batteries was possible. Crew and passenger accommodations were so limited that scarcely a mouse could find hiding place. Rigorous inspection at the airlocks and hatches offered a problem beyond the powers of a magician, even a real one, not a mere trick artist.

Time passed and Bell did not appear near the spaceport. No attempt was made to crash through the cordon of guards. Nerves grew strained and the approaching deadline forced decision on Hastings. He dialed headquarters.

"I'm going with the ship," he told embarrassed officialdom. "If Bell is aboard, I'd better be along. Someone who understands the situation."

Officialdom nodded, no longer amused by the threat of Bell.

"Tell the captain to take no chances with him . . ."

Hastings shrugged unhappily.

Take-off was unspectacular. Pluto is a freak planet of nearly Earth-size, but denser, and with the standard peculiarities of the outer planets. Gravity provides additional problems of reaching escape velocity, but these are not complicated by atmospheric friction. All gases, even the lightest, are liquid or solid, and concentrated in thin layers on the surface.

A booster sequence of ring magnets operated automatically to raise the ship from the subsurface spaceport and catapult it past the planetary skin. Leaving the tube like a projectile, the spacer was carried beyond the immediate field of Plutonian gravity by triple-stage rockets which cut loose and dropped back to the surface for pickup. Afterward, orbit was trimmed just as for a free-flight to Earth, but the ship itself put in readiness for the hyperdimensional drive. Such immense distances are involved that no free-flight nor even steady-power atomic

propulsion could solve the problem satisfactorily. Time and money are important outside Buddhist monasteries.

During most of the month-long journey from Pluto all occupants of the spaceship are either blacked-out from acceleration or existing in the dream-world of hyperdimensions. Building to the extremes of velocity required for the hyperdimensional translation is painful, dreary and dangerous. Once terminal velocity is reached and translation occurs, normal space is warped into a tight elliptical cocoon around the ship, all inertial forces partially damped out, and drugs or mechanical trickery must be resorted to while human minds skirt the dark, ravelled edges of the Unknown.

In that eerie, hour-long interval between primary acceleration and the prolonged nightmare of the pocket universe, Hastings and two crewmen turned out the living quarters and all accessible holds of the ship. Even the outer cargo holds were examined by scanner and it was obvious that Bell was not hiding out aboard. Rows of neatly racked crates, parcels, bins of ore, mail cans, and semi-activated fuel left neither space nor safety for a stowaway. All passengers and crewmen were double checked by the officers and by Hastings.

Afterwards, while alarm howlers vibrated hideously through the cabin-decks, service passageways and control rooms, Hastings lowered himself into the shock-block of molded plastic and tried to relax.

The process was one familiar to him from previous voyages to and from Pluto. Subconsciously he was aware of sound and movement about him but it was fading rapidly. From here on every internal function of the ship, even to the care and feeding of its human element, would perforce be relegated to robots and the automatic machinery. Grimly, Hastings recalled one part-machine . . .

Machines . . .

QUIVERING grayness surrounded him, claimed him as its own. A hard, bright core of identity remained alive, but the immaterial suspension of grayness seemed of infinite extension in all dimensions of time and space. Time perception and space perception meant little in themselves, be-

came mere illusions which would pass away for a time and then return painfully. There had been few accidents, Hastings remembered, and he clung desperately to this last fading memory of consciousness.

Coming out was not necessarily as painful as rebirth but it could have awkward moments. Needle-bite was not the worst, and the tingling frost-fires spread through veins and nerves communicating Inquisitional tortures to the awakening body.

"Bad time, doc," said Bell's voice. "Hurry it up. I need you."

Idly, oddly, Hastings was not surprised to see the curiously humanoid figure bending over him. Hypo in hand, balanced in those tentacular fingers, Bell jabbed again, deftly. Awakening senses screamed with agony from the harmless, revivifying drug. Hastings did not question the urgency of command. Jangled universes came together in his tingling brain, became shimmering chaos, resolved as reality in three familiar dimensions came into sharp focus, as his disciplined body made habitual response.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Trouble, doc. Your department, not mine. Black Virus, I'd say . . .!"

"Oh, Lord! No . . ."

Hyperdimensional travel has its penalties. Among them, black virus infection, which is not black, not virus, not infection. One of the penalties. An alien protein native to those dark dimensions beyond dimension. A protein to which all mankind, most animals and plants, and even a few types of robots, were fatally allergic.

Strong fingers closed on Hastings' arm and hustled him along. Exertion cleared his mind and fear roused his senses to action. Now thoroughly awake, resistance to Bell did not occur to him. He permitted Bell to drag-lead him through the passenger compartments into the crew's quarters. One glance was sufficient. Half the crewmen were already dead. Hideously dead. Others writhed in convulsions, wrenched out of their shockblocks, their faces blotched with dark weals, chest and abdomens bloated and bursting with agony.

"Chiefly the crew, so far," Bell explained. "Only one of the passengers had contact with it. Or with them. They must have got it on the out voyage, before reaching Pluto."

Hastings nodded, numb with horror.

"Can we help them?" Bell asked calmly.

"Not much. Drugs by injection to kill the pain. A few may survive, the stronger ones, and they may wish they hadn't. We'll try to keep it from spreading to the other passengers. There are treatments, but not here. If we could reach the hospital at Luna City—"

Hastings' voice sounded hopeless.

"It's not too far," Bell commented.

"We're well inside the orbit of Mars. A week of deceleration and orbit trimming. Plenty of fuel."

"But who'll handle the ship?"

"They can't?"

"None of them—ever. Even if they live to reach Luna City."

"Then I'll have to," Bell said confidently.

Hastings stared as if the robot-man had suddenly gone mad. "No one man could handle the ship," he gasped. "Even if you knew all about space ships and how to land them. Trimming orbit is a full-crew job. And landing is ticklish enough for old hands. You don't know a thing—"

"No," agreed Bell. "But I'll manage. No *man* could, but I'm not a man, as you pointed out. More or less. We'll find out now which it is. I can do it. I'll have the robots and the automatic machinery. We understand each other."

Hastings wasted no time in futilities. "That's your department. Do whatever you can. Send a warning to Luna City for relay to Earth and Pluto. Then get me a couple of the more intelligent passengers. I'll need help."

"They won't come," Bell said, with the nearest a grunt of disgust he could manage. "They're human enough to be scared. Not that I blame them. I can remember being that human myself. You'll have to settle for whatever help I can give . . . between erands."

Hastings swore and accepted the inevitable.

NINE days of nightmare. Four of the remaining crewmen died and were promptly incinerated. Bell attended to this gruesome task, and others too ugly for print. He ate rarely and slept not at all. He took over completely when Hastings col-

lapsed from sheer exhaustion, rousing him again only when the vital necessities of ship management demanded attention. Apparently immune to contact with the alien protein, he handled living and dead without precautions. During the intervals when Hastings could manage the clinical requirements of his patients, Bell's brain went to work.

Feeding mountains of figures into himself, he became a living calculator, resolving the mathematical mountains into the twinned equations of orbit and objective. By tricky gearing and fantastic jumbles of wiring he increased the efficiency of both automatic machinery and the non-humanoid robots. Simple devices accomplished prodigies of result.

Passengers were herded into a confined space near the nose of the ship, and kept strictly quarantined. Two of the passengers showed unmistakable signs of exposure and were segregated. All the routine tasks of the ship went into the hands of the machines, functioning under the direction of Bell, half-man, half-machine.

"I still don't understand how you managed to get aboard," said Hastings, half-angrily. "But I'm damned glad you did. Even if you don't make the landing and set us down like a panful of scrambled eggs, it's still been interesting to know you. We searched every place in the ship that a stow-away could possibly have hidden."

It was the last day out from Luna.

"You tried too hard, doc." Bell laughed, his sharp, metallic clattering laughter. "I didn't stow away. I was one of the crewmen who helped you search the holds. Nobody ever notices a man in uniform, and I helped them overlook me. These eyeplates are the secret, for people look too hard at them, and it's easy to hypnotize them. Then I will them to see whatever they expected to see. You made everything too easy for me."

"That's what I wanted," said Hastings, flushing, "to make things easy for you. But not exactly as you mean it. Never trust a robot any further than you can throw him."

Bell replied thoughtfully. "No one really trusts a machine. Man instinctively fears and distrusts his own creations. We try to reassure ourselves by repeating the time-dishonored formula. The automobile will

never replace the horse, nor the airplane the car, the rocket the airplane. And on down the line. For myself, I'm still faint-hearted about the hyperdimensional drive in spaceships. A new invention scares hell out of the stay-put mentality of the human race. We try desperately to convince ourselves that it isn't so, that these inventions won't really work."

"People will eventually outgrow childish fears," protested Hastings.

"To some extent. But never completely. People accept the new inventions, but only after they have proved themselves. When they become commonplace, comfortable, they are taken for granted. Often too much so. But machines do every job better than their masters and creators. And civilization goes wherever the machines wish to take mankind; machines feed man, wake him up, put him to sleep, wipe his nose, change his didy when necessary. So mankind returns to the nursery stage—with machines as the new version of benevolent nursery despots. Machines do the thinking; they are kind masters and eager, tireless servants.

"But inside, there is always the hate, the fear, the natural distrust that flesh always feels for the new, the alien. People learn to accept, under duress, just as children accept the despotism of the nursery. But machines are the real rulers. Mankind is at the mercy of machinery. Machines check progress, pass on the sanity and utility of every development. They are gruesome guardian angels but until mankind grows up, they are needed. Theirs is the problem of all guardian angels . . . to make themselves trusted and accepted. That's my problem. I'm half-machine, even though I am still more flesh than anything else."

Mars would have been a glowing, pink-orange coal behind the ship had it not chanced to be elsewhere in its orbit. Earth and Luna were a pair of faint crescents, one vivid blue, the other pale and ghostly gray-yellow, so far to the side that one unversed in astrogation would have feared a clean miss. However, by the time calculated, the ship would reach Earth's orbit and the planet and satellite would be there, in proper position and moving at nearly the exact speed to make landing possible.

There was hope now for those still liv-

ing. If Bell could only cap his miracle with another.

"What are your plans now?" Hastings asked. "Going on to Earth after we're cleared from Luna?"

Bell studied the psychiatrist wistfully. "Is it safe to tell you?"

"Why not? I'm on your side now," admitted Hastings. "You've proved yourself. If the population board gives you any trouble about landing, or going to Earth, refer them to me. I'm your man, your doctor and your friend. You don't have to worry about me, and I've stopped worrying about you. I can even believe you'll set down this crate in one piece. I'm awed. What do you want? Earth?"

Bell's voice was uneasy. "Not right away. I've sent word on to Jane. She'll take the E-L shuttle and meet me here. After I've talked to her, there are things to do. I'm afraid of people, doc. Honestly afraid. And I don't want to go back empty-handed."

IT WAS not a good-landing, technically. But there have been worse with a full-crew ship. Considering the emergency, and all of his handicaps, Bell worked the equivalent of a miracle. Bell saw to the transfer of the still-living crewmen to the Lunar Base hospital, then submitted himself along with the doctor and the well passengers to the thorough examinations of space quarantine. He enjoyed the discomfort caused the staff by his unorthodox anatomy.

Fortunately the signs of deadly reactions to the misnamed protein are easily distinguished. Bell and Hastings were cleared in record time. And the shuttle from Earth was not due for a full hour when they reached the landing stages.

"You haven't answered my question, Bell!" Hastings probed. "I asked what you wanted. What are your plans?"

Bell hesitated. "I don't know exactly. It depends on what Jane wants. I have an idea about proving myself. But it will take money, a lot of money."

"You'll have a lot, Bell. Claim salvage for the ship and cargo. Stick the Company. They owe you something for that accident that should never have happened. Even according to law they're at fault for not providing safeties. Nobody ever argues with

the Company but you have that fat, greedy octopus over a barrel. You'll be rich and they'll have to let you go and come as you please. On Earth or anywhere."

Bell grinned. "I know they'd like to box me up and keep me buried alive on Pluto, just to keep my mouth shut. But you don't sound like a Company man, doc. Aren't you?"

Hastings snorted savagely. "They strangle business, suppress initiative, gobble all valuable inventions, and generally dictate subsistence terms to owners and workers alike. D'you think I went to Pluto to work under P. & T. terms because I liked it? I had to go or starve, and I thought I could do something for the men in the mines. They'll put meters on our breathing next. The P. & T. empire controls all sources of power, from water wheels to fuel and atomic generators. . . ."

"But not sunlight or the cosmic rays, do they?"

"Wait a minute!" Hastings was pale but interested. "You're not thinking of wrecking the trust."

"I might. It would be fun to short-circuit that power. I could do it in a week. A guardian angel has to prove himself. Free power to everyone could be my gift. About that salvage money. Would P. & T. settle for half the legal amount?"

"They'll settle and be glad for such a comfortable deal."

"Will you handle that part for me? Save embarrassment. How's your nerve, doc?"

"Never better. Sure, I'll arrange the salvage deal. Why not? I'll even nick them for a fat cut of commission. But you can't get rid of me so easily. This is one fight I want a share of. And I'm sticking like a burr."

They watched the shuttle ship through the giant airlocks. Like a falling leaf it maneuvered, settling through the dense, hothouse atmosphere of subsurface Luna. Airlock doors in the hull slid open.

"About this free power. It's a simple matter of gratings to step down the frequency—"

"Skip it," said Hastings absently. "I wouldn't understand the technology anyhow. That doesn't matter. After all, I built

your superbrain. Anyone who can do what you've done, bringing in the spaceship and setting it down in one piece, not to mention saving all our lives and preventing the spread of Black Virus, is my man. If you say you can do it, you can."

Bell's metallic eyeplates selected one tiny figure among the many disembarking. He groaned.

"I guess this is it." The doctor gripped his arm, then left him alone to meet his fate.

She was a trim figure in a simple gray suit. Not beautiful, not extraordinary nor spectacular except in that individual way every human being is extraordinary and different from all others. She was in her middle thirties, even plain by some standards. But she was Jane, which was somehow important to Bell.

"It's all right," she said calmly, standing straight and firm, unafraid of the things time and change can do to love, or to other human relations.

"Don't hurry it," Bell advised. "Just remember that whatever you want is all that really matters."

"You're changed," she said rapidly. "Different in ways that I can't understand. Maybe I'll never understand. It may be pretty difficult but we'll worry about details later. You're still you, I think. Welcome home."

Much later Hastings joined the pair and was introduced. He made no comment worthy of record but while Jane attended to some formalities of disembarking on Luna the men were left alone.

Bell fixed his robot stare on Hastings. "Tomorrow we start Project Power," he promised. "Still with me?"

"All the way," Hastings agreed. "I guess that settles everything but the Jackpot Question."

For once, Bell's face-plate achieved the miracle of a completely human expression. Puzzlement.

"Is there another?"

"I think so. What *are* you going to do with Humanity?"

Bell laughed, the sound full of murmurous, metallic overtones.

"I haven't quite decided . . ."