

PLANET STORIES



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The Android Kill

By JOHN JAKES

The android slaves, insipid pieces of metal, plastic and skin, were constructed to work and work and help men like Caffrey relax. But someone, somewhere, made this batch too perfect. Caffrey, big tough Caffrey laughed out loud at the tremendous irony of the joke as he pondered sending his ravaged ship into the burning maw of the sun.

CAFFREY slammed the great steel doors and walked forward through the gym. His bare feet slapped on the mats and the cane of iron-hard Venus jungle wood swung lightly in one hand. He wore only dirty white trousers. Sweat stood shiny on him under the glow of the ceiling lights. He cursed the ship silently for being old and run down and without any cooling units.

His beefy face moved from side to side, watching. The black eyes took in every bit of movement. He saw all that went on. It was his ticket out of the stinking world of frozen-starred space, of Class nine freighters and unholy cargos.

The slender blue-gray androids were exercising. They vaulted on the parallel bars, dangled from the rings, worked with the pulleys. Even the women and the children exercised. They did not sweat, because their bodies were not made for perspiration, but Caffrey could see their muscles twisting and shivering under the slate hides, developing.

A strange kind of noise filled the vast gym. Muted gruntings, whispers of breath, solid slaps of hands and bodies on bars and mats. The androids did not look at Caffrey. They were accustomed to slavery. They knew they had been dead when they were born.

Caffrey stopped walking. Near the left wall, two android males were conversing. They leaned indolently, tiredly, against the brown wooden bars. Caffrey's face lost its flabbiness, becoming stripped of everything but purpose.

He walked toward them, conscious of his own strength. The exercising of the others

went on around him. Slap and soft wind of breath and creak of apparatus. The heat was a nearly-tangible cloud.

"Why aren't you two working out like the rest?" Caffrey asked slowly.

One of the androids said in a weary voice, "I'm tired. I can't when I'm tired."

Caffrey's fingers tightened on the stick. They had to be in perfect shape! *Had to be!* This was his last shipload, and by God . . .

He swung the stick up over his shoulder and brought it down in a blurring arc. There was a flat smacking sound. The android choked. Caffrey struck the other one, and the anger came up from his stomach like fire boiling over. He screamed at them and beat them. Again the stick fell, again, again, again . . .

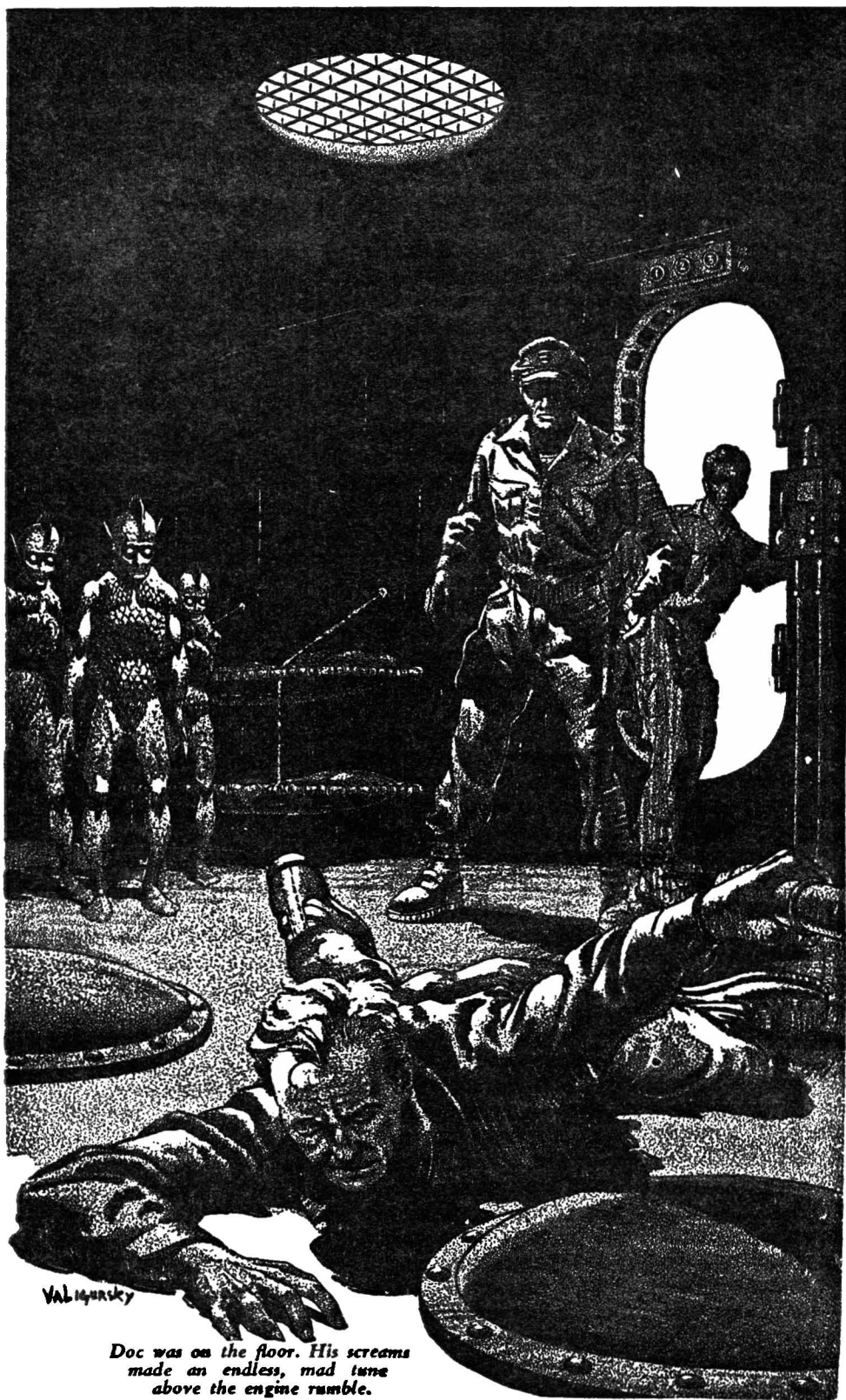
Finally he stood back, feeling the sweat running down him. He tilted his head and gulped air. "Now," he said very quietly, "now, you inhuman sons-of-slate, start working . . ."

The two of them watched from the gray mats where they were crouched. Brief resentment was in their eyes.

Caffrey bunched his muscles and kicked. The android's head snapped backward against the bars. He grunted. Then both of them got up and walked over to the pulleys. They began to exercise, rapidly.

Caffrey laughed and walked on through the gym, not watching them any more. He went through the next bulkhead and spun the lock wheel, then padded down the corridor under the ceiling lights that shone like foggy blue eyes.

Dillman, his astrogator, a young kid with yellow hair and an aggressive jaw, was in



*Doc was on the floor. His screams
made an endless, mad tune
above the engine rumble.*

the chart room. He was working with the course computer. Dillman had been a student at the University of Venus, Cloud City, when he killed an officer of the Control Police in a fight over a girl. Dillman was good in the slave game. Dillman was getting hard.

Caffrey closed the door. It clanged loudly. Dillman looked around.

"Hello, Captain," he said. "We're right on course. Mars in six hours, fourteen minutes."

Caffrey nodded, slumping down into a thickly padded shock chair. Beyond the wide observation window, space made endless black, and stars hung there like pieces of a broken diamond. The swollen ball of the sun burned above the ship, and Mars lay scarlet, just ahead. Distant rumbling from the old corroded jet tubes filled the room.

"How's everything?" Caffrey asked. "Engines?"

"All right," Dillman said, leaning against the astrogation table. "Few pieces of stuff failed to fission awhile back, but everything's okay now."

Caffrey waved his hand. "Get out the bottle."

DILLMAN grinned and pulled open a green metal wall cabinet. He filled two tumblers with the syrupy swamp wine and handed one of the glasses to Caffrey. The captain of the ship drank half, breathed loudly, and emptied the glass.

He hunched deeper into the shock chair, resting. "I'll be glad when it's over, Dillman. Really glad."

"Do you mean that, sir?"

"Hell yes, I mean it. In this business you've got to be tough. But I'll be damned if a man can go on kicking people around all the time. Someplace, he's got to stop. Well, this trip'll make my pile and I can stop. Got a job waiting, shuttling passengers to the Temple Ruins west of Red Sands on Mars."

"This isn't any party," Dillman admitted. "Slavery's a funny thing. I thought it went out a long time back, but everybody on Earth is making such mental advances . . ." he pointed at his skull and grinned wryly ". . . that they just haven't

got any time to do any real work. And of course, these poor wastrels we've got on board aren't really human beings. How do they make them, Cap?"

Caffrey shrugged. "God knows. The Globulars on Centauri four turn them out by the hundreds. Almost as good as human beings."

"They have kids, they get sick, they get mad, and they don't mind working. They don't know what else to do." He sighed, watching the circle of Mars beginning to grow big and bloated and red beyond the window. "Although it's one hell of a job to put muscle on them."

Dillman poured out some more liquor and raised his glass. His eyes were bits of hard rock. "Here's to the last trip, Cap. And I only hope the big boys of Workers, Incorporated, give me this ship."

Caffrey nodded and drank.

A green sign flashed over a bank of machinery. **END OF EXERCISE PERIOD**, it blinked, **END OF EXERCISE PERIOD**, **END OF . . .**

Rising, Caffrey walked to the machinery, pulled a large leather-handled switch. He visualized with pleasure the great doors opening, and the androids, the artificial humans, stumbling back into the dim stinking holds to wait quietly on the last stage of the trip before the chains closed on them. Caffrey laughed out loud.

"Dirty joke?" Dillman asked, faintly anxious.

"No. Just thinking about what I'll get paid. Two thousand solars. Why man, that's enough to live on for years! Plenty of wine, and an easy job, and women, bless 'em."

Dillman started to reply when the com system rattled. The big man moved to the machine and pressed the button.

"Caffrey, bridge," he growled. "What the hell is . . ."

A quiet voice cut him off, deadly, precise like a small knife slicing into him. "Captain, this is Doc. I'm down in the android hold. You'd better come right away."

"Doc," Caffrey began, but the machine clicked off. He slammed it with his fists. "Doc, damn it, Doc . . ." There was only the faraway rumble of the ship's great iron heart.

He swung around, heading for the door.

"Come on," he said quickly. "Nothing's going to happen. Not on this run. Nothing . . ."

They ran through the halls under the blue lights, clambered down the ladders, ran through more halls.

And then they stood in front of the big black door. Caffrey turned the wheel, slowly at first, and then faster, until it spun and blurred into invisibility. He stepped back and the doors opened.

THE hold was dark and musty. In the tiers of bunks, the androids huddled like not-quite-black shadows. They said nothing.

They watched. There was only a smell of antiseptic in the air, healthful, clean and rotten all at the same time.

Caffrey and Dillman moved through the endless rows of bunks. Farther down, Caffrey could see Doc crouching over a low bunk, his cigarette lighter aflame. He knelt there, a small bulbous gnome of a man, with weary defeated eyes and thin hair lying over his skull. An android boy of about seven years lay on the bunk.

Doc looked up as they stepped up to him.

His face was filled with the weariness of his eyes, with too many years and too much that was wrong.

"Well," said Caffrey, watching him. Doc's lighter jumped and flared bright when he spoke.

"The boy is sick," Doc said. "Very sick."

Caffrey clicked his fingernails together. "Did you call me down here for that?" There was a restless stirring from the bunks.

"Certainly," Doc replied. "It might be dangerous."

"What the hell's the matter with him?"

Doc shrugged. "I don't know. How do I know what kind of diseases androids get. Don't you understand what this could mean?"

"No," said Caffrey, "I don't." His voice hardened. "I'm going back up to the chart room. We dock on Mars in a few hours."

Doc sighed and lifted his misshapen body. "All right." He turned to a woman near the bed. The woman's eyes were liquid and full of hurt. "I can't do anything,"

Doc said. "I don't know what's the matter with him." Caffrey felt stupid, seeing sorrow expressed for a woman who wasn't even human. Doc snapped his lighter closed and the circle of fire was gone. Caffrey breathed easily.

"It's too damned dark," Dillman whispered as they moved toward the door. He stumbled against a bunk and swore.

"Keep quiet," Doc said very softly. "Just you keep quiet."

Caffrey closed the black door and passed out cigarettes. The smoke whirled up to the ventilators like a dancing blue dragon. "Doc," he said, trying to control his anger, "I'd like to know why you're getting so excited."

"This is the first time I've seen disease in an android," the little man replied. "I don't know whether the disease is harmful to them or not. I mean seriously harmful. But remember what Terran scarlet fever did on Antares second. We've taken care of scarlet fever. It isn't fatal to us. But remember what it did to the people on Antares second."

"Yeah," said Dillman, leaning against the wall and covering his eyes.

Caffrey remembered too; the bodies and the fine yellow buildings and the rot and the inability to stop the corruption. The system had known panic.

"I see," he said. "You think whatever's wrong with that kid, even though it might not bother them much, might . . . kill us? Is that it?"

"Yes," said Doc. He blew out some smoke.

Caffrey grabbed his arm. "Nothing's going to happen. This cargo is going to Mars and nothing's going to happen. I've worked for this a long time. Understand? No sick kid is going to keep me from landing on Mars."

"You're the captain," said Doc. He shambled off down the corridor, trailing a worm of blue smoke in the air behind him. He rounded a corner out of sight, small and gnarled and tired of arguing. The last of the smoke vanished into the ventilators.

Dillman laughed gratingly with effort. "Let's go get the rest of that bottle, Cap."

"Sure," said Caffrey.

They were three hours out from Mars

when the com system came to life again. Caffrey jumped up out of the shock chair and jabbed the switch. A nervous, excited voice came screeching at him.

"Skolnik, Captain."

"What's wrong?"

"It's Doc. He's on the floor of his cabin. He's . . . I . . ."

"Speak up, man!" Caffrey yelled.

Skolnik's voice pulled itself back from shivering pieces and went on, "Doc's lying on the floor . . . and his voice is awful . . . and the muscles in his face and arms and all over him are jumping and . . . oh, Captain . . ."

"Go on," Caffrey said savagely. "Go on!"

". . . and he's screaming, Captain, and we can't stop him . . ."

Caffrey was out in the hall before the last syllable was uttered. The bulkheads spanged open as he kicked them. His feet slap-slapped frantically and when he was two sections away and one deck above Doc's quarters, he heard the screaming.

It rose and shrilled and howled and made him more afraid than he had ever been in his life.

The carefully acquired veneer of toughness shredded away like cheap cotton candy that was eaten at a Terran carnival and dissolved to nothing in the mouth.

The eighteen crewmen of the ship were in the hall, milling and twisting their caps in their hands. Skolnik stood with his back to the wall. He had vomited on the floor and now he was crying. Caffrey was sicker when he smelled the bitterness, but he shoved at the crewmen.

They stumbled against one another like dumb animals. Their faces belonged to little boys on dark nights when they walked home alone.

They seemed to resist Caffrey's efforts, and he clubbed at them, the breath tearing in and out of his chest. Finally, he stood with his hands on the edge of the cabin door.

HIS hands had been sweating, but now he felt, actually felt, the wave of cold sweep through his fingers, up his arms.

Doc was on the floor, like Skolnik had said.

His scream made an endless mad tune above the engine rumble. His body was lifted from the floor, jerked, twisted, thrown back down again like some fantastic, jiggling marionette on strings.

"Doc," Caffrey called, "Doc, listen, it's me, Cap."

The screaming slobbered into nothing. Doc's hands clutched at the iron frame of his bunk. They held there while the rest of his body was convulsed and pulled into insane contortions.

"Infected," Doc said, forming his words into a shriek. "I got it from the child . . . we're all infected . . . all . . . we'll infect Mars . . . spread . . . spread . . . spread . . ." The last word went up and up like the ship's takeoff siren. Doc struggled to hold onto the bed but his body went jerking away across the floor.

Dillman peered over Caffrey's shoulder. The big man spoke very softly. "Go back to my cabin. Get my gun. Hurry."

Dillman hesitated, then ran. Caffrey stood fascinated watching the devil's dance of the diseased man. Finally, something cool and hard was placed in his hand. The scream tore at his eardrums.

Quickly he looked at the ceiling. He pushed the gun forward. He pulled the trigger several times. The shots roared and blended with the engine thunder. When the noise was gone, Caffrey realized that the screaming had stopped. He dropped the gun.

He turned around and closed the door of the cabin and locked it without once looking at Doc. Skolnik still sobbed over against the wall.

Rapidly, Caffrey explained what had happened in the android hold. The men stood around, not looking at one another. They breathed loudly and the blue lights in the ceiling watched them, emotionless.

Caffrey said, "We'll all be like that after a while."

"Maybe if we beam to Mars they'll know what to do," Dillman whispered. "Maybe we can get there in time, and maybe they can stop the disease."

Caffrey looked at him. "And maybe not."

He walked away. Dillman didn't follow. He walked back to the chart room and sat down in the shock chair. Beyond the port,

Mars was large and waiting.

Caffrey thought seriously for the first time in many years. He wanted to get the ship to Mars. Maybe the doctors could help them. And maybe not.

They might infect others. The disease might spread, and if no one knew how to handle it . . . he didn't want to think about that.

Doc hadn't known what to do. Doc was a good man, medically. He had been a little run down, a little second-hand, because of his seedy deals and his need of money and his operations on women in dirty back alley rooms on a hundred worlds. But Doc couldn't stop it.

And sometime, Caffrey thought, alone and facing himself at last, a man has got to stop being tough. You can't live with yourself forever and be tough. Just once you've got to do something for your self-respect. He knew it, and all the cursing and shouting could not cover up the fact that he knew it.

There was a chance for them. But the chance might be deadly, more than deadly, to Sol's worlds. The androids didn't matter. They were pieces of metal and plastic and skin, constructed to get sick, but they didn't matter.

Caffrey laughed. *They didn't matter.* But they mattered when you thought of Doc being shaken to pieces in agony. Too perfectly made, they were. He laughed out loud at the tremendous mighty irony of the joke.

Dillman came in the door.

"What are we going to do, Captain?"

Caffrey stood up and sighed. He walked to the com system. He opened it. He spoke into it for a few moments. He shut it off. He turned to Dillman.

"That's what we're going to do," he said.

Dillman began to yell. He hit Caffrey,

pummelled at him, screamed in fear. Caffrey had to knock him down on the floor and hit him with his cane. None of the other men gave him trouble.

Carefully, he moved to the course computer.

He made corrections in the directional tape. The ship began to groan. It swung into a new course. Caffrey took one final look at Mars, thinking of the quiet days shuttling people to the Temple Ruins west of Red Sands, of the liquor and the warm, laughing women. But no more.

The sun lay dead ahead.

Caffrey sat down and poured himself a drink. Then he remembered something. If the disease hit him, he might alter the course.

He smashed the machinery, ripping it apart with his great hands, tearing it, so that the course could never be changed. Wires lay severed and bare all over the floor.

He picked up the bottle for another drink. The sun was a living ball of flame. He could not look at it.

The green sign went crazy. EXERCISE PERIOD, it blinked, EXERCISE . . .

Caffrey tried to throw the bottle at it. His hand twitched. The bottle fell to the floor and broke. Caffrey looked at his hands, at the hairs whitened with sun glow. The hand twitched again. Dillman stirred where he lay. His leg flapped once or twice.

Caffrey sat there while the heat began to melt the walls. He felt his body writhing, but it did not matter, in the heat. There was only a blinding whiteness all around. He thought about the androids. He thought about Skolnik. He thought, at last, about Mars.

He was still thinking about Mars when the ship fell into the burning maw of the sun.
