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The Madcap Metalloids

By W. V. ATHANAS



"Squad, Right Face! Forward MARCH! HALT!"

Plucked from the space-lanes by its ravening magnetism, the two intrepid Terrans defied the death of this deadly radioactive worldlet by playing games with the roly-poly natives!

JONATHAN DRAKE SWAM BACK to consciousness as a bubble rises through molasses—slowly, and with great effort. His arms lay heavily on the padded rests of the shock-chair, and his lids drooped persistently despite the shouted commands of his brain. A bubble of

air rose reluctantly up his throat to operate his paralyzed vocal cords.

"Doc," he croaked. "Doc?" The words bounced off the polished metal walls of the room. There was no sound after that but the soft purr of the control board.

Jonathan walked his hand along the arm

rest like a spider, each finger a leg drawing the weighted hand a step further like a tremendous body. Finally a finger found the cup of the release button, and the pneumatic pads fell free of thigh, belly and chest. He slid the button forward and the shock-seat tilted him forward and decanted him gently onto the floor.

He could hear Doc breathing now, the sound of it harsh above the quiet humming of the dynamics, and he rolled on over and heaved his body off the floor with both arms.

"Puny," he muttered to himself. "Weak as a baby. Must have been a rough landing."

He fought his way to his hands and knees, but his body rebelled at the task of rising to his feet.

This is getting to where it ain't funny, he thought, and scrambled with great effort to the control board.

He had a look at the G-gauge and whistled softly. 3.4! *Leaping Luna, no wonder!* He forced his hand to the knurled knob of the control lever and clicked it down four notches. He held it there a moment, then eased it back a fraction by twisting the knob. The dynamics' hum rose a note and the weight began to fall from him.

He stepped swiftly to the other shock-chair and released the restrainers with one impatient stabbing finger. Doc had a bluish tinge about his mouth and his breathing was a bit ragged.

"Doc," said Jon sharply. He thumbed one of Doc's eyes open and studied the pupil. "Too much deceleration," he muttered, and wheeled to the black kit on the wall.

His eye caught the visi-plate over the control panel in passing, and he gave the bleak plain it showed a casual glance. Something round and black traveled across the field of vision, but was gone almost as soon as it caught his attention. He flicked a quick look to see that the automatic cameras were recording, and returned to Doc.

Doc made no response to the jab of the needle, but within ten seconds the color flooded to his face and he snapped his head up with alert attention.

"We made it," said Doc with instant comprehension. Doc was bald as an egg, though he was not yet thirty-five, and his lips were red and full and smiled easily. Behind those twinkling blue eyes—as Jon knew full well—was a brain that operated at its peak during stress, a mind that knew neither dismay nor panic.

His eyes twinkled now with sharp inquiry. "How does it look, Jon?"

THE lean dark-haired pilot shrugged. "I haven't seen much of it yet. Instruments show that we aren't cracked—outer and inner hulls still holding pressure. Tremendous gravity, no atmosphere. Entire area slightly radio-active. Haven't had time to check the recording tapes yet. I blacked out about the same time you did."

Doc caught his lower lip between his white even teeth for a moment. Then he tilted himself out of the shock-chair and rolled the stiffness out of his broad shoulders. "Tapes first," he said.

Jon clipped another reel into the recorder and stopped the whirring of the one he wanted. He slipped it onto the reversing spindle, pulled out the tag-end inside and fed it into the slot. Then he tapped two cigarettes alight on his thumbnail, gave one to Doc and stepped back to watch.

The asteroid showed up with surprising suddenness out of the void that was deep space. Its outlines were blurry at first, but sharpened as the spotter focussed on it. It was traveling at tremendous speed, for the star patterns behind it changed even as they watched. The metallic voice of the sound track came in now, recording the instrument readings.

"Ship's course Z-point RD 3784. Object's course Z-point AD 1892." The speaker droned on with data, speed of ship, computed speed of object, drive ratings. Then: "Collision course. Collision course. Repeating. Collision course."

The black mass of the asteroid shifted on the screen and momentarily went out of focus as the ship spun on its axis and the rear viewers took over. Then the scene was streaked with flame as the main jets put on full emergency deceleration.

The rest of the recording tape was nightmarish. The flaring of the jets stuttered—then stopped. The dispassionate mechanical voice of the speaker reported the main converter feed jammed, and almost instantly reported that auxiliary units were operating.

Doc shuddered reminiscently at this. He recalled the tortuous crawl through the tunnel into the converter room, the shoving of the screen ahead of him in the flickering blue glow of the room, the unjamming of the 'foolproof' feeding reel that had been installed especially for this exploration.

The twenty minutes it took had been enough. The ship lurched to the pull of this concentrated hulk of God-knew-what, and went into a tight orbit around the asteroid.

They were just too close. They came in lower and lower, and finally Jon threw on full power. Hobson's choice. Fall into the mass or kill themselves with high-G deceleration. Jon chose deceleration.

Both pairs of eyes watched the changing pictures with fascinated gaze. This was where they had blacked out.

It was sheer luck. The tape showed that they had gone tumbling across the bleak land below in a crazy pinwheeling motion. The nose dropped forward into the line of flight just as the belly of the ship slammed into the plain. For perhaps fifty Earth miles the ship cut its screaming swath across the bosom of the naked plain. Then motion stopped, and the tape showed nothing but the dead land for minute after minute.

"All right," said Doc, and Jon reached for the switch.

THEN motion showed on the screen. A sphere came out of the side, rolled up to the nose of the ship, hesitated, then rolled on almost out of the range of the lens. Then it simply disappeared. The tape whirred on to its end, and the machine clicked off.

"Now what in the name of the Sacred Blick of Venus," said Jon, "was that?"

"I pass," replied Doc. "Let's see that again."

They saw it again. And again. What

appeared to be a solid sphere of shiny black metal rolled across the plain, paused before the nose of the ship, rolled on—and simply disappeared!

"Well," said Doc at last, "this is still Exploration Unit X-3. First we eat, then we start getting this all down on tapes. Then we check the ship, and maybe we take a look-see around. Then we get the hell out of here. But first we eat."

Jon busied himself breaking out the rations. This consisted of picking two tins out of the locker, rapping them sharply on the rod that protruded from the case and setting them aside. In about thirty seconds the tins emitted a tired sigh and the lids raised slightly. The portions of food, each in its own clear plastic bag, were hot and ready.

Doc dropped his postprandial cigarette into the disposal slot and came to his feet.

"On your feet, Flyboy," he ordered. "Plenty workee, so chop chop, up and at it."

"Slave driver," sneered Jon. He squirmed into his antirad suit. He poised the helmet and fired his blast. "I gotta sweat my head off, back there, and you play with tapes up here. Talk about your men and boys. Hah!" And he dogged down the helmet. He could see Doc's lips moving and grinned pleasantly. He made motions to show that he wasn't hearing a word.

He was still grinning when he undogged the tunnel lock and closed it behind him. Between the double doors, he twisted his body in the cramped space to undog the second door. When it swung open, he had to crawl through the narrow opening into the tunnel. He thrust head and shoulders into the opening, and the weight of the world fell on him. He was jammed against the floor with an unbearable weight, and the threshold of the lock-door was slowly cutting him in two.

"Doc!" he screamed into the mouthpiece in his helmet. "Doc, give me a hand!" Then a cold hand closed over his heart.

The transmitter was off! In his horseplay he had not turned the knob, and now his hands were welded to the floor by the crushing weight.

He lashed out frantically with his lead-

soled feet, for they could still move. He tried to pound the lead soles in the distress code, but the pain of his crushed ribs was telegraphing down his nerves and the rhythm was erratic.

Here it comes, he thought bleakly, and a black wave curled over his thoughts.

He caught his breath and gagged. He looked up into Doc's anxious eyes and pulled the mask that was feeding him oxygen off his face.

"Whoosh," he said. "What was that?"

"Just plain gravity," replied Doc. "The Stable-G unit just covers the flight-compartment here, as you well know. When you stuck your head into the tunnel, you went over the edge, and the part of you that was in the tunnel must have weighed tons. I had to put a power winch on you to drag you out. Wonder it didn't pull you in two. We'd have thought of that if we both hadn't been trying to be funny." They considered this soberly for some minutes.

"Well," said Jon, raising a soothing hand to his aching neck, "that takes care of that. The drive compartment is out of bounds for us until we can get Stable-G into that tunnel."

"Yes," said Doc shortly. He turned to the rack where he had been working. He tossed the correlation tapes to Jon.

"Read 'em and weep," he said grimly.

Jon skimmed the tapes quickly. Twice he went back and checked the cold merciless facts. Finally he looked up and took a deep breath. It was unescapable fact, this asteroid was radioactive. It was only a matter of time until the ship would be contaminated.

"How long?" He forced his voice into steadiness.

Doc tapped a cigarette alight and took a deep lungful of smoke. He pursed his lips and gazed at the glowing end with deep distaste. "Between three and four days," he said slowly. "Say seventy-two hours to be safe."

"Well," said Jon, "let's see about getting this can the hell out of here." He settled himself in his seat and his experienced hands ran smoothly over the multitude of controls.

The amber READY light slowly slid through the spectrum until it reached

green. Then the red warning lights came on above the firing switches.

"Set," he said over his shoulder, and Doc slid into his shock-chair and clicked the switch. "Right," said Doc.

Jon flipped the three toggle switches and shoved the red power lever full ahead. The ship quivered, and the tiny shudders of strain telegraphed their way up to Jon's sensitive nerves. But the ship moved not at all. Jon cursed softly and threw the auxiliaries on. The sense of strain grew until it was nearly unbearable. The ship edged ahead, six inches, six more, then the warning lights began to pop on above the control panel.

Jon groaned, and cut power. He swiveled around.

"That's all," he said, "unless you want to get out and push." They unstrapped silently and lighted cigarettes without looking at each other. Unconsciously their eyes went to the Geiger. It clicked softly, and the sensitive needle jumped half across the dial and fell back. The needle of the accumulator dial was already lifting off the pin. Again the Geiger clicked and the needle jumped.

"Well," said Doc tiredly, "let's start getting it down on record tape. It may do some good someday."

THE transmitter was set on automatic, and was tirelessly throwing out its XER, XER, XER, in Interplanetary Code. But only a hissing roar came from the speaker tuned to the Explocenter channel. Doc got up and turned the volume down. He rubbed his hands together briskly.

"Let's go out and have a look-see," he suggested.

"You nuts?" inquired Jon sourly. "We'd be squashed like a couple of bugs the second we step off Stable-G."

"Ole Doc thought about that. We put a small Stable-G unit on each foot of a space suit and run them off the dynamics in the suit. By coupling the secondary off the S-G unit on the right foot to the metal suit, and the primary of the left one ditto, we can convert the whole suit into a S-G, and be as safe as if we were in church. Just to be safe, we'll hook up a suit and shove it into the air-lock to test it."

It worked.

Doc insisted on being the first out. He ran a loop of eighth-inch shielded warping line through the towing rings on the shoulders of his suit and grounded the shielding to the suit with a dab of welding metal.

"If I get stuck, Jon," his voice came tinnily through the phones, "haul me back with the winch. And whatever you do, watch the weld on your end of the shielding. There should be enough juice in it to keep it inert." Jon nodded, and Doc broke the seal on the outer door.

For a split-second the air glittered with pinpoints of light as the moisture in the airlock solidified. Then the crystals blinked out as the further cold broke the solids into their separate gasses and dispersed them. Doc slowly descended the ladder to the ground. His voice kept up a steady drone, feeding information to Jon and to the recorders tuned in on the control panel.

"I am clear of the ship now, by about twenty meters. Surface seems to be a sort of metallic sand—granulated at least—but solid as steel. My relative weight seems to be about 1.5, with S-G unit at maximum. The area seems to be absolutely barren, without even a hummock or dune in sight. The . . . Whup! There's one of those things—those spheres—just ahead, about thirty degrees off the ship's nose. Stand by—I'm coming back to the airlock."

Jon swiftly hauled in the slack in the line, hand over hand, and pressed the winch control to feed the slack onto the drum.

"Hold it," came Doc's voice. "It's disappeared again. Whup! Now there's one over here on my right, at about a hundred meters. Spherical shape, black, about five and a half or six meters in diameter . . . now it seems to be settling into the surface; assuming a hemispherical form . . . Whup! Disappeared again! Reel me in, Jon. We've got to get some high-speed shots of this."

It never occurred to either of them that there was no point in making these recordings. Explocenter hand-picked its men, and insatiable curiosity was the first requisite. Quick judgment and moral stamina

came next. And first, last, and always—"get it down on records".

The Geiger clicked softly on the bulkhead and the needle of the accumulator was working toward the red area, but neither paused to consider these things now. They had made their try, exhausted their resources.

BUT in the back of their minds was the knowledge that within a few months a statistician at Explocenter would mark Explounit X-3 "missing", and at the end of the year two more names would be added to the column at Explocenter; that shaft of gray venustron that stood beside the main entrance, whereon was the long, long scroll of names. Simple monument to the men of Explocenter who never came back.

"We can't take the big tele-lens outside," mused Doc, "so we'll have to record off the visi-plate. I'll go outside again, and spot for you, and you can line the 'plate on my bearings."

"Huh-uh. My turn," retorted Jon. "Why should you have all the fun? I'm going out this time, and you can shoot pictures to your little heart's content. Besides, I'm going to tuck my little personal camera into my helmet under my chin and get some shots on the spot."

"All right," snorted Doc. "But don't come crying to papa if you stub your toe. And look both ways before you cross the street. Here—let me blow your nose before you go out in the cold."

"Aw go to Helios, you retort-smasher. If I run into a ground squirrel, I'll skin him and bring you some hair."

Jon eased down the ladder and shuffled across the smooth surface until he was well clear of the ship.

"Nothing yet," he reported, and swept the horizon with his glance.

"I could have told you," said Doc nastily. "Your ugly face scared them away."

"Yeah," snorted Jon. "Every stenotyper at Explo has your beautiful mug pasted in the top drawer of her desk."

"Sure!" agreed Doc smugly.

"Well," said Jon impatiently, and under his breath. "Come on, you black boogers—I ain't got all day." Then he gulped.

For a huge black sphere materialized

about fifty meters to his left and rolled swiftly toward him. Jon beat a hasty retreat. He backed toward the ship, and jogged the camera under his chin to start it operating. The sphere paused a second, then rolled slowly after him.

"Steady," came Doc's voice in the phones. "I got a dis-ray on it."

Jon felt better, though he knew that a dis-ray blast this close to him would fricassee him too. He told Doc so.

"What's the difference?" inquired Doc, the first note of their doom in his voice. "Fast or slow—take your choice."

"Take your pictures, ground-hog," grunted Jon. "I'll do the heavy thinking around here."

"Don't sprain your neck with it, Fly-boy."

It was that dull black hopelessness in the back of Jon's mind that gave him the bravado that he showed then. He took a quick step toward the sphere.

"Scat," he snarled savagely, and waved his arms. "Shoo! Get lost!"

Then his mouth gaped. It was gone! Vanished!

"Doc!" he yelled, "did you see that?"

"Yup," came Doc's matter-of-fact voice. "Got it all here on the tape. Blip! Gone, just like before."

"That isn't what I mean," protested Jon. His brain was staggered by the half-formed thoughts that crowded it. "Now get this, Doc."

He shouted, "Come back here! Right here in front of me." For the space of three slow heartbeats nothing happened. Then, with the air of having been there all the time, the sphere materialized.

Breathing carefully, Jon said. "Roll toward me." The sphere hesitated a second, then came obediently toward him.

"Stop!" said Jon. The sphere was stock-still in the instant.

"Doc," cried Jon, excitement cracking his voice, "these star-blasted boogers can think!"

"Come on in out of the sun, Fly-boy," said Doc wearily. "The heat's getting you. It's coincidence. Or you moved to attract it, or something."

"No," protested Jon. "Now look. I'm going to cut off my trans, but I'll call my

shots first. I'm going to have it roll left, then right, then back to center. Got that? Left, right, and back to center. Over and out." And Jon cut off his transmitter.

HE stood stock-still and formed the impression in his mind. *Now roll to my left*, he thought. The blank sphere moved to the spot indicated. *Now to my right*. The huge sphere obeyed the mental commands with the joyous precision of a rookie Space Patrolman who has just learned his Parade Manual.

For fifteen minutes Jon put the hulking ball through its paces, and then as suddenly as it had appeared, the rapport was lost. The sphere trundled off across the plain, oblivious to Jon's commands, and finally settled to a hemisphere in the distance. Jon opened his trans.

"Yah," came Doc's disgusted voice. "He never jumped through no hoop."

"Drop it," retorted Jon curtly. "He got tired of it. Did you get it all down?"

"Every bit of it. Better come on in now, and we'll look it over."

Jon was suddenly tired, and he thought of the soft chairs in the Flight Room. But there would be that damned Geiger clicking, and the accumulator needle working into the red.

Jon knew suddenly that he was not going back to the ship. *What's the percentage in waiting for it*, he thought, *when I might as well be taking a look-see over the hill? Oh, come now Jon-me-lad, what hill?*

Into the trans he said, "Put a lamp in the window, Mother Dear. I'm going to look the sitchy-ation over. I'll hold on the line of the ship to the horizon, then bear right on the circle till I get back. Have supper ready—and please, no horse-radish in the broccoli."

Doc's voice came through with a trace of worry in it. "We shouldn't separate until we know more about this."

"To quote an outstanding authority," said Jon, "one Randall E. 'Doc' Martin, 'what's the difference? Fast or slow—take your choice'. End of quote."

"All right," agreed Doc tiredly. "But Jon, don't do, uh, anything rash."

"G'bye, Clabberhead," retorted Jon fondly. "Over and out."

Black depression settled on Jon as he trudged toward the horizon. Unwilling impressions returned to his brain. He remembered the crew of the XP-11. Their converter had been cracked in a jet blow-out. The commander was in the Rest Home on Venus. His head and shoulders looked like a mushroom. Colloids. Lucky, everybody said, just a light burn. His brain was still good.

So he carried his obscenity of a head around and found his way with a radar rod. Some of the others weren't so lucky; the flesh melted off their bones. Some of them had glowed before they died.

I'll stick with it until the time limit's up, he thought, then I'll blast my suit or cut the S-G circuit. Quick and easy.

He approached the sphere—hemisphere now—and wondered casually why it assumed that shape. Feeding, probably. But what would a metal ball eat? On the other hand, how did it receive his mental commands? *Drop it, Jonny, you're just going in circles.*

The sphere popped back into shape at his approach and circled coquettishly about him. It stopped before him and seemed to be waiting. Jon grinned.

"Booger, you ear-banger, you're bucking for stripes. All right . . . To the rear, MARCH!" Booger spun on his axis and trundled briskly away.

"Halt! By the right oblique, MARCH! RIGHT! . . . WHEEL! Halt! At Ease!" Booger came patiently to rest.

THE fancy came over Jon that it would indeed be a sight to organize a drill team of these spheres. "Booger," he thought suddenly, "where are your friends? You can't be the only one on this Godforsaken world. Go get 'em, Booger." Booger sat for a bit and then rolled playfully to and fro.

Jon phrased his thoughts carefully. He visualized a double row of Boogers, five to the row, before him. *Go get the rest of them, Booger,* he thought. Booger quivered, and then like snapping off a light tube, he was gone.

Within ten seconds, he popped back. Beside him a twin materialized, then two more.

Finally all ten of them were there, in two rows of five.

"Squad, Right Face!" ordered Jon. "Forward MARCH! HALT! Hey, dress up those ranks there." The right-end sphere in the front rank was at least two meters out of position. Booger broke ranks without orders and trundled swiftly to the side of the offending one, wheeled in a short arc and vigorously hunched him into position. Jon applauded with space-gloved hands.

"All right, Booger, you win. You are hereby promoted to Corporal of the Drake Irregulars. Now let's see some snappy close-order drill."

They drilled for some minutes, and then in a particularly tricky maneuver, the squad went to pieces. Two of them simply vanished. Three of them squatted—that was the only word Jon could find to fit—into hemispheres, and the rest either stopped or trundled about aimlessly.

"Well all right," said Jon with dignity. "Squad dismissed." He turned away to continue his tramp, and stopped with a startled gasp. There were spheres all about him. Ten, fifteen, twenty, thirty—there must be at least fifty of them, he calculated.

"Well, this is cozy," he said. "If I'd known I was working before an audience, I'd shown you some real drilling. Some audience, sitting on your hands."

He walked through the throng of them, giving them plenty of leeway in case one of them decided to roll his way. One, he thought it must be the one he had named Booger, followed him slowly. He got a good close-up look at several of them.

Smooth sleek balls they were, with shiny metallic surfaces, unbroken by any mark. No eyes, no feeding orifices, just smooth spheres.

What a bunch of bowling balls you'd make, he thought, *if we just had some pins.* Then he gasped.

At least six of them had extruded necks and were huge bowling pins!

"Now wait a minute," he gasped. "Do that again." They did. It seemed to be contagious. Within a few seconds he was surrounded by a veritable gallery of bowling pins, ten meters high!

He closed his eyes and counted to twenty—slowly. Then he snapped his eyes open quickly. They were still there.

"Doc was right," he groaned. "The heat's getting me." Then his whimsical humor made him think, *Booger, come here!*

One of the anonymous pins sprang back into a sphere and trundled to him. Jon made a sweeping gesture.

"Knock 'em down," he ordered. Booger took a rolling start and smashed into the ranks of pins with the enthusiasm of a runaway space tug. The earth-quaking impact shook Jon off his feet. He lay stretched on his belly laughing hysterically at the ludicrous sight.

Steady lad, some sane corner of his brain whispered. *Steady. This is no time to go to pieces.*

What the hell, he retorted to himself. *At least the condemned man had a hearty laugh.* But he pulled himself to his feet and trudged back to the ship.

DOC silently busied himself with the storage of the new reels after they had eaten.

"I found out how they do that disappearing act," he said finally. "It showed up on the high-speed shots. They shoot out a long pseudopod—like a wire. Then they snap back into a sphere at the other end. It's simply darned fast locomotion."

"Yes," agreed Jon, "and they can shape themselves into bowling pins and stuff too. And hold it. Their shape, I mean."

A thought was uncurling in Jon's mind. "Doc, do you suppose . . . by golly, it's *got* to work!"

And Doc was watching with astonished red-rimmed eyes as Jon slid through the neck of his space suit in its staped in the corner. Jon's voice faded out and came in over the speaker as the wrench settled the helmet in its seat and fell away.

"Warm up the converter, Doc. You'll have to handle that end this time. When I give the word, throw everything on—mains, auxiliaries, steering, everything. I'll have to do my end from the air-lock. And whatever you do, *don't cut acceleration until we're out of orbit and on course away.* Chop chop, chum."

Doc gaped at the door of the air-lock for a second, then shrugged and started closing switches. If the hottest spaceman of Explocenter said "try" . . . well, what could you lose?

Jon's voice came in over the speaker again. "Booger! Booger, you big lump, come here. Doc, I'm cutting off trans for a minute, it seems to work better when I think it to him."

The seconds ticked off into minutes, and the READY light was full green. Doc's hand trembled a bit on the firing levers, and he checked the restrainers in his shock chair for the third time.

Thirty seconds dragged by, and sweat budded on his forehead. "What in Helios is he . . ." he muttered, and then the speaker crackled with the one word: "NOW!"

Doc slammed the firing levers home, and instantly was driven deep into his shock-chair. Blackness washed out his trailing thought, *Leaping Luna, what is this doing to Jon? There is no shock-pad in the air-lock.*

It did plenty. It took all of Doc's skill and three weeks at Venusenter before the brash spaceman was clamoring for active duty.

"You see, Doc," he answered the question, "Booger and the rest were telepathic—one way at least. I had him gather about fifty of them, so if one or two quit on the job, it wouldn't make too much difference. Then I had them extrude themselves into cables clear over the horizon. I had them hook their . . . well, tail ends onto the fins of the ship. Then I gave them the word to get over the hill—fast. With our power, and their catapult action, it worked just like a Plutonian Cradle. Gave us that extra boost we needed."

"But what was their incentive?" inquired Doc. "What made them take your orders?"

Jon grinned broadly. "They ain't very smart. And life there is pretty monotonous. It tickled them to have some one give them something to do. Besides that, just before I passed the word to Booger, I commissioned him Commander-in-Chief of Drake's Irregulars. Authority-crazy, that Booger."