

WORLD'S LEADING SCIENCE-FICTION MAGAZINE

# AMAZING

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STORIES



"Too Hot To Handle," They Said  
READ IT HERE!

**THE EDGE OF THE KNIFE**



# AMAZING

STORIES

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Cover: EDWARD VALIGURSKY  
Illustrating a scene from "Winged Planet"

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# WINGED PLANET

By ADAM CHASE

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*This was an advanced,  
humanitarian world—  
peopled by robots that  
insisted on helping you  
even if they had to cut  
you into small pieces  
to do it.*

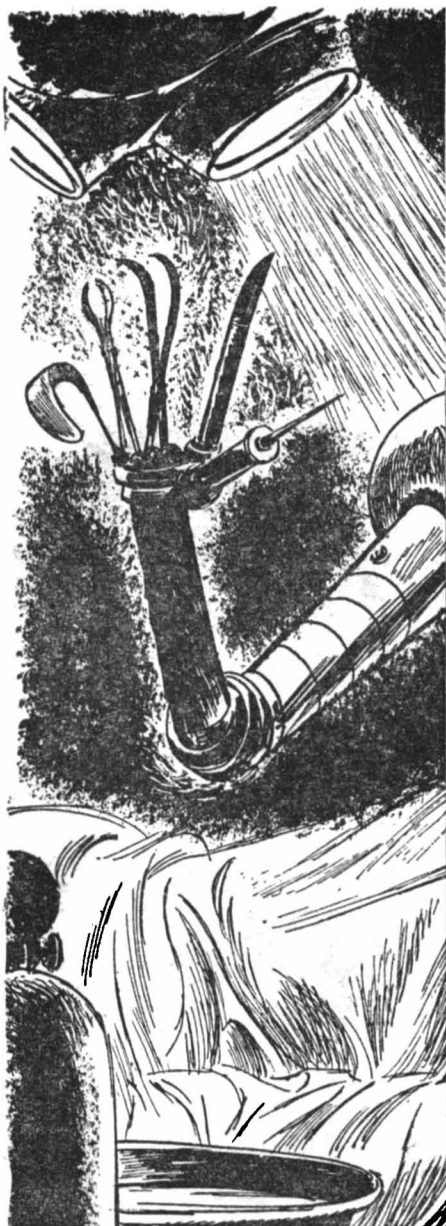
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CLIFF ACORN made a pass at Ann of the Outworlds about fifteen minutes before the *Star of Orion* crashed.

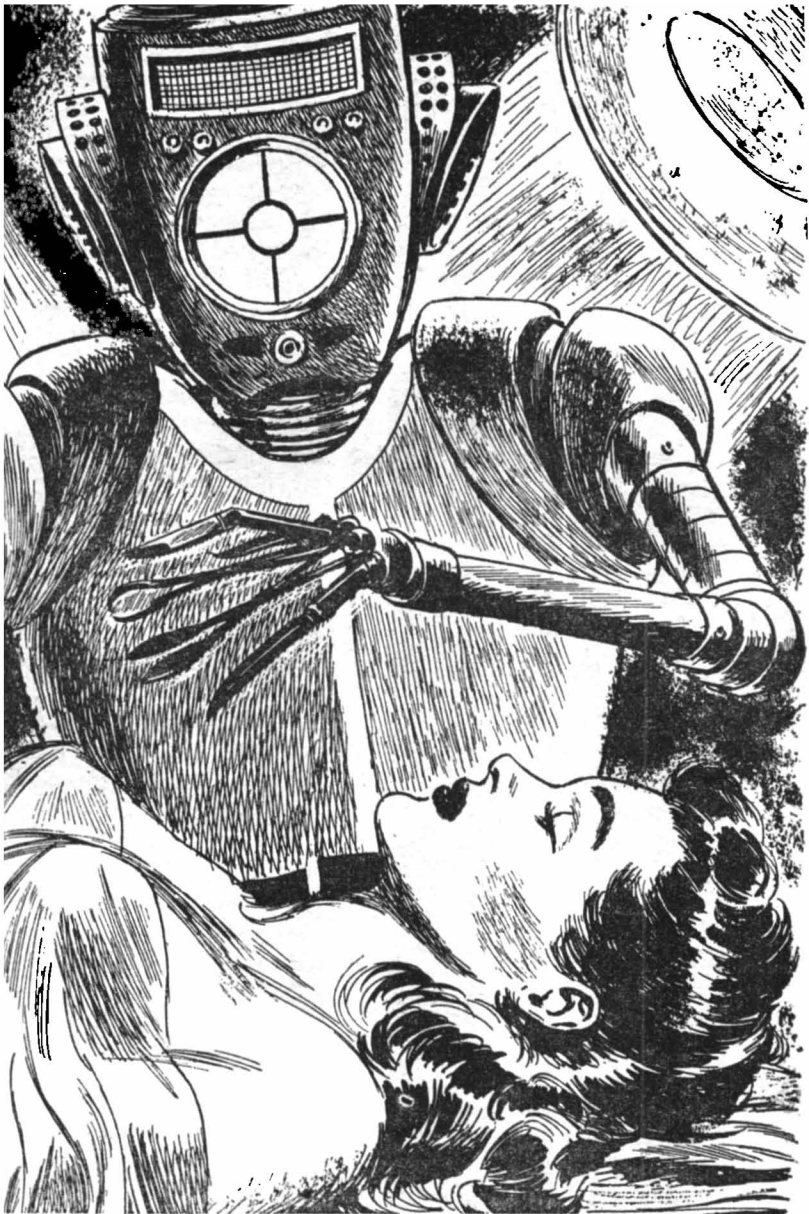
It happened while Ann of the Outworlds stood alone on the observation deck to await the first sight of the star-studded velvet blackness of normal space when the *Star of Orion* cut back in from subspace. Ann became aware of someone coming up behind her, and started to turn. Then she found herself trapped suddenly in Cliff Acorn's big arms, so she said:

"Cliff, you're acting like a darned fool."

Usually, sarcasm or utter



Joyce helplessly awaited



the steel touch of the robot-surgeon.

indifference worked. The length and breadth of the Milky Way Galaxy, Ann of the Outworlds had had passes made at her. She was an expert in fending them off, but it had been a long time since someone as annoying—and annoyingly persistent — as Cliff Acorn had bothered her.

“What’s the matter,” he said now in the observation deck of the *Star of Orion*, “I got leprosy or something?”

“No,” Ann said, breaking away. “You’re a perfectly normal ship’s second officer, with all the usual lusts. And you all assume that just because a gal travels alone, and just because she’s in my business—”

“I thought you were something special!” Cliff Acorn insisted.

Ann of the Outworlds knew ~~that~~ wasn’t true, but didn’t argue about it. She coolly lit a cigarette and let the perfume waft toward Cliff Acorn. She was suddenly, intensely aware of her own figure. She had a splendid figure, and knew it. She was wearing her practice leotards with a robe draped over her shoulders and carelessly fastened in front. Ann of the Outworlds was a dancer who had entertained frontiersman on every outworld colony from Sirius to the

Swarms of Ophiuchus. It seemed that every time she visited another primitive outworld her reputation sank lower into a morass of rumor and innuendo. And she had learned long ago that there was nothing she could do about it.

While Cliff Acorn, a broad-shouldered blond young man in the uniform of the Interstellar Transport Service, thought of some way to renew the attack, another couple came out on the observation deck. Often, Ann knew, the observation deck of a passenger ship like the *Star of Orion* would be crowded with passengers seeking their first view of the starry vaults of normal space. The *Star of Orion’s* passengers, however, seemed to be indifferent to the spectacle, with the exception of the young couple coming out on deck now. As for Ann of the Outworlds, she would never grow accustomed to changeover if she saw it a million times—which, thanks to her profession, almost seemed likely. To see one moment the swirling gray featurelessness of subspace and the next the velvet and diamonds of deep-space was a sight Ann would always marvel at.

Acorn lit his own cigarette. It had a too obviously mascu-

line odor, so Ann turned away distastefully. As she did so, she couldn't help watching the young couple. The man was in his late twenties, Ann's own age; the woman was perhaps five years younger. The way they acted, holding hands and smiling shyly into each other's eyes, they were probably honeymooners.

The boy said: "Happy, darling?"

The girl nodded. "This will only be the fourth time I ever saw changeover."

"I never saw it at all," the boy answered, and then said abruptly: "Is it safe?"

"But you must have seen it when we left Earth, Garry." Ann's latest engagement had been on Earth, which had rapidly lost its central position in interstellar affairs with the coming of cheap subspace travel. Now the Swarms beyond Sagittarius and Ophiuchus had become the center of human culture, a distinction which they certainly merited astrographically.

Garry explained why he had missed changeover while leaving Earth. Ann didn't hear him, not actually trying to eavesdrop. His honeymooning wife did hear him, and laughed.

"I asked you if it's safe," Garry persisted.

"Of course it's safe," his young wife said at once, looking surprised. "Why shouldn't it be safe?"

"I—I don't know, Joyce."

"Old worrywart!"

"No. It isn't that. It's just I—"

Garry went into an explanation in a soft voice, Joyce nodded understandingly, then they kissed. Ann of the Outworlds had not heard the explanation, but knew the explanation didn't matter. The boy Garry was a coward. You could see it in his expression, in the tense way he held himself awaiting changeover, even in the way he looked to his frail bride for assurance and support. Ann suddenly found herself pitying the girl Joyce, who would be saddled all her life with a timid, craven man, unless she decided to ditch him when, some time in the near future, with the honeymoon glow worn thin, she learned it the hard way.

"Now lookit them," Cliff Acorn said, chuckling. "They got the right idea, Ann." He snapped his fingers. "I'm only passing through, baby. Just passing through the world. I want to sample every—"

His hand, while he was talking, had come to rest on Ann's

shoulder and gradually had moved down from it. She stepped back, her cheeks reddening, and slapped his face.

Cliff Acorn laughed softly, to show he took no offense. But the honeymooner Garry, who apparently had never been struck in the face, not even by a woman who had received unwanted attention, winced when her open palm struck Acorn's cheek. Then he looked at his wife and they both smiled as if to say that, married, they were forever beyond that sort of thing.

Cliff Acorn came close to Ann and whispered, "Well, I always say, nothing ventured nothing gained."

It was Ann of the Outworld's turn to laugh. "You're a walking platitude, Mr. Acorn," she said, and watched Cliff Acorn's eyes flatten as he stared at her. Apparently, Cliff Acorn didn't like being made fun of.

". . . perfectly safe," Joyce was reassuring her groom. "If you can picture subspace as a folding over of a two dimensional continuum so that points far apart can suddenly become adjacent . . ."

"I know the theory, hon. I just sometimes feel uneasy about things like that."

Before Joyce could answer,

before Ann of the Outworlds had time to confirm her snap judgment of the boy Garry, the ship's alarm bells clanged.

"Joyce!" Garry cried.

Cliff Acorn looked at Ann, winced, and sprinted toward the irisng door. The door shuttered closed before he got there, though, and he couldn't budge it. At least he took his duty seriously, Ann thought: he had been going inside to help.

The alarm bells clanged again. Joyce and Garry looked at each other without comprehension. Then all at once the *Star of Orion* shuddered throughout its entire length like a convulsively dying animal.

Overhead, the glassite roof of the observation deck spun wildly, and abruptly the gray swirling murk of subspace surrendered to the velvet and diamonds, the diamonds swinging giddily, of deep-space.

"Look out!" Joyce cried.

The deck dipped underfoot and the four of them were tossed toward one bulkhead. The deck swung again, and they went the other way. Then without warning the glassite roof was underfoot.

"Help!" cried Garry.

Ann of the Outworlds looked at Cliff Acorn. There was

blood streaming down his face from a gash on his temple. She looked at the honeymooners. They were locked in each other's arms, the boy sobbing, the girl stroking his hair and probably not having time yet to realize she had married a coward.

Ann wondered if she would live to realize it at all.

Then with a grinding, driving, explosive ripping of metal, the *Star of Orion* struck and spun and bounced and came to a jarring stop.

Ann of the Outworlds felt herself flung through air. Then the whole world seemed to explode inside her head and for a long time she knew nothing. There was blackened and complete void.

She was a tiny, helpless figure at the center of an enormous galaxy twice as big across as the Milky Way. She was being pelted with cosmic debris, and the only protection she had was her skimpy leotard. Stars flashed by and nebulae pinwheeled. Then, slowly, and with infinite difficulty, she opened her eyes.

Pain beat in great waves at the back of her head and stabbed at her eyeballs. She wanted to surrender to it, to sink down into it. She was stretched out on her stomach and

there was something wetly warm under her.

She would have surrendered to the pain, except for the flames.

At first she thought she imagined them, as she had imagined the pinwheeling galaxy, but then she saw them more clearly, licking at the broken glassite of the observation dome. She climbed to her hands and knees and felt pain in her shoulder. The warm wetness was blood. Her blood—from a deep gash in her shoulder.

She crawled a little ways and found Cliff Acorn. Both his eyes had been blackened, so she assumed he had a brain concussion. She took his hand and felt for the pulse at his wrist. It beat weakly, erratically. Cliff Acorn was alive—but only just alive.

She found the girl Joyce next. Joyce was half-conscious and screamed with pain when Ann touched her arm. Then Ann looked at the arm. It was broken midway between elbow and wrist, the fracture compound and the white bone protruding.

Garry, also on his knees, was crawling toward Joyce. He looked down at her and cried hoarsely, "Help! My God, someone help us."

"It's all right," Ann said.



"It's going to be all right. We've got to get them out of here before the fire—"

Garry's eyes went big. Then he saw the flames and ran, unthinking, irrational with fear, to the sprung iris-ing door.

"Your wife," Ann said softly, but loud enough for him to hear. He paused at the door. Flames shot abruptly across it, tongues leaping out searchingly. There was now no escape that way.

The observation deck was a shambles. Choking on smoke now, Ann and Garry dragged Joyce away from the fire, leaving her on the floor near one end of the glassite dome, which was badly cracked. Then Ann started to go back for Cliff Acorn.

"I—I'm not going back there," Garry said. "You can't make me go back there."

"He'll die unless we get him out."

"I have my wife—"

"You're a coward," Ann said, using the words like a lash. The boy looked at her and for a moment she thought it hadn't worked. Then, his face set, he took a deep breath and ran back with her to the unconscious Cliff Acorn.

The flames were very close now, but Acorn was still unconscious. Dizzy and almost

sick with pain, Ann got down and grasped his armpits. Garry took his legs and they carried him quickly to where they'd set Joyce down. When she looked back, Ann saw that the flames had engulfed the deck where Acorn's unconscious body had been.

Garry knelt alongside Joyce and began to sob. He didn't make any vocal sounds, but his breath came chokingly and his shoulders heaved.

"Quick!" Ann said. "Or we'll all burn to death."

She went to the one wall still untouched by the flame. The metal bench running the length of the wall had been sprung almost completely away from the bulkhead. Its cushions had been scattered across the floor. "Come on," Ann said, "we'll have to yank it loose."

The metal was unpleasantly hot to the touch, but they finally succeeded in getting it loose. With the bench carried like a battering ram between them, Ann and Garry returned to the cracked dome. Without speaking, Garry knowing for once exactly what must be done, they ran at the dome. The makeshift ram hit with a bone-jarring thump and Ann thought the glassite must surely give along the crack.

But all that happened was the sudden appearance of other cracks, smaller, radiating out from the single large one.

The flames crawled hungrily toward them. There was a deadly roaring sound below them which could only mean that the entire interior of the *Star of Orion* was aflame. Even the floor felt hot now. They ran at the glassite again. This time the bench flew from their hands but the dome remained intact.

"Looks like it's no use," Garry groaned.

"Come on. Once more!"

Ann was blinded by the smoke, and choking on it. They ran forward with the bench. It hit, there was a crashing sound, and it flew from their fingers. Then for a brief moment the smoke cleared and the flames were behind them. Through a large rent in the dome Ann thought she could see a strange mauve daylight.

Garry helped her carry Joyce out, the girl whimpering whenever they changed the position of her broken arm. Finally they set her down on some rocks a hundred yards from the stricken *Star of Orion*. The surface of the strange planet seemed to be one continuous jumble of rocks and the mauve glow in

the air was a combination of the planet's blue sun and the crimson flames from the spaceship.

Garry sat down near his wife.

"We're going back," Ann said.

The boy shook his head. "Not me. I can't go back there again," he said.

Ann walked around in front of him. "That man was still alive. You know he was still alive. Are you going to let him die?"

"I can't go back. It might explode any second."

Ann turned around and stalked away across the rocks without another word. She couldn't stand there arguing while Cliff Acorn burned to death. On the other hand, she doubted if she could get him free of the ship alone. As for all the others aboard, she knew there was no sense looking. Only the observation deck's location had saved it. Everyone else had either perished in the crash or had been consumed by the flames.

When she had almost reached the blazing ship, Ann heard footsteps on the rocks behind her. She turned around and waited for Garry, then went in through the hole in the dome with him. The smoke was too thick for

them to see through now. They had to feel their way to Cliff Acorn.

Together they carried him from the ship. Ann felt her robe catch and tear on a sliver of glassite. When she pulled free she was wearing the purple leotards only.

They staggered with Acorn across the rocks, learning the hard way that there is nothing so heavy as an unconscious man's dead weight. Finally, with hundred-foot-high flames behind them casting long shadows across the rocks, they deposited Cliff Acorn next to Joyce. Ann staggered wearily to one side and sat down. She couldn't do anything for them now. She was exhausted. She wondered if they could find any sticks to help set Joyce's arm. There didn't seem to be any trees or any signs of life. She flopped down without any of her usual dancer's grace on the rocks and was either immediately asleep or lost consciousness.

She awoke to the sound of screaming. It took her a while to orient herself. The first thing she saw was the gutted hull of the spaceship. It was blackened and smoking, but the flames had died down. That probably meant considerable time had passed, but

the blue sun still seemed to hang in the same position in the sky.

Getting up, Ann heard the scream again. At the same moment, Garry cried out for help.

Something beat at the air overhead and an enormous shadow came sweeping down over the rocks. Ann looked up and saw a giant bird with a wingspan of perhaps thirty feet. At first she had thought it was some kind of flying machine, but then she saw the predatory claws, the great jutting beak, the feathered wings.

The scream came from Joyce, who was conscious and who also had seen the bird.

The scream was a mistake.

The bird headed straight for her.

It alighted with a thump and with one enormous clawed leg resting on Joyce's body and the other on Acorn's. Ann ran toward it, shouting, thinking she could distract it. Even Garry, forgetting his fear in the greater emotion of love for his bride, ran at it throwing rocks.

Ignoring them both, great wings beating, the bird rose skyward with Joyce and Acorn.

Ann watched it disappear toward the horizon. When it

was a very small dot whose wings could no longer be seen, she became aware that Garry was no longer with her.

She called his name but got no answer. Finally, where the rocky surface of the unknown planet sloped upwards perhaps a mile away, she saw his running figure. He was running in the direction the giant bird had taken. It was hopeless, of course. He could never overtake the bird. If he ran on that way, without food or water, blindly, hysterically, without any markers on the rock-rubble surface of the world, he would probably die trying. If the bird wanted to feed on Joyce and Acorn, they were probably doomed anyway. As for Ann and Garry, all they had to do was remain with the ship, for an accident in subspace automatically triggers a distress call announcing position and time of the disaster, so it would only be a matter of time before a rescue ship came bursting through the deepspace veil to their rescue.

Meanwhile, though, there was the boy Garry.

Chasing hopelessly after a winged monster.

Still, he had managed to conquer his own cowardice. Ann looked after his tiny figure. She looked back at the

ship. Stay here and she'd be comparatively safe. Go running across the unknown rock-rubble after him and she'd probably be lost, never able to find her way back.

But he had conquered his cowardice in a desperate attempt to save his wife. And wouldn't Ann be a coward herself if she didn't go after him?

She looked back at the ship once more, then she started out at a dogtrot after Garry.

The first thing she realized was she had not become tired. She had no idea how long she'd been trotting across the rock-strewn, lifeless terrain, but the effort did not tire her at all. She realized that she'd never overtake Garry, though, because the one view she'd had of him had been of a man sprinting. And, if she didn't become exhausted trotting mile after mile, there was no reason to assume he would tire running.

She stepped up her pace. Pretty soon she was flashing along, her legs pumping, her knees kicking high, the skimpy leotard not resisting the movement of her limbs at all. She did not grow tired. She did not lose her wind. Yet she had done so in the burning ship. She'd come out of it ex-

hausted. Because the ship's atmosphere and the atmosphere of this unknown world were different? Ann gave a mental shrug. She couldn't answer that question, but she'd been around long enough to know that, given a multiplicity of worlds, anything was possible. So why not a world in which the very air you breathed renewed your whole strength despite the effort you used?

The third time Ann looked back, which had been some hours ago if time meant anything on the strange world, she had not seen the ruin of the spaceship.

But the blue sun seemed stationary in the sky, so either time was deceiving or the planet rotated on its axis very slowly, perhaps once in the time it took for a single journey around the primary.

There was a long gradual dip in the ground ahead of her, so Ann could see a great distance. Instinctively she looked skyward, where—if there was going to be trouble—trouble would come from. The sky was a dazzlingly deep blue. There wasn't a cloud in it. Shading her eyes and still running effortlessly, Ann gazed ahead. She squinted. She thought she could see Garry

running miles ahead of her across the downward-sloping ground. She shouted his name, but if he heard her he gave no sign. He kept on running farther and farther away.

All at once another figure appeared alongside of him. From this distance that was all Ann could tell. It actually seemed as if the second figure, which appeared to be about a head taller than Garry and manlike, materialized out of nowhere. The figure gleamed in the blue sunlight. It either wore metal—or was made of metal.

Ann redoubled her efforts, but didn't seem to come any closer to the two figures. The gleaming one went close to Garry. Ann squinted at them. The gleaming one picked Garry up. The two figures merged.

Then they disappeared.

Ann thought she heard a faint cry.

She thought she would know the spot when she reached it, for two rocks, like enormous stone sentinels, reared skyward there. It took her a long time to reach the place, but when she did she knew it was the right spot and knew also how the metal creature—or metal-shod creature—had apparently appeared out of nowhere and disap-

peared the same way with Garry.

The two spires of stone stood about fifty yards apart. Between them the rock surface was smooth but bare of life like the rest of the planet.

And beginning at a point bisected by an imaginary line you could draw between the two spires of rock, and running on toward the horizon in a perfectly straight line, was a fissure ten feet across. She wondered where it came from.

It was too straight, Ann told herself, to be anything but artificial. At its starting point, the floor of the fissure was only about four feet below the level of the ground. Ann sat down on the edge, took a breath, and jumped into the fissure. Its floor sloped down at an angle something less than five degrees. Ann walked along it, sure that Garry and the metal creature had come this way. When she had gone a few dozen yards the walls were over her head. As she continued a few dozen yards further, the shadows deepened. Over her head, the fissure opening was still no more than ten feet across. But here on the floor, the fissure spread out. The floor was now thirty or more feet across, and widening as rapidly as it an-

gled deeper into the bowels of the planet.

Finally, the ten-foot-wide fissure overhead was the narrowest of rule-edged slits. Yet strangely light seemed to come from the walls of the fissure. And suddenly the ground felt soft, almost spongy, underfoot. Ann looked down.

The ground was green with moss!

The walls too were green, with moss and lichen growing on them. Somewhere not far away but unseen, water gurgled. The lichen supplied the light by which Ann now saw, since for all intents and purposes she was in a cavern and the rule-edged slit far overhead barely offered any illumination at all. The lichens glowed.

The only guess Ann had was that whatever quality in the atmosphere of the planet endowed her and Garry with tireless energy somehow, paradoxically, prevented other life from living there. So it probably wasn't in the atmosphere of the planet after all: if it didn't apply in the fissure, Ann had to assume it was the planet's sunlight. Experimentally, she ran a few hundred feet. Her breath came quickly and for the first time since setting out after Garry she could feel perspira-

tion dampening her armpits. She slowed to a walk, taking deep lungfuls of air to regain her breath.

Just then a voice inside her head told her, "You are quite right in your surmise. The rays of the blue sun are tremendously beneficial to life already existing but are lethal to the spores of new life."

Ann started. Where had the voice come from? She looked around, saw nothing but the lichen-covered walls. The voice had merely confirmed what she had already guessed. She decided that the uncanny sunlight behaved like plant vitamins in a nursery. Feed flourishing plants and they grow luxuriously; feed tiny seedlings, and you destroy them.

But what about the voice? Telepathy? Then where the source?

Something clanked in the

green dimness ahead of Ann. Her heart bobbed into her throat, pounding there and making it difficult for her to breathe. She wanted to run. She knew what was coming, because she had seen it make off with Garry. Then, thinking of the others, who were in here somewhere, Garry certainly, Joyce and Acorn very likely, she stood her ground.

The robot clanked toward her.

It was not metal-shod. It was metal. A metal man, or a manlike metal creature, seven feet tall. The voice spoke in her head again, saying one word: "Come."

"What if I don't want to?"

Silently inside her head the metallic voice laughed.

"Are—are my companions where you're going to take me?"

"Come."

"Are they?"

"Yes. Yes, of course," Ann heard impatiently.

Then a metal arm wrapped itself around her waist. She felt incredible strength in it, then her feet were lifted off the ground. With a loud clanking, the robot began to run with her. Its joints squeaked. Ann didn't say anything, but thought: *it's just a machine*—with a wild impulse to laugh—and *it needs oil*.

The robot, which apparently could read minds as well as deliver telepathic messages, said, "You're right again. There is almost no oil on this planet. We ration it. We rust. We'll die of the rust some day. That's why we have to hurry."

"Hurry about what?" Ann asked.

Instead of answering her immediately as it clanked along, going deeper and deeper into the fissure, the robot merely created the mental image of laughter in her mind. Finally, it said: "Hurry our creation."

"Creation?"

The robot didn't answer. It ran at the wall abruptly and a section of the wall slid soundlessly back. They went inside. Ann was deposited on a floor in darkness. She heard the robot clanking away and called

after it, but it didn't answer. Ahead of her she saw a tiny pinpoint of light and walked toward it. Soon the pinpoint increased to the size of a small coin held at arm's length. It became a light shining at the top of a high, broad door. As Ann approached the door, it slid ceilingward. Ann went through.

There was a brightly lit room. In it were Garry, looking scared and bewildered, and Acorn and Joyce, looking quite happy. Acorn's eyes were not blackened. Both of Joyce's arms were perfectly normal.

"But—but you're both injured!" Ann gasped. "Concussion, broken bone . . ."

"They cured us," Acorn said jauntily. He snapped his fingers. "Just like that."

Before she could answer a voice in Ann's head said: "Prepare for vivisection."

Apparently this was new to the others too. They looked at each other, not knowing what to expect. The robot—Ann thought it was the one which had brought her since it was the only robot she had seen so far—clanked into the room.

"Strip, please," it said mentally.

They just stood there, staring.



"Remove your garments and prepare for vivisection."

"Hey, listen—" Acorn began.

The robot, reluctantly, it seemed, clanked toward him. Acorn tried to duck out of the way, but one big metal hand pinned him against the wall. The other made a quick motion down the length of Acorn's body to his feet. There was a ripping sound. Acorn stood there naked.

Ann looked at the others. In the face of the fear clawing at her entrails, embarrassment would have been foolish. She could tell the others felt that way too.

The robot clanked about impatiently. Ann removed her leotard.

"I regret the necessity of this," the robot told them telepathically, apologetically, "but if we don't vivisect some specimens, how are we ever going to learn how to create the human race?"

"Vivisection!" Joyce sobbed, and fainted.

Light suddenly flooded the dim room. Garry caught his wife before she could fall. He eased her to the floor, looking very scared himself but determined and masculinely protective. Whatever else might happen, Ann thought with ap-

proval, their adventure wasn't doing the boy Garry any harm.

The robot took Joyce's still body away from Garry, who was flung against the wall when he tried to protect his wife. Then Joyce's body was strapped to a flat slab-like stone table, the robot unscrewed a metal plate from its own great chest, then unscrewed its own right hand at the wrist, reached into the hole revealed in its chest, withdrew a wrist with a set of surgical tools instead of fingers, screwed the strange new hand into place on its right arm, and approached the table where Joyce lay, flexing scalpel, forceps, clamp and an index finger of sutures on its new hand.

Garry promptly jumped on the robot's back and was just as promptly dashed to the floor.

Even Acorn's face looked white, but he said: "They cured her arm and my concussion. Whatever they do they can undo." He added softly, so Ann and not Garry heard him: "I think."

The robot stared down impassively at Joyce. Garry was sobbing. Ann, naked and unarmed, said to Acorn, likewise naked and unarmed, and as helpless as she was: "All over

the galaxy, humanoid races—as if we had some common origin. And here, a planet with robots, and giant birds, but no men. But men must have created the robots, Cliff. They're manlike, aren't they? Then the men either died or went away, we'll never know which."

"Maybe," Acorn suggested, "they never lived here at all. Maybe, somehow, the manlike robots got transported here, say in a runaway ship or something. Maybe the ship crashed, as ours did. The robots were built to be man's servants, but they had no servant's role to perform since they had no masters."

"So," Ann finished for him, the idea beginning to make very good sense, "the robots could think of only one thing—to recreate man, to serve him! Then, assuming there are birds here—"

"Not just the giant bird," said Acorn. "I saw others in the fissure, some of them as small as hummingbirds, and all sizes up to that monster."

"The robots experiment on the native population of birds. God knows how long they've been here. They've learned a great deal about the processes of life. The great variety in bird sizes proves that. But this—this is probably the first

time they have human beings to work with."

Acorn was awe-struck. "Even thirtieth-century man, with all his science, can't alter life the way these robots apparently can!" There was a new light, a special kind of wild eagerness, in Acorn's eyes. Ann didn't like it but at the time whatever Acorn thought or felt hardly seemed important. He said: "Can you imagine the power a man could have if he ever mastered the secrets of life these robots have mastered?"

The robot-surgeon hadn't moved. Apparently it had been listening to them. Now, when there was a pause in their conversation, the surgical hand swept down toward Joyce's bare breast.

"Wait!" Ann cried.

The surgical hand remained poised in midair.

"Were we right? Does what we guessed explain what you are trying to do?" Ann asked, speaking very quickly, earnestly and hopefully. She had realized that when they held the robot's intellectual interest it momentarily forgot Joyce's body on the slab.

"Much to my amazement," the robot declared telepathically, "you have come as close to the truth as we can come.

You see, our brain-synapses are such that our memories deteriorate on events more than fifty years old according to this planet's reckoning. And we have been here far longer than that."

"All you want to do," Ann persisted, an idea forming in her mind, "is create humankind so you can serve it?"

"Precisely." The robot's thought seemed somehow wistful.

"But don't you realize," Ann said triumphantly, driving her point home, "that you no longer have any reason to create humankind. We are here! We don't need creation! You can serve us!"

At first there was no reaction from the robot, not even telepathic rejection of the idea. The surgical hand lifted slowly and Ann thought it would plunge downward into Joyce's breast. But the metal hand came down slowly and went to the chest-plate. Soon the normal five-fingered metal hand had replaced the surgical hand. The robot used it to unfasten the straps which held Joyce. Garry went to her quickly, chafing her wrists, talking to her, pulling at her earlobes. When he lifted Joyce off the slab, she began to sigh.

The robot, meanwhile,

clanking loudly, threw itself on the ground before Ann. "Master!" it telepathized. "Forgive my stupidity. You are here at last, at last! Your wish is my absolute command."

Ann said promptly: "We want to return to our ruined ship and wait for rescue. We'll need food. Some of your smaller birds will do quite well, I suppose."

The robot's thought seemed disappointed. "That is all you wish? We have waited so long, and it is so little. Of course, we were never able to comprehend, master, exactly what a human being, since we remember no human beings, would wish for. But we did in truth expect more. Nevertheless, it shall be as you say."

The robot clanked toward the door. And Cliff Acorn, his eyes positively gleaming now, said: "Just a minute."

"Yes, master?"

"How many of you robots are there?"

"A hundred and seventy-eight, master."

"And the birds?"

"They're native to the planet. Except for the insects they feed on here in the cavern and the vegetation which grows along its walls, they're the only life. Of course, we fished the entrance to the cav-

erns and altered the birds tremendously. We—”

“Can you similarly alter any life forms?” Acorn asked eagerly.

“Yes, master. We hit upon it quite by accident, seeking the power to create life. Given an embryo of any life form, we can cause it to grow to gigantic proportions. You saw for yourselves the bird which brought you here. Since there are so few of us, we had decided that several of the biggest birds should patrol the planet’s surface for us, so if anything strange—”

“Yes, yes,” Acorn said. “But you can create monsters like that at will?”

“Like that or any size at all, master. We can also alter the basic structure of a life form, making a song bird into a bird of prey, for example.”

“Don’t you see?” Acorn told the others excitedly. “You could breed a whole new race of men like this! Workers, big and strong; savants, with enormous brain capacities; explorers who could adjust to any environment; fighters with—”

“Maybe what you say is true,” Ann told him. “I don’t know, and neither do you.”

“I only know it’s the greatest discovery since—”

“Sure, but don’t you think government scientists, working for the best interest of mankind, ought to decide what to do with it?”

“Never!” Acorn shouted. “We found it. It’s ours. Or,” he added softly, “if you don’t want it, then it’s mine.”

Exasperated, Ann turned to the robot. “You will ignore your recent conversation with this man. You will obey my original command.”

“Yes, master,” telepathized the robot.

“You will take us to your laboratories and assemble all your robots,” Acorn commanded the metal creature.

There was no immediate telepathic answer. The robot, which had never expected divergent human commands, did not know how to react.

Acorn said: “Weren’t you disappointed with what she told you to do? Didn’t you expect more?”

“Of a certainty, yes, master.”

“Good,” Acorn said triumphantly. “What I ask is more. You’ll do it?”

The robot turned to face Ann, then pivoted, creaking, to stare at Acorn. It was still undecided. Then Acorn added, “Listen to me and I can get you all the oil you need. I can cure your rust.”

That decided the robot. "It shall be as you wish, master," it said, and clanked toward the door.

Ann glared at Acorn, who smiled smugly. She knew his type: the passes he had made on shipboard had only been an unimportant sample. His type took what it wanted. Right now it wanted power. For the first time in his life, unexpectedly, Cliff Acorn had a chance at real power. It was up for grabs and, since the honeymooners probably would not be of much help, Ann had to stop him in order to deliver the uncanny power over life into the proper hands. But how was she going to do it? The robot was on Acorn's side. Glibly, Acorn had won it over. A moment ago, they had seemed near safety. Now, thanks to Acorn's wild schemes, they were further from it than they had ever been. For she knew Acorn would stop at nothing to get what he suddenly saw just out of reach in front of him. . . .

Ann did the only thing she could do under the circumstances. She found a rock on the floor and, while Acorn was watching the robot activate the horizontal door, came up behind the ship's officer with the rock overhead. As she brought it down, hard enough

to stun but not to kill, hoping that with Acorn unconscious the robot would obey her, something made the man turn around instinctively.

He shouted an oath and warded off the blow, then hit Ann in the face with his clenched left fist. She found herself dumped neatly on the floor and looked up at him, tasting the saltiness of blood in her mouth. Joyce and Garry looked shocked. Acorn said, "I hope I won't have to do that again." And, when Ann didn't respond, Acorn told the robot: "If you see any of them attacking me in the future, feel free to kill them. That's an order."

The robot telepathized at once that it understood.

They all left the operating cavern together.

Ann's chance came several hours after the meeting with the robots. She did not actually see the meeting. With Joyce and Garry she was conducted into a small cavern, the overhead door came grating down, and they were left alone. Hours passed, although Ann could not tell how long it had actually been.

Finally, the door slid up and a robot came in for them. She did not know if it was the same robot as before. This one

carried a bird as big as a bald eagle on its metal wrist the way a falconer carries a falcon. The bird's head darted, the eyes looked cruelly at them, the talons clawing nervously at the metal wrist, scraping against the metal. The bird looked like an eagle, too.

"Which one of you," the robot asked telepathically, "is called Ann?"

"I'm Ann."

"Then you are to come with me. The others stay."

"What for?" Ann asked.

At first the robot didn't answer. Then it telepathized: "My only concern is to serve man, the master. Come."

The "master," of course, was Cliff Acorn. Joyce and Garry said good-bye almost as if they thought they wouldn't see Ann again.

"He's mad," Joyce said, "isn't he?"

"Mad with power. A lot of men would be."

"And you're going to try to stop him?"

Instead of answering, Ann said, "Apparently he doesn't think I can. He sent for me."

Then she obeyed the robot and the door slammed down behind her. She followed the robot with the perched eagle.

Acorn led her into a room

which the robots had prepared to his specifications. She was amazed they could work so rapidly. The room was like an outdoor living room with exotic plants and trees and songbirds busy in their branches. The cavern ceiling was lofty, enhancing the outdoor impression. The birds sang sweetly.

"Listen," Acorn greeted her enthusiastically, "it surpassed everything I hoped for. They can do anything—anything with life, Ann, except actually create it. They can grow new tissue for old, like starfish and lobsters can on Earth, they can breed any kind of mutation they wish, they can . . . but take my word for it. Do you know what this means?"

"You already told me," Ann said coldly.

"No, I mean for you."

"I?"

"Ann, I want you to share it with me. That hasn't changed, how I feel about you."

"Oh, sure," Ann said, looking at the robot with the bird of prey on its metal wrist. "With a robot to guard me all the time. Don't you see, Cliff, I'd never agree to what you're doing." Ann made one final attempt to ignite a spark of decency in him. "I guess I'm like the robots. I want to—well, to serve man too. I

couldn't keep a thing like this for myself."

"To serve man!" Acorn scoffed. "You know, those robots are almost pathetic, the way they almost fight with each other to do my bidding. All their existence, they've waited to serve man. They'll do anything for me. Anything."

"But you won't change your mind?" She knew she was hoping for the impossible.

He did not answer, but only smiled. Then he took Ann into his arms forcibly and kissed her hard. She fought him with her small fists, but her strength couldn't match his. The robot looked at them. The robot seemed concerned. The perched bird watched them restlessly. Once its wings spread but the robot stared at it, apparently telepathizing, and the bird relaxed.

Acorn let her go and stepped back, panting. He taunted her: "What's the matter, don't you think I can do it? I realize there's a rescue ship, probably here right now, probably searching the planet for us. Well, I've got plans for that ship. I'm having the robots prepare a portable lab for me. Some of them are waiting to take over the ship, so I'll be able to begin experi-

menting at once. I thought a hard core of . . ."

But Ann wasn't listening now. She had heard enough. Mad with his dreams of power, Acorn wouldn't stop. Ann really didn't know how far he could get, for she only had his word to go on regarding what the robots could do. But this much was sure: the men aboard the rescue ship, unwary, unsuspecting, were doomed. And so, probably, were Joyce and Garry. . . .

As if in response to her words, Acorn said, "Oh, I almost forgot. Experiments are beginning at once—with Joyce and Garry as subjects."

"You wouldn't!"

Acorn smiled.

And, looking at his smile, Ann knew what she must do. Even if it meant her life. Almost certainly, it would mean her life, but it was her only chance, Joyce's and Garry's only chance, the only hope for those aboard the rescue ship, and possibly for mankind—

Ann raked her fingernails across Acorn's cheeks, bringing blood on both sides of his face. He was so utterly surprised, he just stood there with the long, deep, parallel scratches quickly reddening and wetting. Then Ann said, clearly and distinctly: "I

want to kill you, Acorn. I'm trying to kill you."

Then she ran.

She heard the robot clanking after her, and suddenly she knew fear. She stumbled and almost fell, but kept going. At the far end of the cavern was a narrow corridor of metallic stone. The stone gave way to metal. Ann kept running, breathless now. The robot's clanking echoed inexorably behind her. The bird of prey screamed, then she heard its big wings fluttering. Ann looked up, and tripped, and fell. Her leotards, which she had hastily donned before following the robot to Cliff Acorn, ripped from armpit to hip. Then the bird was upon her fiercely, its wings beating at her, its talons ripping, its head darting, the sharp yellow beak seeking her eyes. She screamed, cowering on the floor of the passage, but heard nothing. She was almost paralyzed with fright.

Then the robot loomed near her and must have telepathized something to the bird, which withdrew and landed on its wrist perch.

"You tried to kill him?" asked the robot.

She looked up at it. She stood up. "Yes," she said in a very soft voice. Fear was a wild pulse beat in her throat.

"I was ordered to kill you if you tried—"

The walls seemed to be closing in on her. She couldn't breathe. "Yes," she said again.

The robot picked her up by her legs and swung her once against the metal wall, crushing her skull and breaking her neck.

She died instantly.

Light and pain. . . .

Seething. . . .

Formless horror. . . .

A long time coming out of it, have to hurry, hurry or it will be too late, and think, think with every atom of your being—

**SERVE MAN, YOU MUST  
SERVE MAN, THE MORE  
MAN NEEDS YOUR HELP,  
THE MORE YOU MUST  
SERVE HIM.**

Think, think, think. . . .

Doesn't a sick man need more help than a well one? And a dead human? What about a dead human?

"Yes," a voice seemed to say. At least the human being in the process of miraculous healing in the incredible laboratory of the robots thought that was what the voice said.

Robots—

Drifting in and out of vision, bringing things, touching, repairing, healing. . . .



"Yes, master."

"We want to serve you, master."

She sat up. She touched her head. It was whole. She could move her neck. She was Ann of the Outworlds. Alive.

"The boy and the girl," she said. "Are they—all right?"

"Yes, master."

"Then bring them."

Ten minutes later, Ann was looking at Joyce and Garry, who hadn't been harmed. Joyce said, "They strapped us down on those horrible operating tables again. They were going to do—terrible things. They just stopped. I don't know why."

Ann said: "Because I was killed."

They stared at her open-mouthed.

"Because it's their function to serve man, not to harm him. I had to take that gamble. It was the only thing I could do. I had them kill me. Then they stopped everything. They dropped whatever they were doing to heal me. They're healers. They're going to be the best healers man-

kind has ever known—if they don't fall into the hands of people like Cliff Acorn." She stopped talking and looked up at one of the robots. She said: "You must restrain Acorn. He doesn't want to serve and heal. Do you understand?"

"We understood as soon as you died," the mental voice said. "He is restrained. We await your command."

"Go out and find the people from the rescue ship. Bring them here."

There would be government agents aboard the ship. There always were, in the event of sabotage. Ann would turn what she knew over to them. She was almost glad to relinquish the responsibility. She knew the robots would some day be a great force for mankind's benefit.

Garry said: "You taught me something, Ann. I—I won't be afraid any longer."

"Afraid?" Joyce cried indignantly. "Who said you were ever afraid?"

But Garry winked at Ann. Ann smiled at them happily, feeling very good already.

**THE END**