

ADDRESS: CENTAURI

By F. L. WALLACE



EARTH WAS TOO PERFECT FOR THESE EXTRAORDINARY EXILES—
TO BELONG TO IT, THEY HAD TO FLEE IT.

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Contents

- [1](#)
- [2](#)
- [3](#)
- [4](#)
- [5](#)
- [6](#)
- [7](#)
- [8](#)
- [9](#)
- [10](#)
- [11](#)
- [12](#)
- [13](#)
- [14](#)
- [15](#)
- [16](#)

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1

Light flickered. It was uncomfortably bright.

Doctor Cameron gazed intently at the top of the desk. It wasn't easy to be diplomatic. "The request was turned over to the Medicouncil," he said. "I assure you it was studied thoroughly before it was reported back to the Solar Committee."

Docchi edged forward, his face alight with anticipation.

The doctor kept his eyes averted. The man was damnably disconcerting—had no right to be alive. In the depths of the sea there were certain creatures like him and on a warm summer evening there was still another parallel, but never any human with such an infirmity. "I'm afraid you know what the answer is. A flat no for the present."

Docchi sagged and his arms hung limp. "That's the answer?"

"It's not as hopeless as you think. Decisions can be changed. It won't be the first time."

"Sure," said Docchi. "We'll wait and wait until it's finally changed. We've got centuries, haven't we?" His face was blazing. It had slipped out of control though he wasn't aware of it. Beneath the skin certain cells had been modified, there were substances in his body that the ordinary individual didn't have. And when there was an extreme flow of nervous energy the response was—light. His metabolism was akin to that of a firefly.

Cameron meddled with buttons. It was impossible to keep the lighting at a decent level. Docchi was a nuisance.

"Why?" questioned Docchi. "We're capable, you know that. How could they refuse?"

That was something he didn't want asked because there was no answer both of them would accept. Sometimes a blunt reply was the best evasion. "Do you think they'd take you? Or Nona, Jordan, or Anti?"

Docchi winced, his arms quivering uselessly. "Maybe not. But we told you we're willing to let experts decide. There's nearly a thousand of us. They should be able to get one qualified crew."

"Perhaps. I'm not going to say." Cameron abandoned the light as beyond his control. "Most of you are biocompensators. I concede it's a factor in your favor. But you must realize there are many things against you." He squinted at the desk top. Below the solid surface there was a drawer and in the drawer there was—that was what he was trying to see or determine. The more he looked the less clear anything seemed to be. He tried to make his voice crisp and professional. "You're wasting time discussing this with me. I've merely passed the decision on. I'm not responsible for it and I can't do anything for you."

Docchi stood up, his face colorless and bright. But the inner illumination was no indication of hope.

Doctor Cameron looked at him directly for the first time. It wasn't as bad as he expected. "I suggest you calm down. Be patient and wait. You'll be surprised how often you get what you want."

"You'd be surprised how we get what we want," said Docchi. He turned away, lurching toward the door which opened automatically and closed behind him.

Again Cameron concentrated on the desk, trying to look through it. He wrote down the sequence he expected to find, lingering over it to make sure he didn't force the pictures that came into his mind. He opened the drawer and compared the Rhine cards with what he'd written, frowning in disappointment. No matter how he tried he never got better than average results. Perhaps there was something to telepathy but he'd never found it. Anyway it was clear he wasn't one of the gifted few.

He shut the drawer. It was a private game, a method to keep from becoming involved in Docchi's problems, to avoid emotional entanglement with people he had nothing in common with. He didn't enjoy depriving weak and helpless men and women of what little hope they had. It was their lack of strength that made them so difficult to handle.

He reached for the telecom. "Get Medicouncilor Thorton," he told the

operator. "Direct if you can; indirect if you have to. I'll hold on."

Approximate mean diameter thirty miles, the asteroid was listed on the charts as Handicap Haven with a mark that indicated except in emergency no one not authorized was to land there. Those who were confined to it were willing to admit they were handicapped but they didn't call it haven. They used other terms, none suggesting sanctuary.

It was a hospital, of course, but even more it was a convalescent home—the permanent kind. Healthy and vigorous humanity had reserved the remote planetoid, a whirling bleak rock of no other value, and built large installations there for less fortunate people. It was a noble gesture but like many gestures the reality fell short of the intentions. And not many people outside the Haven itself realized wherein it was a failure.

The robot operator broke into his thoughts. "Medicouncilor Thorton has been located."

An older man looked out of the screen, competent, forceful. "I'm on my way to the satellites of Jupiter. I'll be in direct range for the next half hour." At such distances transmission and reception were practically instantaneous. Cameron was assured of uninterrupted conversation. "It's a good thing you called. Have you got the Solar Committee reply?"

"This morning. I saw no reason to hold it up. I just finished giving Docchi the news."

"Dispatch. I like that. Get the disagreeable job done with." The medicouncilor searched through the desk in front of him without success. "Never mind. I'll find the information later. Now. How did Docchi react?"

"He didn't like it. He was mad clear through."

"That speaks well for his bounce."

"They all have spirit. Nothing to use it on," said Dr. Cameron. "I confess I didn't look at him often though he was quite presentable, even handsome in a startling sort of way."

Thorton nodded brusquely. "Presentable. Does that mean he had arms?"

"Today he did. Is it important?"

"I think so. He expected a favorable reply and wanted to look his best, as

nearly normal as possible. In view of that I'm surprised he didn't threaten you."

Cameron tried to recall the incident. "I think he did, mildly. He said something to the effect that I'd be surprised how *they* got what they wanted."

"So you anticipate trouble. That's why you called?"

"I don't know. I want your opinion."

"You're on the scene, doctor. You get the important nuances," said the medicouncilor hastily. "However it's my considered judgment they won't start anything immediately. It takes time to get over the shock of refusal. They can't do anything. Individually they're helpless and collectively there aren't parts for a dozen sound bodies on the asteroid."

"I'll have to agree," said Dr. Cameron. "But there's something that bothers me. I've looked over the records. No accidental has ever liked being here, and that covers quite a few years."

"Nobody appreciates the hospital until he's sick, doctor."

"I know. That's partly what's wrong. They're no longer ill and yet they have to stay here. What worries me is that there's never been such open discontent as now."

"I hope I don't have to point out that someone's stirring them up. Find out who and keep a close watch. As a doctor you can find pretexts, a different diet, a series of tests. You can keep the person coming to you every day."

"I've found out. There's a self-elected group of four, Docchi, Nona, Anti and Jordan. I believe they're supposed to be the local recreation committee."

The medicouncilor smiled. "An apt camouflage. It keeps them amused."

"I thought so too but now I'm convinced they're no longer harmless. I'd like permission to break up the group. Humanely of course."

"I always welcome new ideas."

In spite of what he'd said the medicouncilor probably did have an open mind. "Start with those it's possible to do the most with. Docchi, for instance. With prosthetic arms, he appears normal except for that uncanny fluorescence. Granted that the last is repulsive to the average person. We can't correct the

condition medically but we can make it into an asset."

"An asset? Very neat, if it can be done." The medicouncilor's expression said it couldn't be.

"Gland opera," said Cameron, hurrying on. "The most popular program in the solar system, telepaths, teleports, pyrotics and so forth the heroes. Fake of course, makeup and trick camera shots.

"But Docchi can be made into a real star. The death-ray man, say. When his face shines men fall dead or paralyzed. He'd have a tremendous following of kids."

"Children," mused the medicouncilor. "Are you serious about exposing them to his influence? Do you really want them to see him?"

"He'd have a chance to return to society in a way that would be acceptable to him," said Cameron defensively. He shouldn't have specifically mentioned kids.

"To him, perhaps," reflected the medicouncilor. "It's an ingenious idea, doctor, one which does credit to your humanitarianism. But I'm afraid of the public's reception. Have you gone into Docchi's medical history?"

"I glanced at it before I called him in." The man was unusual, even in a place that specialized in the abnormal. Docchi had been an electrochemical engineer with a degree in cold lighting. On his way to a brilliant career, he had been the victim of a particularly messy accident. The details hadn't been described but Cameron could supplement them with his imagination. He'd been badly mangled and tossed into a tank of the basic cold lighting fluid.

There was life left in the body; it flickered but never went entirely out. His arms were gone and his ribs were crushed into his spinal column. Regeneration wasn't easy; a partial rib cage could be built up, but no more than that. He had no shoulder muscles and only a minimum in his back and now, much later, that was why he tired easily and why the prosthetic arms with which he'd been fitted were merely ornamental, there was nothing which could move them.

And then there was the cold lighting fluid. To begin with it was semi-organic which, perhaps, was the reason he had remained alive so long when he should have died. It had preserved him, had in part replaced his blood, permeating

every tissue. By the time Docchi had been found his body had adapted to the cold lighting substance. And the adaptation couldn't be reversed and it was self-perpetuating. Life was hardier than most men realized but occasionally it was also perverse.

"Then you know what he's like," said the medicouncilor, shaking his head. "Our profession can't sponsor such a freakish display of his misfortune. No doubt he'd be successful on the program you mention. But there's more to life than financial achievement or the rather peculiar admiration that would be certain to follow him. As an actor he'd have a niche. But can you imagine, doctor, the dead silence that would occur when he walks into a social gathering of normal people?"

"I see," said Cameron, though he didn't—not eye to eye. He didn't agree with Thorton but there wasn't much he could do to alter the other's conviction at the moment. There was a long fight ahead of him. "I'll forget about Docchi. But there's another way to break up the group."

The medicouncilor interrupted. "Nona?"

"Yes. I'm not sure she really belongs here."

"Every young doctor thinks the same," said the medicouncilor kindly. "Usually they wait until their term is nearly up before they suggest that she'd respond better if she were returned to normal society. I think I know what response they have in mind." Thorton smiled in a fatherly fashion. "No offense, doctor, but it happens so often I'm thinking of inserting a note in our briefing program. Something to the effect that the new medical director should avoid the beautiful and self-possessed moron."

"Is she stupid?" asked Cameron stubbornly. "It's my impression that she's not."

"Clever with her hands," agreed the medicouncilor. "People in her mental classification, which is very low, sometimes are. But don't confuse manual dexterity with intelligence. For one thing she doesn't have the brain structure for the real article.

"She's definitely not normal. She can't talk or hear, and never will. Her larynx is missing and though we could replace it, it wouldn't help if we did. We'd have to change her entire brain structure to accommodate it and we're not that

good at the present."

"I was thinking about the nerve dissimilarities," began Cameron.

"A superior mutation, is that what you were going to say? You can forget that. It's much more of an anomaly, in the nature of cleft palates, which were once common—poor pre-natal nutrition or traumas. These we can correct rather easily but Nona is surgically beyond us. There always is something beyond us, you know." The medicouncilor glanced at the chronometer beside him.

Cameron saw the time too but continued. It ought to be settled. It would do no good to bring up Helen Keller; the medicouncilor would use that evidence against him. The Keller techniques had been studied and reinterpreted for Nona's benefit. That much was in her medical record. They had been tried on Nona, and they hadn't worked. It made no difference that he, Cameron, thought there were certain flaws in the way the old techniques had been applied. Thorton would not allow that the previous practitioners could have been wrong. "I've been wondering if we haven't tried to force her to conform. She can be intelligent without understanding what we say or knowing how to read and write."

"How?" demanded the medicouncilor. "The most important tool humans have is language. Through this we pass along all knowledge." Thorton paused, reflecting. "Unless you're referring to this Gland Opera stuff you mentioned. I believe you are, though personally I prefer to call it Rhine Opera."

"I've been thinking of that," admitted Cameron. "Maybe if there was someone else like her she wouldn't need to talk the way we do. Anyway I'd like to make some tests, with your permission. I'll need some new equipment."

The medicouncilor found the sheet he'd been looking for from time to time. He creased it absently. "Go ahead with those tests if it will make you feel better. I'll personally approve the requisition. It doesn't mean you'll get everything you want. Others have to sign too. However you ought to know you're not the first to think she's telepathic or something related to that phenomena."

"I've seen that in the record too. But I think I can be the first one to prove it."

"I'm glad you're enthusiastic. But don't lose sight of the main objective. Even

if she *is* telepathic, and so far as we're concerned she's not, would she be better suited to life outside?"

He had one answer—but the medicouncilor believed in another. "Perhaps you're right. She'll have to stay here no matter what happens."

"She will. It would solve your problems if you could break up the group, but don't count on it. You'll have to learn to manage them as they are."

"I'll see that they don't cause any trouble," said Cameron.

"I'm sure you will." The medicouncilor's manner didn't ooze confidence. "If you need help we can send in reinforcements."

"I don't anticipate that much difficulty," said Cameron hastily. "I'll keep them running around in circles."

"Confusion is the best policy," agreed the medicouncilor. He unfolded the sheet and looked down at it. "Oh yes, before it's too late I'd better tell you I'm sending details of new treatments for a number of deficient—"

The picture collapsed into meaningless swirls of color. For an instant the voice was distinguishable again before it too was drowned by noise. "Did you understand what I said, doctor? If it isn't clear contact me. Deviation can be fatal."

"I can't keep the ship in focus," said the robot. "If you wish to continue the conversation it will have to be relayed through the nearest main station. At present that's Mars."

It was inconvenient to wait several minutes for each reply. Besides the medicouncilor couldn't or wouldn't help him. He wanted the status quo maintained; nothing else would satisfy him. It was the function of the medical director to see that it was. "We're through," said Cameron.

He sat there after the telecom clicked off. What were the deficient the medicouncilor had talked about? A subdivision of the accidentals of course, but it wasn't a medical term he was familiar with. Probably a semi-slang description. The medicouncilor had been associated with accidentals so long that he assumed every doctor would know at once what he meant.

Deficients. Mentally Cameron turned the word over. If it was used accurately it could indicate only one thing. He'd see when the medicouncilor's report

came in. He could always ask for more information if it wasn't clear.

The doctor got heavily to his feet—and he actually was heavier. It wasn't a psychological reaction. He made a mental note of it. He'd have to investigate the gravity surge.

In a way accidentals were pathetic, patchwork humans, half or quarter men and women, fractional organisms which masqueraded as people. The illusion died hard for them, harder than that which remained of their bodies, and those bodies were unbelievably tough. Medicine and surgery were partly to blame. Techniques were too good or not good enough, depending on the viewpoint—doctor or patient.

Too good in that the most horribly injured person, if he were found alive, could be kept alive. Not good enough because a certain per cent of the injured couldn't be returned to society completely sound and whole. The miracles of healing were incomplete.

There weren't many humans who were broken beyond repair, but though the details varied in every respect, the results were monotonously the same. For the most part disease had been eliminated. Everyone was healthy—except those who'd been hurt in accidents and who couldn't be resurgeried and regenerated into the beautiful mold characteristic of the entire population. And those few were sent to the asteroid.

They didn't like it. They didn't like being *confined* to Handicap Haven. They were sensitive and they didn't want to go back. They knew how conspicuous they'd be, hobbling and crawling among the multitudes of beautiful men and women who inhabited the planets. The accidentals didn't want to return.

What they did want was ridiculous. They had talked about, hoped, and finally embodied it in a petition. They had requested rockets to make the first long hard journey to Alpha and Proxima Centauri. Man was restricted to the solar system and had no way of getting to even the nearest stars. They thought they could break through the barrier. Some accidentals would go and some would remain behind, lonelier except for their share in the dangerous enterprise.

It was a particularly uncontrollable form of self-deception. They were the broken people, without a face they could call their own, who wore their hearts not on their sleeves but in a blood-pumping chamber, those without

limbs or organs—or too many. The categories were endless. No accidental was like any other.

The self-deception was vicious precisely because the accidentals *were* qualified. Of all the billions of solar citizens *they alone could make the long journey there and return*. But there were other factors that ruled them out. It was never safe to discuss the first reason with them because the second would have to be explained. Cameron himself wasn't sadistic and no one else was interested enough to inform them.

2

Docchi sat beside the pool. It would be pleasant if he could forget where he was. It was pastoral though not quite a scene from Earth. The horizon was too near and the sky was shallow and only seemed to be bright. Darkness lurked outside.

A small tree stretched shade overhead. Waves lapped and made gurgling sounds against the banks. But there was no plant life of any kind, and no fish swam in the liquid. It looked like water but wasn't—the pool held acid. And floating in it, all but submerged, was a shape. The records in the hospital said it was a woman.

"Anti, they turned us down," said Docchi bitterly.

"What did you expect?" rumbled the creature in the pool. Wavelets of acid danced across the surface, stirred by her voice.

"I didn't expect that."

"You don't know the Medicouncil very well."

"I guess I don't." He stared sullenly at the fluid. It was faintly blue. "I have the feeling they didn't consider it, that they held the request for a time and then answered no without looking at it."

"Now you're beginning to learn. Wait till you've been here as long as I have."

Morosely he kicked an anemic tuft of grass. Plants didn't do well here either. They too were exiled, far from the sun, removed from the soil they originated in. The conditions they grew in were artificial. "Why did they turn us down?" said Docchi.

"Answer it yourself. Remember what the Medicouncil is like. Different things are important to them. The main thing is that we don't have to follow their example. There's no need to be irrational even though they are."

"I wish I knew what to do," said Docchi. "It meant so much to us."

"We can wait, outlast the attitude," said Anti, moving slowly. It was the only

way she could move. Most of her bulk was beneath the surface.

"Cameron suggested waiting." Reflectively Docchi added: "It's true we are biocompensators."

"They always bring in biocompensation," muttered Anti restlessly. "I'm getting tired of that excuse. Time passes just as slow."

"But what else is there? Shall we draw up another request?"

"Memorandum number ten? Let's not be naive. Things get lost when we send them to the Medicouncil. Their filing system is in terrible shape."

"Lost or distorted," grunted Docchi angrily. The grass he'd kicked already had begun to wilt. It wasn't hardy in this environment. Few things were.

"Maybe we ought to give the Medicouncil a rest. I'm sure they don't want to hear from us again."

Docchi moved closer to the pool. "Then you think we should go ahead with the plan we discussed before we sent in the petition? Good. I'll call the others together and tell them what happened. They'll agree that we have to do it."

"Then why call them? More talk, that's all. Besides I don't see why we should warn Cameron what we're up to."

Docchi glanced at her worriedly. "Do you think someone would report it? I'm certain everyone feels as I do."

"Not everyone. There's bound to be dissent," said Anti placidly. "But I wasn't thinking of people."

"Oh that," said Docchi. "We can block that source any time we need to." It was a relief to know that he could trust the accidentals. Unanimity was important and some of the reasons weren't obvious.

"Maybe you can and maybe you can't," said Anti. "But why make it difficult, why waste time?"

Docchi got up awkwardly but he wasn't clumsy once he was on his feet. "I'll get Jordan. I know I'll need arms."

"Depends on what you mean," said Anti.

"Both," said Docchi, smiling. "We're a dangerous weapon."

She called out as he walked away. "I'll see you when you leave for far Centauri."

"Sooner than that, Anti. Much sooner."

Stars were beginning to wink. Twilight brought out the shadows and tracery of the structure that supported the transparent dome overhead. Soon controlled slow rotation would bring near darkness to this side of the asteroid. The sun was small at this distance but even so it was a tie to the familiar scenes of Earth. Before long it would be lost.

Cameron leaned back and looked speculatively at the gravity engineer, Vogel. The engineer could give him considerable assistance. There was no reason why he shouldn't but anyone who voluntarily had remained on the asteroid as long as Vogel was a doubtful quantity. He didn't distrust him, the man was strange.

"I've been busy trying to keep the place running smoothly. I hope you don't mind that I haven't been able to discuss your job at length," said the doctor, watching him closely.

"Naw, I don't mind," said Vogel. "Medical directors come and go. I stay on. It's easier than getting another job."

"I know. By now you should know the place pretty well. I sometimes think you could do my work with half the trouble."

"Ain't in the least curious about medicine and never bothered to learn," grunted Vogel. "I keep my stuff running and that's all. I don't interfere with nobody and they don't come around and get friendly with me."

Cameron believed it. The statement fit the personality. He needn't be concerned about fraternization. "There are a few things that puzzle me," he began. "That's why I called you in. Usually we maintain about half Earth-normal gravity. Is that correct?"

The engineer nodded and grunted assent.

"I'm not sure why half gravity is used. Perhaps it's easier on the weakened bodies of the accidentals. Or there may be economic factors. Either way it's not important as long as half gravity is what we get."

"You want to know why we use that figure?"

"If you can tell me without getting too technical, yes. I feel I should learn everything I can about the place."

The engineer warmed up, seeming to enjoy himself. "Ain't no reason except the gravity units themselves," Vogel said. "Theoretically we can get anything we want. Practically we take whatever comes out, anything from a quarter to full Earth gravity."

"You have no control over it?" This contradicted what he'd heard. His information was that gravity generators were the product of an awesome bit of scientific development. It seemed inconceivable that they should be so haphazardly directed.

"Sure we got control," answered the engineer, grinning. "We can turn them off or on. If gravity varies, that's too bad. We take the fluctuation or we don't get anything."

Cameron frowned; the man knew what he was doing or he wouldn't be here. His position was of only slightly less importance than that of the medical director—and where it mattered the Medicouncil wouldn't tolerate incompetence. And yet——

The engineer rumbled on. "You were talking how the generators were designed especially for the asteroid. Some fancy medical reason why it's easier on the accidentals to have a lesser gravity plus a certain amount of change. Me, I dunno. I guess the designers couldn't help what was built and the reason was dug up later."

Cameron concealed his irritation. He wanted information, not a heart to heart confession. Back on Earth he *had* been told it was for the benefit of the accidentals. He'd reserved judgment then and saw no reason not to do so now. "All practical sciences try to justify what they can't escape but would like to. Medicine, I'm sure, is no exception."

He paused thoughtfully. "I understand there are three separate generators on the asteroid. One runs for forty-five minutes while two are idle. When the first one stops another one cuts in. The operations are supposed to be synchronized. I don't have to tell you that they're not. Not long ago you felt your weight increase suddenly. I know I did. What is wrong?"

"Nothing wrong," said the engineer soothingly. "You get fluctuations while one generator is running. You get a gravity surge when one generator is supposed to drop out but doesn't. The companion machine adds to it, that's all."

"They're supposed to be that way? Overlapping so that for a time we have Earth or Earth and a half gravity?"

"Better than having none," said Vogel with heavy pride. "Used to happen quite often, before I came. You can ask any of the old timers. I fixed that though."

He didn't like the direction his questions were taking him. "What did you do?" he asked suspiciously.

"Nothing," said the engineer uncomfortably. "Nothing I can think of. I guess the machines just got used to having me around."

There were people who tended to anthropomorphize anything they came in contact with and Vogel was one of them. It made no difference to him that he was talking about insensate machines. He would continue to endow them with personality. "This is the best you can say, that we'll get a wild variation of gravity, sometimes none?"

"It's not *supposed* to work that way but nobody's ever done better with a setup like this," said Vogel defensively. "If you want you can check the company that makes these units."

"I'm not trying to challenge your knowledge and I'm not anxious to make myself look silly. I do want to make sure I don't overlook anything. You see, I think there's a possibility of sabotage."

The engineer's grin was wider than the remark required.

Cameron swiveled the chair around and leaned on the desk. "All right," he said tiredly, "tell me why the idea of sabotage is so funny."

"It would have to be someone living here," said the big engineer. "He wouldn't like it if it jumped up to nine G, which it could. I think he'd let it alone. But there are better reasons. Do you know how each gravity unit is put together?"

"Not in detail."

The gravity generating unit was not a unit. It was built in three parts. First there was a power source, which could be anything as long as it supplied ample energy. The basic supply on the asteroid was a nuclear pile, buried deep in the core. Handicap Haven would have to be taken apart, stone by stone, before it could be reached.

Part two were the gravity coils, which actually originated and directed the gravity. They were simple and very nearly indestructible. They could be destroyed but they couldn't be altered and still produce the field.

The third part was the control unit, the real heart of the gravity generating system. It calculated the relationship between the power flowing through the coils and the created field in any one microsecond. It used the computed relationship to alter the power flowing in the next microsecond to get the same gravity. If the power didn't change the field died instantly. The control unit was thus actually a computer, one of the best made, accurate and fast beyond belief.

The engineer rubbed his chin. "Now I guess you can see why it doesn't always behave as we want it to."

He looked questioningly at Cameron, expecting a reply. "I'm afraid I can't," said the doctor.

"If it was one of your patients you'd understand," said Vogel. "Fatigue. The gravity control unit is an intricate computer and it gets tired. It has to rest an hour and a half to do forty-five minutes work. It can't keep running all the time any more than any delicate machine can. It has to be shut down to clear the circuits.

"Naturally they don't want anyone tinkering with it. It's sealed and non-repairable. Crack the case open and it disintegrates. But first you've got to open it. Now I know that it can be done, but not without a lot of high-powered equipment that I could detect if it was anywhere on the asteroid."

In spite of the engineer's attitude it didn't seem completely foolproof. But Cameron had to admit that it was probable none of the accidentals could tamper with it. "I'll forget about gravity," he said. "Next, what about hand weapons? What's available?"

"Nothing. No knives even. Maybe a stray bar or so of metal." Vogel

scratched his head. "There is something that's dangerous though. I dunno whether you could classify it as a weapon."

Cameron was instantly alert. "If it's dangerous someone can find a way to use it. What is it?"

"The asteroid itself. Nobody can physically touch any part of the gravity system. But I've often wondered if an impulse couldn't be squeezed into the computer. If anybody can do that he can change direction of the field." Vogel's voice was grave. "Somebody could pick up Handicap Haven and throw it anywhere he wanted. At Earth, say. Thirty miles in diameter is a big hunk of rock."

This was the kind of information Cameron had been looking for, though the big engineer seemed to regard the occasion as merely a long overdue social call. "What's the possibility?"

Vogel grinned. "Thought I'd scare you. Used to wake up sweating myself. Got so bad I had to find out about it."

"Can or can't it be done?" demanded the doctor.

"Naw. It's too big to take a chance with. They got monitors set up all over, moons of Jupiter, Mars, Earth, Venus. This or any other gravity computer gets dizzy, the monitor overrides it. If that fails they send a jammer impulse and freeze it up tight. It can't get away until the monitor lets loose."

Cameron's mind was already busy elsewhere. Vogel was loquacious and would talk all night if encouraged. It wasn't that he lacked information but he had no sense of what was important. "You don't know how you've helped me," the doctor said, standing up. "We'll have to get together again."

He watched the engineer depart for the gravity generating chamber below the surface of the asteroid. The day had started badly and wasn't getting better. Docchi to Thornton to Vogel. All the shades of shortsightedness, the convalescent's, authority's, and finally the technician who refused to see beyond his dials. A fine progression, but somewhere the curve ought to turn upward.

The post on Handicap Haven wasn't pleasant but there were advantages—advancement was proportional to the disagreeableness of the place. After shepherding accidentals for a year any other assignment would be a snap. Ten

months to go before the year was over and if Cameron could survive with nothing to mar his administration he was in line for something better, definitely better. This was where the Medicouncil sent promising young doctors.

Cameron flipped on the telecom. "Connect me with the rocket dome. Get the pilot."

When the robot answered it wasn't encouraging. "There's no answer. I'm sorry. I'll notify you when he comes in."

"Trace him," he snapped. "If he's not near the rocket he's somewhere in the main dome. I don't care how you do it, get him."

A few seconds of silence followed. The answer was puzzling. "There's no record that the pilot has left the rocket dome."

His heart skipped and his breathing was constricted. He spoke carefully. "Scan the whole area. Look every place, even if you think he can't be there. I've got to have the pilot."

"Scanning isn't possible. The system is out of operation in that area. I'm trying to check why."

That was bad. He could feel muscles tighten that he didn't know he had. "All right. Send out repair robots." They'd get the job done—they always did. But they were intolerably slow and just now he needed speed.

"Mobile repair units were dispatched as soon as scanning failed to work. Is this an emergency? If so I can alert the staff."

He thought about it. He needed help, plenty of it. But was there any one he could depend on? Vogel? He'd probably be ready for action. But to call on him would leave the gravity generating plant unprotected. And if he told the engineer what he suspected, Vogel would insist on mixing in with it. He was too vital where he was.

Who else? The sour middle-aged nurse who'd signed up because she wanted quick credits toward retirement? She slept through most of her shift and considering her efficiency perhaps it was just as well she did. Or the sweet young trainee—her diploma said she'd completed her training, but you couldn't lie to a doctor—who had bravely volunteered because someone

ought to help poor unfortunate men? Not a word about women of course. She always walked in when Cameron was examining a patient, male, but she had the deplorable habit of swooning when she saw blood. Fainting was too vulgar for her and, as Cameron had once told her, so was the profession of her choice.

These were the people the emergency signal would alert. He would do better to rely on robots. They weren't much help but at least they wouldn't get hysterically in his way. Oh yes, there was the pilot too, but he couldn't be located.

The damned place was undermanned and always had been. Nobody wanted to be stationed here except those who were mildly psychotic or inefficient and lazy. There was one exception. Ambitious young doctors had been known to ask for the position. Mentally Cameron berated himself. Ambition wasn't far from psychosis, or at times it could produce results as bad. If anything serious happened here he'd begin and end his career bandaging scratches at a children's playground.

"This is not an emergency," he said. "However leave word in gravity with Vogel. Tell him to put on his electronic guards. I don't want him to let anyone get near the place."

"Is that all?"

"Send out six geepees. I'll pick them up near the entrance to the rocket dome."

"Repair robots are already in the area. Will they do as well?"

"They won't. I want general purpose robots for another reason. Send the latest huskiest models we have." They were not bright but they were strong and could move fast. He clicked off the picture. What did he have to be afraid of? For the most part they were a beaten ragged bunch of humans. He would feel sorry for them if he wasn't apprehensive about his future.