



**Perfect Control**  
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**S**itting at his desk, Colonel Halter brought the images on the telescreen into focus. Four booster tugs were fastening, like sky-barnacles, onto the hull of the ancient derelict, *Alpha*.

He watched as they swung her around, stern down, and sank with her through the blackness, toward the bluish-white, moon-lighted arc of Earth a thousand miles below.

He pressed a button. The image of tugs and hull faded and the control room of the old ship swam onto the screen.

Colonel Halter saw the crew, sitting in a half circle, before the control panel.

The telescreen in the control room of old *Alpha* was yet dark. The faces watching it held no care lines or laugh lines, only a vague expression of kindness. They could be faces of wax or those of people dying pleasantly.

Colonel Halter shook his head. Brilliant—the finest space people in the field seventy-five years back—and now he was to get them to come out of that old hull. God almighty, how could you pull people out of an environment they were perfectly adjusted to? Logic? Force? Reason? Humoring? How could you know?

Talk to them, he told himself. He dreaded it, but the problem had to be faced.

He flipped a switch on his desk; saw light jump into their screen and his own face take shape there; saw their faces on his own screen, set now, like the faces of stone idols.

He turned another dial. The picture swung around so that he was looking into their eyes and they into his.

Halter said, "Captain McClelland?"

One of the old men nodded. "Yes."

McClelland was clean-shaven. His uniform, treated against deterioration, was immaculate, but his body showed frail and bony through it. His face was long and hollow-cheeked, the eyes deep-set and bright. The head was like a skull, the nose an eagle's beak.

"I'm Colonel Halter. I'm a psychotherapist."

**N**one of them answered. There was only the faint thrumming of the rockets lowering the old ship to Earth.

"Let me be sure I have your identities right," went on Colonel Halter.

He then looked at the man on the captain's right. "You, I believe, are Lieutenant James Brady."

Brady nodded, his pale, eroded face expressionless.

Colonel Halter saw the neat black uniform, identical with the captain's; saw the cropped gray hair and meticulously trimmed goatee.

"And you," he said to the woman sitting beside the lieutenant, "are Dr. Anna Mueller."

The same nod and thin, expressionless face. The same paleness. Faded hazel eyes; hair white and trimmed close to her head; body emaciated.

"Daniel Carlyle, astrogator."

The nod.

Like the doctor's brother, thought Colonel Halter, and yet like the lieutenant with his cropped hair and with an identical goatee.

"Caroline Gordon, dietician and televisor. John Crowley, rocketman."

Each nodded, expressionless, their faces like white, weathered statues in a desert.

Colonel Halter turned to the captain. The rocket thrum of the tugs had become a roar as the gravity pulled against the antique hull.

"We understand," said Colonel Halter, "that you demand repairs for your ship and fuel enough to take you back into deep space."

"That is right." The voice was low, slightly harsh.

"You're all close to a hundred years old. You'd die out there. Here, with medical aid, you'd easily live to a hundred and twenty-five."

Dr. Anna Mueller's head moved slightly. "We're aware of that, Colonel."

"It'd be pointless," said the colonel, "and a shameful waste. You're still the only crew that ever made it out beyond the Solar System. You've kept records of your personal experience, how you survived. They're valuable."

Dr. Mueller caught her breath. "Our adjustment to space is our private concern. I don't think you could understand."

"Maybe not, but we could try. To *us*, of course, complete adjustment is a living death."

"To us, it was a matter of staying alive."

Halter turned aside from disagreement, searching for common ground. "You'd be protected here, you know. You deserve that."

"Who'd protect us from you?" asked the captain. "Life in the Solar System is destructive."

**B**rady, the lieutenant, leaned forward. "You've failed—all through the whole System."

"We haven't finished living in it," said Halter. "Who can pin a label on us of success or failure?"

Miss Gordon, dietician and televisor, said quietly, "There are some records I'd like to show you. We compiled them while the *Alphas* drifting back into the System."

Halter watched the frail arm reach out and turn a dial.

A point of light grew on the screen in Colonel Halter's office.

"Pluto," said her quiet voice.

Halter watched the lightspot focus on a mountain of ice. Men in suits of steel were crawling up its frozen side. Other men on the mountain's top were sighting guns. The men below were sighting guns. Yellow fire spurted from the top and the sides of the mountain, blending into a lake of fire. There was a great hissing and a rushing torrent of boiling water and rolling, twisting steel-clad bodies. The mountain of ice melted like a lump of lard in a hot frying pan. Only the steel bodies glinted, motionless, in the pale wash of sunlight.

Halter watched the brightness die and another lightspot grow one moon. The focus shifted in close to a fleet of shining silver ships.

Then another fleet dropped from close above, hanging still, and there were blinding flashes engulfing each ship below, one after the other, until there were only the shining ships above, climbing into the dusk glow of the Sun.

The glowing circle of bright-ringed Saturn was already rushing toward Colonel Halter from far back in the depth of screen. The focus shifted onto the planet's glaring surface. Men in the uniform of Earth soldiers were rushing out of transparent shell houses and staring in panic as the missiles plummeted through the shells and erupted clouds of steam which spouted up from mile-deep craters and there was nothing but the steam and the holes and the white cold.

Jupiter made a hole in the blackness, with eleven tiny holes scattered all around her, like droplets of fire. Ships streaked up, one for each droplet, circling each, spraying fire, until each droplet flared like a tiny sun.

Yellow Mars, holding closely its two speedy rocks of moons, spun into the screen.

A straggling line of men moved across a desert that whipped them with sheets of yellow dust. A single ship dived from out of the Sun, swooped along the line, licking it with the tongue of flame that streaked behind. As the ship flashed beyond the horizon, a line of smoking rag bundles lay still upon the yellow sand.

**D**arkness closed in upon the television screen in Colonel Halter's office. In the long moment of silence that followed, he thought, *Oh, God, after this awful picture, how can I convince them to come out of the womb of that ship and live again? What reason can I give?*

Immobilizing his face, he saw the half circle of the six old people again in the control room of the old, old ship.

He said, "You'll set down in approximately twenty minutes."

"Yes," agreed the captain, "from where we jumped into space seventy-five years ago. The people of Earth were talking about their problems, not killing each other about them. There was hope. We felt that by the time we'd finished our mission and come back from that other solar system, where a healthy colony could be born, most of those problems would be solved." A pause. "But now there's this terrible killing all through the System. We won't face it."

The roaring of the rockets now as they plunged flame against the concrete slab of the landing field. The bug bodies of the tugs gently easing old *Alpha* to Earth.

Colonel Halter was saying, "How about this other solar system? You haven't let us know whether or not you reached it."

"We saw it." There was a hollowness in the captain's voice. "We didn't reach it. But we will. You'll repair the *Alpha* and refuel it."

"As you were saying," prompted Colonel Halter, "you didn't reach it."

"A meteor," said the captain. "Straight into our rockets. Our ship began to drift. The cameras, of course, set in the bulkheads, were watching us."

"May I see? Anything you have to show or say will be strictly between us. I've given orders for our communication to be unrecorded and private. You have my word."

"You'll be allowed to see. I've given my permission."

Colonel Halter thought, *You have given permission?*

Then he saw in his telescreen the little old lady who was Caroline Gordon, dietician and televisor, press a button on the side of her chair. Instantly the picture changed. He heard her voice. "You see the rocket room of the *Alpha* back almost seventy-five years, a few minutes before the accident."

**T**here were the four torpedo-like tubes projecting into the cylindrical room; the mass of levers, buttons, wheels and flashing lightspots.

Halter watched John Crowley, the rocketman, broad-shouldered and lithe, turning a wheel at the point of one of the giant tubes.

The next moment, he was flung to the floor. He struggled to his feet, jerked an oxygen mask from the bag at his chest, clamped it to his face and rushed to the tubes. He twirled wheels, pulled levers, pressed buttons. He glanced at the board on which the lightspots had been flashing. Darkness. He pressed a button. A foot-thick metal door swung open. He stepped through it. The door shut and locked.

Leaning against the steel wall at the end of a long companionway, he pulled off his oxygen mask and ran along the companionway toward the control room.

The others met him in the center of the ship.

Crowley saluted the young Captain McClelland.

"The rockets are gone, sir. A meteor."

McClelland did not smile or frown, show sadness or fear or any other emotion. He was tall and slim then, with cropped black hair, its line high on his head. His face was lean and strong-featured. There was a sense of command about the captain.

Quietly, he said, "We'll all go to the control room."

They followed him as he strode along the companionway.

The telescreen in Colonel Halter's office darkened and there was only the old voice of the captain, saying, "We were drifting in space. You know what that means. But no one broke down. We were too well trained, too well conditioned. We gathered in the control room."

Light opened up again on Colonel Halter's telescreen. He saw the polished metal walls, the pilot chairs and takeoff hammocks, the levers, buttons and switches of the young ship back those many years, and the six young people standing before a young Captain McClelland, who was speaking to them of food, water and oxygen.

It was decided that their metabolisms must be lowered and that they must live for the most part in their bunks. All activity must be cut to minimum. All weapons must be jettisoned, except one, the captain's shock gun, that could not kill but only cause unconsciousness for twenty-four hours.

Captain McClelland gave an order. The weapons were gathered up and placed in an airlock which thrust them out into space. Five of the crew lay down in their bunks. Dr. Anna Mueller, tall and slim, full-bosomed, tawny-skinned and tawny-haired, remained standing. She pressed the thought recorders over the heads of the other five people who lay there motionless, clamped the tiny electrodes onto her own



temples and placed a small, black box, covered with many tiny dials, beside the bunk of Miss Gordon, the televisor.

A moment later, a jumble of thoughts: *Now I am dead. An end. For what, now that it's here? Love. The warm press of a body. Trees and grass. Sunrise. To take poison. Clean air after a rain. City, people, lights. Sunset—*

The thought words jumbled like a voice from a recorder when the speed is turned up.

Then they faded and one thought stream came through clean and clear: *I am Dr. Anna Mueller. Good none of the others can hear what I'm thinking. Was afraid I'd die this way someday. But to prolong it. Painless death in an instant. Could give it to us all. But orders. Captain McClelland. No feeling? Can't he see what I feel for him? Why am I thinking like this? Now. But this is what is happening to me. He'd rather make love to this ship. Kiss Crowley before I give him the metabolism sedation shot. Captain'll see I'm a woman.*

She stepped to the bulkhead and pressed a button. A medicine cabinet opened. After filling a hypodermic syringe, she went to Crowley, bent down and gave him a long kiss on the lips.

Instantly Colonel Halter heard thoughts.

Captain McClelland: *She must be weak. Why's she doing that? Thought she was stronger. But the ship's the thing. The ship and I.*

Crowley: *What the hell? Didn't know she went for me. Just a half hour with her before the needle. What's to lose? He pulled her down to him.*

Lieutenant Brady: *He'd do that, the damned animal. But I'm not enough of an animal. I'm a good spaceman. All spontaneity's been trained out of me. Feel like killing him. And taking her. Anyplace. But I'm so controlled. Got to do something. This last time... . He sat up in his bunk.*

Caroline Gordon: *I knew he was like that. Married when we got back. Mrs. Crowley. And if we'd gotten back. Out every other night with another woman. I could kill him. She turned her face away.*

Daniel Carlyle: *Look at them. And I can't live. Only one person needs me, back on Earth, and she's the only. And that's enough. But maybe I can kill myself... . He did not move.*

**T**he thoughts stopped and Colonel Halter leaned forward in his chair as he saw Captain McClelland standing beside his bunk, the gun in his hand. Dr. Mueller saw, too—the young Dr. Mueller, back those seventy-five years. She struggled to pull away from Crowley.

Lieutenant Brady stood, started toward the captain, stopped. Crowley pushed Dr. Mueller away from him, leaped to his feet and lunged toward the captain. A stream of light appeared between the gun muzzle

and Crowley. He stumbled, caught himself, stood up very straight, then sank down, as though he had been deflated.

The captain motioned Dr. Mueller to her bunk. She hesitated, pain in her face, turned, went to her bunk and lay down. Another stream of light appeared between her and the gun. She lay very still. The needle slipped from her fingers.

The captain turned the gun on Lieutenant Brady, who was coming at him, arms raised. The light beam again. The lieutenant sank back. Caroline Gordon was watching the captain as the light stream appeared. She relaxed, her eyes closed. Daniel Carlyle did not move as the light touched him.

Captain McClelland holstered the gun. He picked up the hypodermic needle and sterilized it at the medicine cabinet. Then he injected Crowley's arm, filled the hypo four more times, injected the others.

He finally thrust the needle into his own arm and lay down. His breathing began to slow. There was only the control room of the ship now, like some ancient mausoleum, with the six still figures and the control board dark and the eternal ocean of night pressing against the ports.

The picture of the ship's control room began to fade on the screen. After a moment of darkness, the live picture of the six old figures, sitting in their half circle, spread again over the lighted square.

Colonel Halter saw his own image, looking into the old masks.

He said, "And where was *your* weakness, Captain McClelland?"

"I was concerned," said the old voice, "with keeping us alive."

"You weren't aware that some of your crew were emotionally involved with each other?"

"No."

"Are there any more records you could show me?"

"Many more, Colonel, but I don't think it's necessary for you to see them. It would take too long. And we want to get back out into space." He paused. "We can brief you."

"About your going back into space... I'm not sure we can allow it."

"Our answer's very simple. There's a button, under my thumb, on the arm of this chair. A little pressure. Carbon monoxide. It would be quick."

"Your idea?"

"Yes. A matter of preserving our integrity. We'd rather die than face the horrors of life on Earth."

**H**alter turned to the semi-circle of faces. "And you've all agreed to this—this suicide?"

The captain cut in. "Of course. I realized years ago that the only place we could live was in space, in this ship."

"When did your crew realize this?"

"After a couple of years. I told them over and over again, day after day. After all, I am captain. I dictate the policy."

"You've come back. You're in port. You're not in complete command."

"I'll always be in command."

"Perhaps," said Halter quietly. "However, we can come back to that. Please brief me on the records."

Captain McClelland's face hardened as he turned to Dr. Anna Mueller.

She explained, "We regained consciousness twenty-four hours after Captain McClelland used the shock gun on us. By then, our metabolisms were high enough to keep us conscious and alive. We could lift nutrition and water capsules to our mouths. We could press the button to activate the exercise mechanisms in our bunks. The output of the air machines was cut down until there was just enough to keep us alive and thinking clearly.

"At intervals of several days, during our exercise and study periods, Captain McClelland turned up the air. We slept. And we dreamed. The dreams are recorded in full. When we could face them, they were played back to us. Our thoughts were played back, too. I conducted group therapy among us. We all grew to understand each other and ourselves, intimately, and now, in relation to our environment, we're perfectly adjusted."

"Did Captain McClelland join you in group therapy?"

"No."

"Why?"

"He was already perfectly adjusted."

**S**he frowned faintly, glanced at the captain. "When we were conscious, we studied from the library of microfilm. We read all the great literature of Earth. We watched the great plays and pictures and the paintings and listened to the music. Sometimes our thoughts were hateful. There was self-pity and hysteria. There were times when one or two of us would withdraw almost to the point of death. Then Captain McClelland would knock us out with the shock gun.

"Slowly, over the years, our minds gradually merged into one mind. We thought and created and lived as if we were one person. There grew to be complete and perfect cooperation. And from this cooperation came some great works. Each one of us will tell you. I'll speak first."

She paused. "Psychology has always been my prime interest. My rating at school was genius. My aptitudes were precisely in line with the field of work I chose. Through the years, I've developed a theory, discovered a way to bring about cooperation between all men. This is possible in spite of your wars and hatreds and destruction." Frown creases wrinkled her parchment forehead. "I'd like to know if it would work."

Daniel Carlyle's voice was slightly above a whisper. "All my life, I'd wanted to write poetry. The meteor struck. I realized I wouldn't be allowed to die quickly. I began to do what I'd always wanted to do. The words poured into the thought recorder. Everything I felt and thought is there and all I've been able to know and be from this one mind of ours that's in us all. And it's some of the finest poetry that's ever been written." He closed his eyes and sighed heavily. "It'd be good to know if anyone found them inspiring."

"I've always lived for adventure," said Crowley, the rocketman, his old voice steady and quiet. "I've been the one to quiet down last into the life it was necessary for us to live out there. But my thoughts ran on into distant universes and across endless stretches of space. And so at last, to keep my sanity, I wrote stories of all the adventures I should have had, and more. And in them is all the native power of me, of all adventurers, and the eternal sweep of the Universe where Man will always thrust out to new places." There was a faint trembling in his body and a pained light in his eyes. "Seems I ought to know if they'll ever be read."

**I**n spite of Brady's frailness, the lieutenant was like a grizzled old animal growling with his last breath. "I was the most capable pilot that ever blasted off from Earth. But I was also an inventor and designer. A lot of the ships Earth pilots are flying today are basically my ideas. After the accident, I wanted to get drunk and make love and then let myself out into space, with a suit, and be there forever. But Captain McClelland's shock gun and the understanding seeping into me from the thought recorders calmed me down eventually.

"So I turned to creation as I lay there in my bunk. I designed many spaceships. And from those, I designed fewer and fewer, incorporating the best from each. And now I have on microfilm a ship that can thrust out to the ends of our galaxy. There aren't any flaws... . Oh, I tell you, by God, I'd like to see her come to life!"

He leaned back, sweat rolling down his bony cheeks.

Miss Gordon, dietician and televisor, the motionless old lady with cropped, white hair, and face bones across which the paper skin was

stretched, said, "There was only one thing I wanted when I knew I couldn't have marriage and a family. There was a perfect food for the human animal. I could find it. I began working on formulas. Over and over again, I put the food elements together and took them apart and put them together again. I threw away the work of years and started over again until at last I had my perfect formula."

She clasped her hands. "Man's nutrition problem is solved. From the oceans and the air and the Earth, from the cosmic rays and the lights of the suns and from the particles of the microcosm, Man can take into his body all the nutrition that can enable him to live forever." She sat very still, smiling. "And it's got to be given a try."

Silence.

Colonel Halter watched the old figures sitting like figures in a wax museum, waiting, waiting. He turned a dial. The picture that flashed onto the screen in his office showed the pocked ship standing upright now, like some tree that had grown in the middle of a desert where it was never meant to grow.

The space tugs had streaked out beyond the atmosphere to finish other assignments. There were no crowds, no official cars, no platforms, no bands. Only darkness and silence.

Halter turned a dial. The control room of the old ship flashed back onto the screen. The ancient crew sat as before. Halter saw his own face on their television screen.

Something was missing, he thought. What? What hadn't been said?

And then suddenly it came to him.

The captain. He hadn't spoken of any contribution he had made during those interminable years.

**H**alter thought back over Captain McClelland's record. No family. Wiped out when he was a baby in the last war. Educated and raised by the government. Never married. No entanglements with women. No close friends. Ship's captain at twenty-one. No failures. No vacations. No record of breakdown. Perfect physical condition. Strict disciplinarian. More time in space than on Earth by seventy-five per cent. No hobbies. No interest in the arts... . Apparently no flaw as a spaceman... . The end product of the stiffest training regimen yet devised by Man.

The ideal captain.

The records of the other five? All showing slight emotional instabilities when checked against the optimum score of a spaceman.

Dr. Mueller—a divorcee. A woman men had sought after. Dedicated in spare time to social psychology. Conflict in her decision as to whether she should go into the private practice of psychotherapy or specialize in space psychology. Interested in the study of neurosis caused by culture.

Lieutenant Brady—family man. Forced himself into mold of good husband and father. Brilliant designer. Ambition also to be space captain. Conflict between these three. Several years of psychotherapy which released his drive for adventure in space. *Alpha* mission to be his last. Lack of full leadership qualities prevented him from reaching captaincy.

Rocketman Crowley—typical man of action. Superb physique. Decathlon champion. Continual entanglements with women. Quick temper. Tendency to fight if pushed or crossed. Proud. However, if under good command, best rocketman in the service.

Astrogator Daniel Carlyle—highly sensitive. Psychosomatic symptoms unless out in space. Then in perfect health. Fine mathematician. Highly intuitive, yet logical. Saved four missions from disaster. Holder of Congressional Medal of Honor. Hobby, poetry. Fiancee was boyhood sweetheart.

Dietician and televisor Caroline Gordon—youngest of crew. Twenty years. Too many aptitudes. Tendency toward immaturity. Many hobbies. Idealistic. Emotions unfocused. IQ 165. Success in any field of endeavor concentrated upon. At eighteen, specialized in dietetics and electronics. Highest ratings in field. Stable when under strict external discipline.

**N**o, thought Halter. None of them fitted space like the completely self-sufficient McClelland, the man who could stand alone against that black, teeming, swirling endlessness of space.

He turned to the captain. The old face was placid, the eyes slightly out of focus.

"Captain McClelland," Halter said sharply.

The pale eyes blinked and looked keenly on Halter's face.

"You want fuel to take you back out into space."

"That's right."

"And if you don't get it, you'll press a button on the arm of your chair and you'll all die of carbon monoxide poisoning."

"Exactly."

"I'm curious about one point." Halter paused. "What did *you* do, Captain, while the others were working on their various projects?"

Captain McClelland scowled at Halter for a long moment. "Why do you want to know that?"

"Your crew members became lost in some work they loved. They told me about it with a certain amount of enthusiasm. You haven't told me what you did. I'd like to know—for the records."

"I watched them, Colonel. I watched them and dreamed of the time when I could take them and the ship back out into space under her own power. I love space and I love this ship. I love knowing she's under power and shooting out to the stars. There's nothing more for me."

"What else did you do besides watch them?"

"I activated the machinery that moved my bunk close to the controls. I practiced taking the ship through maneuvers. I kept the controls in perfect working order so I'd be ready to take off again someday."

"If we repaired the ship so you could take off, the first shock of rocket thrust would kill you all."

"We're willing to take that chance."

Colonel Halter looked around the half circle of old faces. "And all your long years of work would be for nothing. Each of you, except Captain McClelland, has made a contribution to Earth and Man. You're needed here, not in the emptiness of space."

He saw the eyes of the five watching him intently; saw a tiny flicker of surprise and interest on their faces.

"You're destroying Earth," said the captain, his voice rising, "with your wars and your quarrels. We've all of us found peace. We're going to keep it."

**H**alter ignored the captain and looked at the five.

"There are many of *us* on Earth, who are fighting a war without blood, to save mankind. We've made progress. We've worked out agreements among the warring nations to do their fighting on the barren planets where there aren't any native inhabitants, so noncombatants on Earth won't be killed and so the Earth won't be laid waste. That was the fighting you saw while you were coming in.

"This is just *one* example. And there're a lot of us contributing ideas and effort. If all of us who're working for Earth were to leave it and go out into space, the ones who have to fight wars would make the Earth as barren as the Moon. This is our place in the Universe and it's got to be saved."

"We've adjusted to the control room of this ship and to each other," said McClelland flatly. "Our work's done."

"Let's put it like this, Captain. Maybe *your* work's done. Maybe *you're* not interested in what happens to Earth." Halter turned to

the others. "But what *you've* done adds up to a search for answers here on Earth. Poetry. Design of a flawless spaceship. A psychological theory. A perfect diet. Novels about Man pushing out and out into space. All this indicates a deep concern for the health of humanity and its success."

"We're not concerned," retorted the captain, "with the health or success of humanity."

Halter sharply examined the other faces. He saw a flicker of sadness in one, anger in another, uncertainty, fear, joy.

He said, "For seventy-five years, you obey your captain. You listen to what he says. And everything is a command. Yet in yourselves you feel a drive to carry out your ideas, your creations, to their logical ends. Which means, will they work when they're applied to Man? Will people read the novels? Will they catch the meaning of the poetry? Will the spaceships really work as they're supposed to? Will the psychological theory really promote cooperation? Is there supreme health in this marvelous diet?"

He gave them a moment to think and then continued. "But if you continue to follow the commands of the captain, you'll be dead before you're out of the Earth's atmosphere. You'll never know. Maybe Man will prove that your great works are only dreams... . But I think there's a great need in you to know, one way or the other."

**T**here was a faint stirring among them, like that of ancient machines being activated after years of lying dormant. They glanced at each other. They fidgeted. Trouble twisted their faces.

"Colonel Halter," said the captain, "I'm warning you. My thumb is on the button. I'll release the gas. Do we get the repairs and the fuel to take off from Earth, or don't we?"

Colonel Halter leaned grimly toward the captain. "You've spent fifty years with one idea—to stay out in space forever. You've made no effort to create or do one single constructive act. I'll tell you whether or not you get the fuel and the repairs—*after* I hear what someone in your crew has to say."

Silence hung tensely between the control room of the ship and Colonel Halter's office on Earth. The captain was glaring now at Halter. A tear showed in the corner of each of Dr. Anna Mueller's old eyes. Lieutenant Brady was gripping the arms of his chair. Daniel Carlyle's eyes were closed and his head shook slightly, as though from palsy. There was a faint, enigmatic smile on Caroline Gordon's face. The cords on Crowley's neck stood out through the tan and wrinkled wrapping-paper skin.



*By God, thought Halter, they're all sane except the captain. And they've got to do it. They've got to come out on their own steam or die in that control room.*

"I'm waiting," he said. "Is your work going to die and you with it?"

"We'll leave all the records," said the captain, his thumb poised over the button on the arm of his chair. "That's enough."

Halter ignored him. "Each of you can help. You've only done part of the work." He stood and struck the desk with the flat of his hand. "Damn it, say something, one of you!"

Still the silence and the flickering looks all around.

Halter heard a sob. He saw Dr. Anna Mueller's head drop forward and her shoulders tremble. The others were staring at her, as if she had suddenly materialized among them, like a ghost.

Then her voice, through the trembling and the faint crying: "I've—I've got to know."

The captain got creakily to his feet. "Dr. Mueller! Do you want me to use the gun again?"

She raised her face to his. There was pain in it. "I've—got work to do. There's so—little time."

"That's right. On this ship. You're part of the crew. There'll be plenty of work once we get out in space again."

"I've got to see if my theory's right."

"Colonel Halter," said the captain, "this is insubordination. Mutiny."

**H**e raised the gun tremblingly, pointed the black muzzle at Dr. Mueller, sighted along the barrel.

"Wait," said Halter. "You're right."

Captain McClelland hesitated.

"It's quite plain," went on Halter, "that Dr. Mueller is alone among you. She wants to come out and go on with her work. The rest of you want the closed-in uterine warmth and peace of this room you're existing in. You can't face the possibility of failure. So I'm afraid she'll have to be sacrificed. After all, you do need a full crew to move the ship—even if you are all dead a few seconds after blastoff." He paused, looking intently at Brady, Crowley, Carlyle, Gordon, where they sat in the half circle, staring back at him. "So—"

Lieutenant Brady struggled up from his chair.

"I've got twenty-five years of life. I've some ships to design."

"That goes for me, too," said Crowley, the rocketman. "Will anybody want to read my novels?"

Astrogator Carlyle leaned forward. "There are many more poems to be written."

"Give me a soundproof laboratory," said Caroline Gordon. "I'll add another fifty years to all your lives."

"I'm afraid it is mutiny, Captain," said Halter.

The captain started toward his chair, his hand reaching for the button on its arm.

Lieutenant Brady stumbled forward, blocking his way.

Halter could only watch, thinking, *It's up to them. They've got to do it now!*

He saw the captain draw his shock gun; saw light flare at its muzzle; saw Lieutenant Brady crumple like a collapsing skeleton.

Crowley reached forward, grasping McClelland's shoulder. The gun swung toward him. A stream of light squirted into his middle. Crowley fell forward, pulling the captain down with him. The three other oldsters were above the three black figures sprawled on the floor, like tangled puppets. They hesitated a moment, then fell upon the ones below them, black arms and legs twitching about now like the legs of dying spiders, struggling weakly.

A flash of light exploded beneath these twisting black reeds and streaks of it shot out all through the waving black cluster.

The next moment, they settled and were quiet.

**T**here was a stillness in the ancient control room, like the stillness in a sunken ship at the bottom of the sea. It lingered for a long time, while Colonel Halter watched and waited.

Dr. Mueller's voice, seventy-five years tired, said, "He's—quiet now. Please come and take us out."

Colonel Halter switched on his desk visiophone.

"They're coming out," he said quietly. "I'll be there to supervise."

On the visiophone, the general's image nodded. "Congratulations, Colonel. How are they?"

"There'll be one case for psycho. Captain McClelland."

"I'll be damned!" exclaimed the general. "From his record, I thought he'd never break!"

"Let's say he couldn't bend, sir." A pause. "And yet he did keep them from destroying themselves."

"He'll be made well again... . What about the others?"

"I think they, too, are very great and human people."

"Well," said the general, "they're *your* patients. I'll see you at the ship in five minutes."

"I'll be there, sir." Colonel Halter flipped the switch. The visiophone blanked out. He looked at the television screen.

The six black-clothed figures were quiet on the floor of their ship's control room. They reminded him of sleeping children curled together for warmth.

As he left his office and walked out into the humming city, he felt drained, still shaking with tension, realizing even now how close he had come to failure.

But there was the scarred and pitted needle-nosed old hull, bright with moonlight, standing like a monument against the night sky.

Not a monument to the past, though.

It marked the birthplace of the future ... and he had been midwife. He felt his shoulders straighten at the knowledge as he walked toward the ancient ship.

—RICHARD STOCKHAM

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