

Redevelopment

By WESLEY LONG

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John McBride hung the phone on the hook and wiped his face. This face-wiping was not the usual gesture of a man whose face is dirty, or covered with perspiration. It was the dazed sort of gesture made by a man who has just been subjected to a surprise, and since the wiping tended to remove the awed look, replacing it with a slightly dazed smile, the surprise must not have been too unpleasant.

He shook his head, as though to clear it, and then made his way through Station 1 of the Plutonian Lens to the landing platform. Just inside the gigantic lock, a medium-sized space-ship stood, and

sitting on the edge of the space lock, swinging her feet, was Sandra Drake.

"Hello," she said brightly.

"Hi," said John. This was entirely new. Sandra Drake was not usually given to greeting men as anything but absolute imbeciles. "What brings you out here? And how did you make it?"

"Oh," said Sandra lightly, "I remembered the charge on Station 1 and brought along a charge-compensator. We hardly sparked when we lit."

One of the attendants said, in a low aside: "About three hundred amperes! She'd call a major explosion a snap of the fingers! You could hide an egg in the crater she made."

But Sandra was still talking. "John," she said in a voice that would have caused Shylock to give her his last gold piece, "I want help."

"You need help? What can we do for you?"

"It's pretty big," warned Sandra. Her low contralto dared him to ask what it was—and also dared him to deny it to her.

"Look, Drake, you did us a favor not too long ago. I think we owe you one."

Sandra smiled uncertainly. "I was afraid that that little stunt was only repaying you for the first meeting we had."

"Shucks," said McBride. "Anyone can make a mistake. Forget it."

"But being pilot for you on the *Haywire Queen* did me a lot of good, too, you know. I got my license back for that one. We both gained."

"I know. I'm glad we did. But what can you possibly want that is so big that you're afraid to ask?"

"Well, and maybe it isn't too big, either. Steve is a friend of both of us, isn't he? I'd do anything for Steve—and wouldn't you?"

"Yes. If any favors are owing, I think it is both of us to him."

"That's what I'm getting at. I need help—for Steve."

"You sure go a long way around to get it," grinned McBride. "Why didn't you tell me that first instead of warning me about a favor?"

"It's pretty big. But look, John, Steve took the *Haywire Queen* on a run to Sirius more than six weeks ago. He took along enough stuff to stay a week; he said he'd be back after one hundred and seventy hours of stay at, on, or near Sirius. This was just a trial hop to try the new drive you cooked up and a longer, better equipped expedition would be made later."

"He did say something about it the last I saw him. He said he wasn't particularly interested in exploring a new system. He'd leave that for the explorers. He was interested in the drive and so on, and after he'd paved the way for getting to the stars and had proven his drive, he'd turn it over to those interested in colonization. But six weeks ago, you say? Gosh, that's a long overstay, isn't it?"

"It is. I happen to know he didn't take more supplies than he needed. So I'm worried about him."

"And where do I come in? You want me to go and help you look for him?"

Sandra smiled wanly. "Hardly. I'm sure Enid would enjoy that, too. No, John, what I want is for you to hook up the stuff I've got in the *Lady Luck* to make me one of those drives you invented so that I can go myself."

"You're taking a chance, you know."

"That's where the favor part comes in. I want to go and look for Steve Hammond. I need your drive. And if you don't help me, I'll go out in space and tinker with the junk until I get it. I was there when you cooked it up, remember, and I have a good memory for details."

"But it's dangerous."

"Is it? 'Might be dangerous' is what you mean. And I've been taking harebrained chances for a long time, now. Do I or don't I?"

McBride thought for a long time. "You get it," he said at last. "On one condition. That you return in not less than one month. If you do not, I'm going to take it upon myself to follow. So no matter what you find, get back. Is that a promise?"

"It is."

"O.K., Sandra." McBride went to the wall of the big lock and spoke over the communicator. "Tommy! Get Al and Westy and tell 'em to bring their tools to the landing lock. We're going to juggle a few generators around."

To Sandra, he said: "I hope you've got plenty of what it takes."

"I have," she said, sensing his meaning. "Matter of fact, I've got the latest thing in alphas—two of 'em. And all the E-grav generators we'll need are all tacked into what I think are the right places to make this crate into a super-speed job. There are spares for all three fields, and a couple of spare cupralum bars, too. Even part of the wiring is done. I got just so far and then realized that I don't know too much about gravitics. That's when I decided to come here for help."

"Good thing," said McBride. "You might have killed yourself."

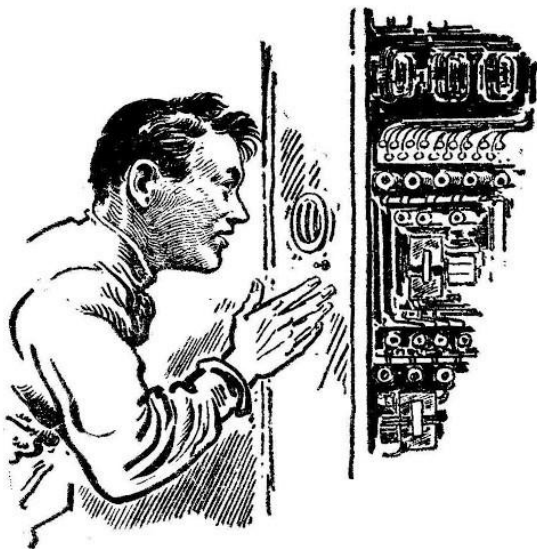
Sandra didn't answer, and at that moment, McBride's men came with their tools. Wordlessly, they nodded to Sandra and then followed McBride into the *Lady Luck*.

McBride wasted no time. "Al," he said, "you fit the mag-G for vertical bi-lobar field to cover the nose of the crate with the top lobe, and Westy, you see that the mech-G generator in the nose induces the proper vectors in the cupralum bar. I'll get Hank and Jim to touch up the wiring and safety devices. We'll have this crate back in space within the hour!"

"Working a little fast, aren't you?" asked Sandra.

"No. I don't think so. You've got most of the main stuff in place. It's merely a matter of running the alphas correctly—remember, Sandra, alphas are not electrons and even low-alpha lines require smooth, round bends, otherwise they squirt off in a crackling alphonic discharge that will eat the side out of a steel tank. You've done most of the heavy work. It just requires touching up here and there: getting the proper field-intensity out of the gravitic generators and adjusting the output of the alphas. Then there is some tricky relay work with the safety circuits: it wouldn't

improve your beauty to suddenly find yourself sitting in the pilot's chair at seven thousand gravities."



Sandra shuddered.

"Oh, and look, since you've got the compensator. You'll find a static-charge meter handy, perhaps. If there are planets around Sirius, who knows what their intrinsic charge is. We'll loan you one so that you can make planet without making a corona at the same time. Rarefied air makes pretty lights when it comes under a few trillion volts—and being a cathode is no worse than being an anode when your voltage is running up into a bushel of zeroes—either is equally disconcerting. How do you intend to spot any planets?"

"I've got a pair of hemisphere lenses. I'll sail through the Sirian sky at about forty thousand miles per second and expose for ten minutes. The stars will still appear as spots, but anything close enough to be planet-wise will make streaks unless it is dead ahead.

"In which case you'll see it personally," grinned McBride. "That's the best stunt I've heard of yet to find planets."

"It isn't new. They used it to see if there were any planets outside of Pluto several years ago, though they exposed for several hours while running at ten or fifteen thousand. Steve has a pair of hemis with him, too."

Al came trudging in with a roll of alphon cable over his shoulder and dropped it on the floor. "She's in—my end, anyway."

"Running already?"

"On test power. Drake had the bi-lobar field almost on the ball. Westy found about the same thing. I think another couple of days and Drake wouldn't have needed help."

"I couldn't make it work," complained Sandra.

"Well, you missed a few minor points," said Al. "Never, never run alphon lines anywhere near a relay rack. It induces crosscurrents in the windings and either makes 'em more sensitive or almost dead, depending on the polarity. It won't hurt AC relays, but they aren't used too much on a space-ship, so it's best to play safe."

"I'll remember that, too," Sandra promised him.

"O.K."

And so an hour passed, and another one added to it before the *Lady Luck* was fitted for super drive. It was finished, then, and Sandra Drake was more than voluble in her thanks.

"Never mind the thanks," said McBride, "or we'll be into that original wrangle as to who owes who what kind of a favor. Where we sit out here in the lens, favors are not weighted and set down as an asset. Forget it. G'wan out there and get Steve Hammond—and do not forget for one minute I'm coming after you if you're gone more than thirty days. Seven hundred and twenty hours! Get me?"

"Sure thing," said Drake. "And, John, you're pretty swell."

"Nuts!"

"All right, 'Nuts!' But some day I'm going to settle down and be a good girl, and then you can believe me."

"That, I'll believe when I see it. Go on, Sandra, go out and get Steve."

"I'll get Steve," promised Sandra. "Oh, but definitely."

"Well, good luck."

"Thanks."

The space lock closed, and the men retreated inside of the Station's air lock. The gigantic doors swung open, letting a huge puff of air out into space. Then the *Lady Luck* lifted gracefully for all of her tons of mass, and wafted out through the opened door. It was a dead-center passage, one that could be made only with a master pilot running the board personally.

Then she was gone. Halfway around the lens she would have to go before Sirius came into a safe line of flight. Sandra was taking no more chances on contacting the surface of that mighty space-warp that focused Sol on Pluto.

McBride wondered: Has Sandra learned her lesson?

One week passed. One week, filled to the very brim with all of those routine things that make life full of wonder—as to whether there isn't something better in the hereafter. The sheer millions of miles of gravitic-induced space-warp refracted Sol's light endlessly and perfectly to make for Pluto a synthetic sun that sported a dozen darting points. On Pluto, men lived and worked and pursued happiness, and the valuable ore came up from the ground in the Styx Valley and created the need for Pluto and the lens. Over Mephisto, the smelters cast their glow against the sky, which the inhabitants of Hell always called "The Eternal Fire." Across the River Styx from Hell, Sharon lay like a city of marble by day and a string of pearls by night.

Nor was Hell, as seen from Sharon, any less beautiful. The twin cities of Pluto, rivals in everything, fought as usual. And the bone of contention for that particular week was a simple, age-old epithet. It is a sorry fact that with the entire solar system running as it always did, Sharon and Hell found it possible to make the headlines of all the cities of the system by their arguments.

Sharon lost. Hell succeeded in bringing to mind the fact that Hell, Pluto, was a fine place to be, and the poor citizens of Sharon were forced into second consideration. But then, Sharon had not been a running business for centuries.

Go to Sharon! had no familiar ring.

But the Road to Hell was a broad highway.

McBride looked up as the door to his office opened, and his jaw fell away down to here. He blinked. He looked again, and then jumped to his feet. "She found you!" he said.

"Who found who?" asked Steve Hammond. "Has that dame—?"

"Drake? Yep. She came here and we fixed that drive for her. She's changed, Steve. Even I can see it."

"So she was here?"

"You bet. Sandra has changed."

"Has she?"

"Why, Steve, she was actually worried about you. Near frantic."

"Was she?"

"She may have concealed it from you. After all, she's been a pretty hard-boiled girl and the change is a little abrupt. She's probably concealing her real feelings."

"Would she?"

"Probably. After all she's said about men in general, she's probably fighting an internal battle. But she let it go right here."

"Did she?"

"Did she! Why, she tried to hook up the super drive herself, and when it didn't work, she came here for help. I'd say she was really interested in finding you. Going out of her way to help you, Steve, is quite a difference from the Sandra as I know her."

"Do you?"

"Say! What is the matter with you? 'Has she?' 'Was she?' 'Would she?' 'Did she?' is that the best you can do?"

"Look, John, how long ago was that?"

"About a week or so."

"What did she do, exactly."

"She came here and told us that you've been a month or six weeks overdue on that trip to Sirius. She wanted the drive fixed so that she could go out and look for you. I offered to go along, but she said no. So we fixed her drive and she took off like the devil was in her hair."

"Mac, you're a sucker!"

"Oh, now look—"

"So she's changed, has she? Full of remorse. Sputtering like a leaky alphasat field because she was hamstrung without a drive. Her heart was reeking with love for me, and she wanted, if she couldn't have me, to go out into the deep, unknown void of interstellar space and die where I had died, so we could be together in that last, long resting place."

"What are—"

"So John, please, for the small help I was to you, and for the love of Steve that lies within both of us, give me the drive so that I may go forth and seek he whom I crave. I want so little, John, and Steve is such a fine fellow—"

"Say! Have I been took?"

"The proper word is 'Taken' and the answer is in the affirmative."

"I'll be damned."

"You probably will," smiled Hammond. "Mac, all that dame wanted was to be the first human being to set foot on another, extra-solarian planet! She wanted to be known as the first person to ever seek another star."

"I take it that you haven't been further than a long stone's throw?"

"Shucks. I haven't even been out to the Los Angeles city limits."

"Darn her hide!"

"Yeah. I've been looking for her—and I'm as big a dope as you. I wanted to offer her the chance to pilot the *Haywire Queen* out there. I couldn't find her in the inner system and so I was going to take a squint at Pluto. I stopped off to ask if you'd care to take the run with me."

"You know I would."

"Well, that takes care of both answers. Drake is on her way—shucks, she's there already—and the second part is you—and you want to go."

"I'll ask Enid," said McBride. "Come on, we'll go right down and see her now."

Enid McBride smiled. "His asking me is a matter of form," she told Hammond. "Naturally he'll go. I think it will be swell for him to go. He needs a vacation anyway."

"But—"

"No buts. You'll go and like it. I wouldn't want you to miss anything like this for the world."

"How about you?"

Enid smiled again. "I'm no pioneer type, John. You know that. I'd be out of place—and what would John Junior do? Oh, we could leave him with Anna, if I wanted to go, but somehow this is as far as I care to get from home—my folk's home, I mean. It's funny how after seven years a woman still speaks of her parents' home as her home in spite of the fact that she has a home and family of her own."

"What'll you do?"

"I'm going to take this opportunity to go home—my parents' home, I mean. You see, Steve, Dad and John talk different languages. Dad is a metal broker on Pluto. The only reason why he tolerated John at all was because John's lens kept Dad in business. Dad wouldn't know a cupralum pig from an acceleration cushion, though he deals in a million tons of the stuff every year. It's all on paper. On the other hand, John wouldn't know how to sell the stuff, but he sure can make it do tricks. So they sit and glare at one another and each one wonders how the other makes a living. Dad's money is obvious, and John's success is equally well-known, but how and why are lost on each other.

"So I keep 'em as far apart as I can."

"I get it," smiled Hammond. "Pretty bad, hey?"

Enid laughed, "This ring is pure iridium. Dad was horrified because he first thought that iridium was radioactive like radium and that I'd get burned or worse. Then he found out it wasn't—and offered to buy a real, honest-to-goodness platinum ring if John couldn't afford it. Then he discovered that iridium is so rare that they do not have a market price per gram and that was all right, but he also confused it with iodine, and worried about its chemical action on my hand. Poor Dad still is not sure about it, so he has to inspect it every time he sees it to ascertain whether or not it is turning green, or my finger is falling off, or that it hasn't sublimed and disappeared. You can't detect the wearing, so Dad then accuses John of either buying a new one every time I come home or making me keep it in a safe while I'm here."

"Cupralum, to Enid's father, is something that he shunts around by signing papers and which, if he shunts fast enough, will increase his bank account, though if the other guy shunts faster, will cause him no end of deficit. Space, to him, is something that you can't breathe, and the stars are little bits of brightness that twinkle on a clear night. Oh, we get along," smiled McBride. "After all, he's Grandpa now, and John Junior is likely to get a slab of Cupralum. Preferred, for his birthday. The kid'll prefer something he can chew on, I'll bet."

"So that's neither here nor there," said Enid. "You take your space hop, and I'll take Little Johnny to Pluto to see his grandparents. Frankly, Steve, I've been wondering just what excuse I could use to run off alone for a month. This makes it perfect."

"We'll stop at Hell on the way back and pick you up," said McBride.

"Fine. How soon are you leaving?"

Hammond said: "Anytime he's ready. How soon can you cut loose from the lens, John?"

"Give me an hour to get things cleaned up and I'll be on the beam."

"Right."

"I'll pack you a bag," said Enid. "Have any preferences?"

"Shirts, shoes, socks, and shaving kit, mostly."

"Want your dinner clothing?"

"Oh sure. And pack my swimming suit, too. Also my tennis racket, and see that the golf bag has plenty of spare balls. Have Timmy wax the skis and sharpen my skates, and I'll also take along the shotgun, a pup tent, the oil stove, a fur coat, a quart of whiskey, six lemons, an orange, a lime, and a bottle of Angostura. Might pack me a light lunch, too."

"Don't bother, Enid. We've got most of that stuff with us," laughed Hammond.

"All right," chuckled Enid. "He'll get one shirt and a bar of soap; one pair of socks, and a bar of soap; and so on—with a bar of soap. Well, keep 'em coasting, Steve, and see that he doesn't run off with any red-headed witches."

"If we see any, I'll bring 'em back for me," laughed Steve. "See you later."

McBride was not as abrupt as he sounded. His business clean-up consisted of dictating a letter, putting all things in the hands of his

chief assistant. The rest of the time he spent with Enid, saying good-by. Whatever transpired, whatever they discussed, whatever plans they made—and they must have talked of many things and made many plans, for in spite of the familiarity of running all over the solar system, this was a big step, indeed, since for the first time in history, man and wife would be light-years apart—they did it well enough in private so that their parting was simple and quick.

John kissed Enid adequately, and said: "Stay healthy."

Enid laughed and said: "Stay whole!"

And then McBride was in the *Haywire Queen* and the air lock was cracked. The big ship lifted gently and zipped out of the lock with a casual disregard for distances. Unlike Drake's precision take-off, the *Haywire Queen* went through the open door with the air of wanting to leave quickly because there were better things to do than worry about hitting the center plus or minus an inch.

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