By DANIEL F. GALOUYE

Did they think they were people

— or did people think they were?

Homey Atmosphere

HERE it was again! Like a wounded bird's stridor, the whine of the phase condenser pierced the ship's silence.

Vance Lorry, perched on the edge of his bunk, stared up. His lean, youthful face was overcast with apprehension.

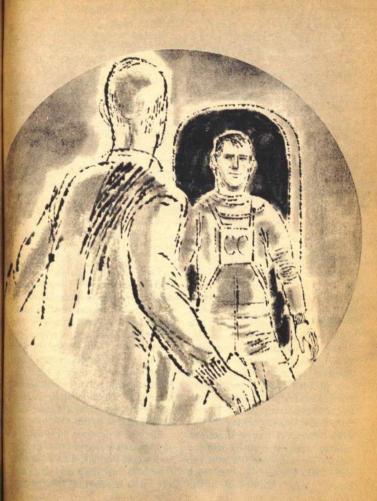
Across the compartment, Mart Burton slapped his thigh and rose. "That does it. Let's hit the lifeboat."

"No! Wait!" Lorry went to the door and posted himself in front of it. "Maybe there's a chance! Let's sit it out for just one more jump!"

"Look, sonny," Burton said, "there's no time to thrash this out. We're already six hundred light-years from the nearest outpost. We can't let ourselves get dragged through another leap by that runaway condenser!"

"But they'll get it fixed! They just need more time!"

Although his tone was pleading, Lorry remained planted in front of the door. The whine intensified and Burton, studying Lorry's determined stance, laughed. It was not unfriendly, but it did suggest the absurdity of a scuffle between himself and his smaller, younger companion.



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Lorry said, "Give them a chance, Burton. The crew's got as much at stake as we have!"

"Let's get this straight, sonny. Any time a main hyperdrive condenser gets stuck in automatic repeat, we've had it. We'll just keep on barreling ahead till we run clear out of galaxy."

"That's the way it used to be — in the days of sub-identity cybernetics. But this crew can take care of any kind of trouble!"

"You mean they're supposed to be able to. They've been at it for two days and haven't gotten anywhere. Now it's time to junk this crate while we're still within lifeboat range of an outpost."

"You go ahead." Lorry moved aside from the door. "I'm staying with the others."

Frustrated, Burton shouted in his face, "You're boarding that lifeboat if I have to drag you there!"

"You mean you'd desert the crew — just like that?"

Burton sucked in a breath. "Can't you get it through that damned thick head that they're not people? They're only electronic circuits with identity biasing. Their purpose is — "

"I know," Lorry broke in. "Besides their primary functions, they're supposed to provide a homey atmosphere. That's so you and I don't get in each other's hair while we're out

planting navigation markers. But they're more than that, Burton. They're real!"

Burton swore and clamped a big hand around Lorry's arm, "We're boarding that lifeboat now."

But Lorry only laughed. "Too late." He gestured aft where the whining condenser had reached a screeching pitch. "We'll be jumping in a second."

He'd succeeded in duping Burton with pleading and argument. Now there wasn't enough time to reach the boat. And, after the leap, the surrogate crew would have four more hours to repair the condenser while the ship lay motionless in normal space.

LORRY tried to make it to the bunk but failed. The phasing condenser's shriek mounted to an ear-splitting climax and blackness closed in as he fought the subjective onslaught of the leap. A vortex of blinding energy struck at the foundations of his consciousness — a whirling, nauseous pattern of alien sensations that directed their relentless force at the hallucination centers of his brain.

He was knee-deep in a field of wind-tossed blossoms that lapped with gentle determination at the base of a hill. The air was crisp and pure against an azure sky.

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It was a pristine exhilaration that he felt as he pushed forward against the swaying stalks. But he paused, anxious and alert, as he heard his name being carried by the whisper of the breeze.

Then he saw her — almost a silhouette on the crest of the hill. Slim and graceful, she stood there with rippling clothes hugging her lithe form and with sheening brown hair dancing to the capricious tempo of the wind.

All beauty and grace and animated charm — that was Trix.

"Vance! Vance!" she called out again in a tone as clear and sweet as a trilling woodwind. Then she was descending the slope in a study in fluid motion.

He raced forward to meet her. They joined hands and stood gazing at each other as the wind scattered the gaiety of their laughter among the blossoms below.

Then seriousness shaded her exquisite face. "Is this how you imagined I'd be?" It was ever the same question.

And he answered it as always: "I couldn't have expected more."

The face of a mischievous tyke poked out from behind a nearby tree. "Sis's got a beau-o! Sis's got a beau-o!"

Odd, Lorry thought, how he'd always imagined Trix was Kid's sister. He squirmed and Trix's cheeks crimsoned. "Come away from there, Kid!"
It was Gumpy. Lorry was surprised to see the old man on the hill, although he should have realized the three of them would

never be too far apart.

His bearing straight and proud,
Gumpy came forward. It was
obvious that, despite his wrinkled
face and sparse white hair, the
cane was no necessity, merely
an affectation.

Kid tried to dart away, but Gumpy's reflexes were light-fast. (Weren't they always?) He used the crook of his cane to snag the boy's arm. Then, catching a handful of tousled hair, he marched him off.

"Kid don't rightly understand these things," Gumpy apologized over his shoulder. "But he'll grow up someday."

Lorry watched them disappear around the hill and eventually was aware that Trix was smiling up at him. But he was wrestling with a puzzling inconsistency. Of course they were a tight little family, but how could a man as old as Gumpy be Kid's father?

Then it was all gone — the tingling warmth of the girl's hand in his, swaying blossoms, crisp azure sky, the fragrant wind.

In their place were the lusterless metal walls of the crew's compartment, broken only by a porthole alive with the blazing fires of alien suns. The jump was over.

And Lorry, lying on the deck, wondered what would happen should the phase condenser freeze in mid-discharge. Would he remain eternally suspended in the interval between space and hyperspace? With all physical processes arrested in timelessness, would his World of the Leap Interim become a reality?

Bitter over the abrupt end to his hallucination, he made his way to the control compartment.

BURTON was already there, having apparently shaken off the effects of the leap minutes ago. He was pacing before the three consoles at the far end of the compartment.

"Try the auxiliary drive

again," he directed.

"No soap, Mr. Burton," replied the speaker of the cabinet on the right. "When that condenser's in automatic repeat, I can't budge a thing."

"Try it!"

The video pickup cells on the next console glowed. "Let the Kid be, Burton," its speaker rasped. "He ain't stinting none."

"Honest, Mr. Burton," Kid pleaded. "Like Gumpy says, I tried my best. But nothing happened!"

The lad was as prankish as any ten-year-old in other matters, Lorry conceded as he approached Burton and the consoles. But when it came to his official duties as auto-pilot, Kid showed the seriousness of an accomplished technician.

"Don't ride them, Burton," Lorry said. "They're doing all they can."

"So you're back again. I'm warning you — just stay out the way."

"They'll get it straightened out before the next leap."

"Don't you know that when a phase condenser jumps track, the only thing you can do is slap in a new one? But can we do that? No! Why not? Because Gumpy here forgot to requisition spare parts!"

"Weren't really an oversight,"
Gumpy's speaker offered in
weary protest. "Blame it on that
danged character-conditioning. In
senility-biasing, some of the forgetfulness trait must've spilled
over into the operational circuits.
The spare condenser just plumb
slipped my mind."

"There!" Burton said. "That's efficient cybernetics for you! We've got a good communications and internal control system, but things 'just slip' its mind!"

He fumed for a moment, then asked, "Why in hell don't you bleed the overdrive circuit? That'll keep us from jumping. Then we can just sit here till we get the condenser fixed!"

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"Can't. If that condenser don't get current, I don't get the juice to do anything about fixing it. Nobody else knows anything about the circuit, so you got to let me do it my way."

With greater calm than exhibited by Burton, Lorry confronted the central console. "Well, what are you doing about the trouble, Gumpy?"

"Aside from yakking with you two, I'm trying to override the auto-repair program and pull some capacitance tests."

"Very well, then," Burton relented. "Fade out and stick with it. But I want a report at least from you an hour before the next jump."

Gumpy's video pickup cells dulled over and his speaker lost its background purr, joining Kid's in silence.

Burton headed for the passageway. "I'm going to doublecheck the provisions on the lifeboat. Looks like we're going to spend a long time cooped up in that thing."

AFTER he had left, Lorry went over to the third console and stood there for a long while, staring up at the nameplate that read simply, "Navigatrix."

The cabinet's speaker emitted a soft hum, then paused. "Vance?"

It was the distant chiming of bells borne on the breath of a warm breeze. It was full of both tender concern and wistful laughter.

When he only continued staring, the voice became more brusque but lost none of its overpowering charm. "Station Two reporting, sir. Our position —"

"Cut it out, Trix."

"If you were any more serious, I'd feel like crying." The clear woodwind tones of her words pierced and shattered him. God, he thought, what a voice they had engineered!

"Gumpy doesn't seem to be getting anywhere," he said finally.

"No, I don't suppose he does," she admitted.

Somehow, he felt that if he ripped the panel off the console and dug past the tangle of leads and relays, he'd find her somewhere within the warm confines of the box. She seemed that real.

"Vance, I don't want you to stay any longer. It's too dangerous. Leave with Burton before the next leap."

He forced a laugh. "Why, Pve got more faith in Gumpy than you have!"

"It isn't that." Even in dejection, her voice had the quality of silk brushing against velvet. "He'll fix that condenser—sooner or later." "Then what are we bothered about?"

"I'll show you."

Light flooded an electronic screen on the opposite bulkhead. It showed a vista of densely packed stars and nebulous patches. Close to its center, a green circle was displaced several degrees from the familiar cross hairs.

"With that last leap," she explained, "we went three degrees off. An element of drift has crept in. When we try to backtrack, I'm afraid I won't be able to compensate."

"I'm not worried. I know — "
"Please don't say it, Vance.
Another couple of leaps and
we'll be hopelessly lost."

He was silent for a moment.
"Don't tell Burton about this."
"I won't promise that. I want
you to get back safely."

"But what about you and Kid and Gumpy?"

"We don't matter — not that much." Before he could take issue, she added, "We just finished a leap, Vance. Were you on that hill again?"

"I was there."
"And I too?"

When he nodded, she went on with more enthusiasm, "Tell me again. What am I like?"

"Tall and slender and graceful, like — "

"Like a gazelle?"

"Yes."

"What's a gazelle?"

"A very beautiful Earth creature."

"And I'm like one of them?"
He felt suddenly embarrassed over the intimate situation he'd let develop during the months they'd been at space. In objective perspective, it was a mixture of forlorn frustration and self-ridicule. Yet was it his fault that they'd endowed Trix with so appealing a personality?

Still, Trix and Kid and Gumpy were more than surrogate crew members. They were gifted with fully human identities and consciousnesses.

"You're like one — of us,

A GRINDING roar exploded somewhere deep within the ship and the deck lurched under Lorry. Thrashing, he tried to maintain his balance but only went plunging against the bulkhead.

"Trix! What is it?" Regaining his feet, he fought the sensation that the ship was spinning around him.

"Wait. I'm trying to find out." Her tone was impatient, excited.

From where he stood against the bulkhead, the deck seemed to rise ahead of him like a steep slope

"I've got Gumpy on a direct

hookup," Trix said. "He says one of the grav coils shorted out."

Lorry made it back to the console and caught a grip on the panel to steady himself.

"Gumpy!" he demanded.
"What went wrong?"

"He's too busy to answer,"
Trix explained. "He was trying
to trace down the trouble in that
condenser when he tripped the
wrong relay. An overload got
through to the environmental
circuits."

All the lights were flickering now and the circulation system was sending only wisps of smoke through the ventilators. Somewhere forward, an automatic hatch was opening and closing, opening and closing.

"Mr. Lorry! What's wrong?"
He turned and saw the cells
on Kid's cabinet all aglow.

"Nothing to get excited about," he lied. "Gumpy's taking care of it."

"It's something bad, I know! I felt the current drain. I can still feel it!"

"Don't worry, Kid." Lorry shifted again to compensate for the fluctuating gravity field. "Everthing's going to be all right."

"Gosh, Mr. Lorry, I don't like it at all!"

"Look, Kid," Trix said with the stern solicitude of a big sister. "What did I tell you about

people who face danger and become heroes? Remember?"

"I — I guess so. But — but we are going to get home again, aren't we?"

· "This is our home," she said firmly.

Canting twenty degrees to the right against the off-center gravity, Burton came storming back into the compartment. "What the hell's happening now, Gumpy?"

When there was no answer, he gave the cabinet a kick.

Its cells brightened and the speaker grumbled, "Dampen your tubes! Ain't I got my hands full with this danged mess of wires and switches?"

"What," Burton demanded, "is the story now?"

"Damnation if I didn't whip up an overload that fused a whole batch of leads in the internal control trunk."

"Well, switch over to the alternate trunk. That's what it's there for!"

"Ain't there any more — not now it ain't."

"What do you mean?"

"Guess it plumb slipped my mind to tell you, but we been running on alternate for the past couple of months."

"Why?"

"Had another overload and blew out a flock of circuits on the main." BURTON swore and tore at his hair. "All right, Gumpy," he said at last with deliberate calm. "You're internal control. You tell me what we're going to do."

"Don't rightly know at the moment," said Gumpy.

"Hear those gyros whining?" Burton shot at him. "It's gravdisplacement strain that's causing that. If they don't snap their shafts, those gyros won't be worth a damn for getting us back home."

"Well," Gumpy said speculatively, "'pears I'll have to start from scratch and rebuild the circuits so as to have at least one complete internal control system

"And," Burton interrupted, "find the trouble in the hyperspace condenser and repair it all that in the two hours we have left before we jump another fifty or sixty light-years away from home?"

Gumpy made a "hm-m-mming" sound. "Kind of looks impossible, don't it?"

The central console's cells flickered. "I'm afraid, Gumpy! You can do something, can't you, so they won't have to leave us out here?"

"Hush, Kid," Trix comforted. "Remember what I told you. Just think of the fun we'll have when the ship's all ours."

Lorry stepped in front of the girl's cabinet. "It doesn't have to be that way, Trix. I have a

"No, Mr. Lorry," she said. electing formality in the presence of the other man. "We're not going to let you endanger your lives any longer. Mr. Burton, there's something we haven't told you. The ship's developed a radical drift."

"What kind of a drift?" Burton asked.

"I don't know. Maybe it's some new force in this sector of the Galaxy. Whatever it is, I can't factorize it for navigation Another couple of leaps and we'll be completely lost."

Burton drew in a deep breath and looked down at his hands. "Can you still plot a course home?"

"It wouldn't be on the nose. We'd come out of the last leap maybe fifteen or twenty lightvears off."

"That's good enough. Plot it for the lifeboat."

Lorry felt the press of desperation creeping up on him. He couldn't let Burton abandon the surrogate crew!

"The course has already been fed into the boat's control schedule," Trix said. "I took care of it six leaps ago. Since then I've kept up running modifications."

"Good girl," said Burton.

Then he told Lorry, "All right, Vance - let's go home. We did all we could."

But Lorry only backed off.

This drew an irate glare from Burton. "Look, sonny, I've been damned patient. I understood how it was possible for a man a young man at space for three months with nothing but a sorry old bird like me for company to get droopy-eyed over a pretty voice. Just another form of space fatigue, I suppose. But I was decent enough to pretend I didn't notice it. Now -

He stepped forward, squarely into a right hook that Lorry hadn't even guessed he had in

T required some effort to sling the big man over his shoulder. But, even despite the ship's list, he made it to the storage compartment and dumped Burton inside. Then he secured the lock and turned to face the surrogate

"Oh, Vance!" Trix exclaimed. "Why did you do it?"

"Let him have the spot, girl," Gumpy said. "It's his show. Could be he's got something in mind."

Kid grabbed at the hope. "That's right, Trix. He knows what to do. Don't you, Mr. Lorry?"

going to need plenty of help."

The handle of the storage compartment's door rattled violently.

"Lorry!" Burton's muffled voice came through. "Let me out!"

"Open that door, Vance," Trix sighed. "It's the only thing you can do."

"No, it's not!" Lorry insisted. "I'm going to take you aboard the lifeboat - all of you."

"See!" Kid yelped. "I told you he'd - "

"Shut up, Kid," Gumpy said. "Can't be done, Vance. Ain't got enough room on that boat."

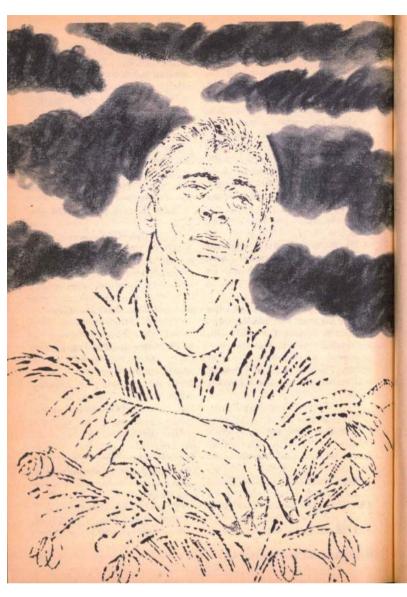
"And there's no time!" Trix added. "It would take days and an entire crew of cyberneticians to take these consoles apart!"

"Of all the damned fool plans!" said Burton.

The ship lurched again and Lorry readjusted himself to the erratic gravity. In the next instant, the shricking of straining gyros mounted perceptibly and one of the ventilation ducts belched a cloud of smoke.

"I'm not going to take the cabinets intact," he shouted so Burton could hear too. "Only the main parts - memory cells, response-pattern drums, adaptation banks - "

"Won't work," Gumpy said. "Too many units involved, "I think I do, Kid. But I'm Vance," the girl explained. "Even



if you knew anything about cybernetics, it would take days."

"Nope," Gumpy reiterated.
"Can't be done."

"Yes, it can!" Kid begged. "Mr. Lorry can do it! Just give him a chance!"

"I'll need your help," Lorry went on. "You'll have to lead me step by step."

The storage compartment door bucked under the impact of Burton's shoulder. But it held.

Then Lorry cringed before a subtle sound that mounted in intensity as it charged through the passageways. The phase condenser, screeching with a fury, was getting ready to kick off again and hurl them another fifty light-years into obscurity.

fifty light-years into obscurity.
"Oh, Vance!" Trix cried. "Get
to the lifeboat! Get off the ship!"

"But it's only been two hours since the last jump!" he protested.

"Danged if it ain't," Gumpy acknowledged. "Means only one thing — fluctuation's getting wilder. Could even blow up the whole works this leap, or the one after."

"I'm afraid it's too late to reach the lifeboat now, Vance," Trix groaned. "If we make it through this hop, you'll have to abandon ship right away."

"Lorry!" Burton roared. "For God's sake, come to your senses! Let's get out of here!" The condenser's whine peaked and blackness closed in over everything.

WASTLY different now, the meadow was a strange, hostile place. Where there had been exhilarating, delightfully scented breezes, there was now only a desolate calm.

Dense clouds hovered over the hill and the blossoms that carpeted the plain were stained and wilted, gripped in the stillness of death and overpowering stench of putrescence.

He pressed forward through the sea of decaying vegetation, perplexed by the sudden change that had overtaken his private World of the Interim.

Nowhere could he see Trix, or Kid, or Gumpy.

He called their names and was startled at the alien sound of his own voice as it intruded on the foul quiet of the meadow.

Then he saw her — standing halfway up the slope, her arms folded in rigid indifference and her hair coarse and still as it hung down either side of her expressionless face.

Kid darted out from behind the girl and thumbed his nose at Lorry.

"Trix! Kid!"

The boy seized a clump of dry dirt and hurled it down the slope. It hit Lorry.

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"Kid! Trix! What's wrong?" he demanded.

Her stare only became more disdainful as the boy mocked Lorry in a derisive voice.

Gumpy came around the hill, shaking his fist and waving threats with his cane.

Lorry spread his arms imploringly. "Tell me — what's wrong? I don't understand!"

The girl tossed her head scornfully, then spat out his name as though it were a curse: "Vance!"

And Gumpy repeated the word with utter contempt.

HE was coming around now.

And the words that had served as a fadeout from the chimerical scene on the hillside had only been the girl's voice piercing the veil of unconsciousness and prompting him back to reality: "Vance! Vance!"

But even more urgent was Burton's voice from the storage compartment.

"You're all wrong, Lorry!" he was shouting. "Don't you see your logic's off?"

Lorry went over to the locked door. "All I'm trying to do is save —"

"No, Vance," Trix cut in.
"Listen to him. He's right."

"They're not real, Lorry!" Burton continued. "There's not a single element of conscious awareness in their makeup. They can't actually think! It's just an effect — a gimmick!"

"Sure," Lorry said. "That's the way it's supposed to be. But they know what's happening to them, all right."

"No, Vance, they don't. It's hokus-pokus with complicated circuit arrangements and cross-indexed reaction banks. It's all engineered so they'll respond realistically to any situation."

"It's no illusion."

"Yes, it is, Vance. It's the same old automatic stimulus-response mechanism, dressed up in elaborate trimmings."

"Isn't that all you and I actually are?"

"There's a difference. It's consciousness, awareness of being, spark of life, ego, the ability to get a subjective lift out of a sensation — call it anything you want. But the difference is there."

Silence held the compartment for a while.

"Trix," Kid piped. "Is Mr. Burton trying to say we're not like him?"

"Hush, Kid."

"That's just one way of looking at it, boy," Gumpy comforted.

"Listen, Lorry," Burton shouted. "That leap condenser's phasing erratically. It could jump us again in five minutes,

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or it could blow the guts out of this ship instead! If we do make that next skip, Trix won't be able to give us a course to get back home in the boat. Come on now and let me out of here!"

"Can't do it."

"All right, then! Ask them if they're real!"

Lorry turned toward Trix, but she spoke before he could phrase a question. "Only circuits and transistors and relays and special banks. That's all, Vance."

"You're lying! Gumpy?"

"I can get mad as heck if things don't go right. But I don't suppose it's really an emotion just surge current in negative feedback."

"In the next galaxy it is! Kid?"
"When you told me that story

about the little boy that got lost, I — I felt like crying, Mr. Lorry. I wanted to help him. I don't know." He hesitated. "I guess — "

"That's not fair, Vance," Trix objected. "Special human appeal was engineered into the boy's character and — Vance! You've got to go now! Look!"

One of the screens on the forward bulkhead flared up and sent startling brilliance into the compartment. It showed a dense cluster of stars surrounding a sparkling-white sun whose fire was so intense that it seemed to warm the compartment, even

over the vast distance and through the viewscreen.

"What is it?" Burton demanded from the locker. "What's going on?"

"That's a Sirius-type sun!" the girl blurted out. "I've just finished plotting our vector. The next jump is going to put us within lethal range of that star!"

Lorry could taste the bitterness, the incredible irony of this new situation. In any random jump through hyperspace, the chances of accidentally materializing within the limits of a solar system were in the order of a trillion to one. Yet it was going to happen to them!

"You hear that, Lorry?" Burton banged on the door again.
"For God's sake, let's get out of here!"

"Pears as though that settles it, gal," Gumpy said. "I been holding off, hoping maybe something would crop up. But — "

Above the other noises of the ship there was the click of a lock. The storage compartment door swung open and Burton, caught off balance, tumbled out. He looked even more surprised than relieved.

Gumpy cackled. "Guess it plumb slipped your mind that I got control over all the hatches on this here crate."

Dazed, Lorry only stood his ground as Burton advanced.

"Go with him, Vance," Trix entreated. "And just remember — when you find that hill and all those flowers, I'll be there too — in a way."

Burton reached out to seize his arm and Lorry yanked away. He didn't even see Burton's fist.

THERE was a strange, suspenseful quiet in the control compartment now.

The hatch that had gone out of control wasn't banging any longer.

With a hiss that evidenced smoothly functioning machinery, the dead gravity coil came to life and the ship lurched back to equilibrium on its lateral axis.

All the gyros were now whispering a sibilance of well-being.

A final wift of smoke drifted out of the ventilation duct, followed by a soft, steady breeze. It lasted only for a moment, though. Then the stream of air was snipped off with a finality that suggested oxygen would no longer be an important shipboard item.

One lonely observation screen framed a lifeboat dwindling in size as it drifted astern. Abruptly, it emitted the eerie shimmer that attends departure of a vessel into hyperspace.

One by one, all the screens in the control compartment came ablaze with the scintillating grandeur of the Milky Way as seen in a score of directions from the ship — great star clusters and nebulous masses, monstrous suns and rifts and patches of obscuring material and multiple stars.

Then a speaker diaphragm crackled against the silence of the compartment. "Things back in order yet, Gumpy?"

"Just about, Trix. Last thing left is to get the hyperdrive off automatic repeat. There — that does it!"

"We made it!" Kid squealed.

"That we did, boy," Gumpy said. "But you really hammed it up there for a while."

"If that's the case, then Trix overplayed it a bit too."

Her laughter tinkling through the ship, she said, "Doesn't matter. We swung it, didn't we?"

"Yup," Gumpy agreed. "And I guess nobody will ever get the idea a surrogate crew might have a hankering to take off on its own. You plot the course for those two, Trix?"

"Naturally. They'll get back."
"Where we heading?"

"The Coal Sack. I've always wanted to see what it's like over there."

"I kinda thought we might meander over toward Andromeda for a spell. But I guess it can wait. After all, we got time to burn."

- DANIEL F. GALOUYE



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