

The Rolling Stones

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I — THE UNHEAVENLY TWINS

The two brothers stood looking the old wreck over. 'Junk,' decided Castor.

'Not junk,' objected Pollux. 'A jalopy — granted. A heap any way you look at it. A clunker possibly. But not junk.'

'You're an optimist, Junior.' Both boys were fifteen; Castor was twenty minutes older than his brother.

'I'm a believer, Grandpa — and you had better be, too. Let me point out that we don't have money enough for anything better. Scared to gun it?'

Castor stared up the side of the ship. 'Not at all — because that thing will never again rise high enough to crash. We want a ship that will take us out to the Asteroids — right? This superannuated pogo stick wouldn't even take us to Earth.'

'It will when I get through hopping it up — with your thumb-fingered help. Let's look through it and see what it needs.'

Castor glanced at the sky. 'Its getting late.' He looked not at the Sun making long shadows on the lunar plain, but at Earth, reading the time from the sunset line now moving across the Pacific.

'Look, Grandpa, are we buying a ship or are we getting to supper on time?'

Castor shrugged. 'As you say, Junior.' He lowered his antenna, then started swarming up the rope ladder left there for the accommodation of prospective customers. He used his hands only and despite his cumbersome vacuum suit his movements were easy and graceful. Pollux swarmed after him. Castor cheered up a bit when they reached the control room. The ship had not been stripped for salvage as completely as had many of the ships on the lot. True, the ballistic computer was missing but the rest of the astrogation instruments were in place and the controls to the power room seemed to be complete. The space-battered old hulk was not a wreck, but merely obsolete. A hasty look at the power room seemed to confirm this.

Ten minutes later Castor, still mindful of supper, herded Pollux down the ladder. When Castor reached the ground Pollux said, 'Well?'

'Let me do the talking.'

The sales office of the lot was a bubble dome nearly a mile away; they moved toward it with the easy, fast lope of old Moon hands. The office airlock was marked by a huge sign:

DEALER DAN

THE SPACESHIP MAN

CRAFT OF ALL TYPES

SCRAP METAL

SPARE PARTS

FUELING & SERVICE

(AEC License No. 739024)

They cycled through the lock and unclamped each other's helmets. The outer office was crossed by a railing; back of it sat a girl receptionist. She was watching a newscast while buffing her nails. She spoke without taking her eyes off the TV tank:

'We're not buying anything, boys — nor hiring anybody.'

Castor said 'You sell spaceships?'

She looked up. 'Not often enough.'

'Then tell your boss we want to see him.'

Her eyebrows went up. 'Whom do you think you are kidding, sonny boy? Mr Ekizian is a busy man.'

Pollux said to Castor, 'Let's go over to the Hungarian, Cas. These people don't mean business.'

'Maybe you're right.'

The girl looked from one to the other, shrugged, and flipped a switch. 'Mr Ekizian — there are a couple of Boy Scouts out here who say they want to buy a spaceship. Do you want to bother with them?'

A deep voice responded, 'And why not? We got ships to sell.' Shortly a bald-headed, portly man, dressed in a cigar and a wrinkled moonsuit, came out of the inner office and rested his hands on the rail. He looked them over shrewdly but his voice was jovial. 'You wanted to see me?'

'You're the owner?' asked Castor.

'Dealer Dan Ekizian, the man himself. What's on your mind, boys? Time is money.'

'Your, secretary told yon,' Castor said ungraciously. 'Spaceships.

Dealer Dan took his cigar out of his mouth and examined it. 'Really? What would you boys want with a spaceship?'

Pollux muttered something; Castor said, 'Do you usually do business out here?' He glanced at the girl.

Ekizian followed his glance. 'My mistake. Come inside.' He opened the gate for them, led them into his office, and seated them. He ceremoniously offered them cigars; the boys refused politely. 'Now out with it kids. Let's not joke.'

Castor repeated, 'Spaceships.'

He pursed his lips. 'A luxury liner, maybe? I haven't got one on the field at the moment but I can always broker a deal.'

Pollux stood up. 'He's making fun of us, Cas. Let's go see the Hungarian.'

'Wait a moment, Pol. Mr Ekizian, you've got a heap out there on the south side of the field, a class VII, model '93 Detrouiter. What's your scrapmetal price on her and what does she mass?'

The dealer looked surprised. 'That sweet little job? Why, I couldn't afford to let that go as scrap. And anyhow, even at scrap that would come to a lot of money. If it is metal you boys want, I got it. Just tell me how much and what sort.'

'We were talking about that Detrouiter.'

'I don't believe I've met you boys before?'

'Sorry, sir. I'm Castor Stone. This is my brother Pollux.'

'Glad to meet you, Mr Stone. Stone... Stone? Any relation to — The "Unheavenly Twins" — that's it.'

'Smile when you say that,' said Pollux.

'Shut up, Pol. We're the Stone twins.'

'The frostproof rebreather valve, you invented it, didn't you?'

'That's right.'

'Say, I got one in my own suit. A good gimmick — you boys are quite the mechanics.' He looked them over again. 'Maybe you were really serious about a ship.'

'Of course we were.'

'Hmm... you're not looking for scrap; you want something to get around it. I've got just the job for you, a General Motors Jumpbug, practically new. It's been out on one grubstake job to a couple of thorium prospectors and I had to reclaim it. The hold ain't even radioactive.'

'Not interested.'

'Better look at it. Automatic landing and three hops takes you right around the equator. Just the thing for a couple of lively, active boys.'

'About that Detroit — what's your scrap price?'

Ekizian looked hurt. 'That's a deepspace vessel, son — It's no use to you, as a ship. And I can't let it go for scrap; that's a clean job. It was a family yacht — never been pushed over six g, never had an emergency landing. It's got hundreds of millions of miles still in it. I couldn't let you scrap that ship, even if you were to pay me the factory price. It would be a shame. I love ships. Now take this Jumpbug...'

'You can't sell that Detroit as anything but scrap,' Castor answered. 'It's been sitting there two years that I know of. If you had hoped to sell her as a ship you wouldn't have salvaged the computer. She's pitted, her tubes are no good, and an overhaul would cost more than she's worth. Now what's her scrap price?'

Dealer Dan rocked back and forth in his chair; he seemed to be suffering. 'Scrap that ship? Just fuel her up and she's ready to go — Venus, Mars, even the Jovian satellites.'

'What's your cash price?'

'Cash?'

'Cash.'

Ekizian hesitated, then mentioned a price. Castor stood up and said, 'You were right, Pollux. Let's go see the Hungarian.'

The dealer looked pained. 'If I were to write it off for my own use, I couldn't cut that price — not in fairness to my partners.'

'Come on, Pol.'

'Look, boys, I can't let you go over to the Hungarian's. He'll cheat you.'

Pollux looked savage. 'Maybe he'll do it politely.'

'Shut up, Poll!' Castor went on, 'Sorry, Mr Ekizian, my brother isn't housebroken. But we can't do business.' He stood up.

'Wait a minute. That's a good valve you boys thought up. I use it; I feel I owe you something.' He named another and lower sum.

'Sorry. We can't afford it.' He started to follow Pollux out.

'Wait!' Ekizian mentioned a third price. 'Cash,' he added.

'Of course. And you pay the sales tax?'

'Well... for a cash deal, yes.'

'Good.'

'Sit down, gentlemen. I'll call in my girl and we'll stat the papers.'

'No hurry,' answered Castor. 'We've still got to see what the Hungarian has on his lot — and the government salvage lot, too.'

'Huh? That price doesn't stand unless you deal right now. Dealer Dan, they call me. I got no time to waste dickering twice.'

'Nor have we. See you tomorrow. If it hasn't sold we can take up where we left off.'

'If you expect me to hold that price, I'll have to have a nominal option payment.'

'Oh, no, I wouldn't expect you to pass up a sale for us. If you can sell it by tomorrow, we wouldn't think of standing in your way. Come on, Pol.'

Ekizian shrugged. 'Been nice meeting you, boys.'

'Thank you, sir.'

As they closed the lock behind them and waited for it to cycle, Pollux said, 'You should have paid him an option.'

His brother looked at him. 'You're retarded, Junior.'

On leaving Dealer Dan's office the boys headed for the spaceport, intending to catch the passenger tube back to the city, fifty miles west of the port. They had less than thirty minutes if they were to get home for supper on time — unimportant in itself but Castor disliked starting a family debate on the defensive over a side issue. He kept hurrying Pollux along.

Their route took them through the grounds of General Synthetics Corporation, square miles of giant cracking plants, sun screens, condensers, fractionating columns, all sorts of huge machinery to take advantage of the burning heat, the bitter cold, and the endless vacuum for industrial chemical engineering purposes — a Danté-esque jungle of unlikely shapes. The boys paid no attention to it; they were used to it. They hurried down the company road in the flying leaps the Moon's low gravity permitted, making twenty miles an hour. Half way to the port they were overtaken by a company tractor; Pollux flagged it down.

As he ground to a stop, the driver spoke to them via his cab radio: 'What do you want?'

'Are you meeting the Terra shuttle?'

'Subject to the whims of fate — yes.'

'It's Jefferson,' said Pollux. 'Hey, Jeff — it's Cas and Pol. Drop us at the tube station, will you?'

'Climb on the rack. Mind the volcano — come up the usual way.' As they did so he went on, 'What brings you two carrot-topped accident-prones to this far reach of culture?'

Castor hesitated and glanced at Pollux. They had known Jefferson James for some time, having bowled against him in the city league. He was an old Moon hand but not a native, having come to Luna before they were born to gather color for a novel. The novel was still unfinished.

Pollux nodded. Castor said, 'Jeff, can you keep a secret?'

'Certainly — but permit me to point out that these radios are not directional. See your attorney before admitting any criminal act or intention.'

Castor looked around; aside from two tractor trucks in the distance no one seemed to be in line-of-sight. 'We're going into business.'

'When were you out of it?'

'This is a new line — interplanetary trade. We're going to buy our own ship and run it ourselves.'

The driver whistled. 'Remind me to sell Four-Planet Export short. When does this blitz take place?'

'We're shopping for a ship now. Know of a good buy?'

'I'll alert my spies.' He shut up, being busy thereafter with the heavier traffic near the spaceport. Presently he said, 'Here's your stop.' As the boys climbed down from the rack of the truck he added, 'If you need a crewman, keep me in mind.'

'Okay, Jeff. And thanks for the lift.'

Despite the lift they were late. A squad of marine M.P.s heading into the city on duty pre-empted the first tube car; by the time the next arrived the ship from Earth had grounded and its passengers took priority. Thereafter they got tangled with the changing shift from the synthetics plant. It was well past supertime when they arrived at their family's apartment a half mile down inside Luna city

Mr Stone looked up as they came in 'Well! the star boarders,' he announced. He was sitting with a small recorder in his lap, a throat mike clipped to his neck.

'Dad, it was unavoidable,' Castor began. 'We —'

'It always is,' his father cut in. 'Never mind the details. Your dinner is in the cozy. I wanted to send it back but your mother went soft and didn't let me.'

Dr Stone looked up from the far end of the living room, where she was modelling a head of their older sister, Meade. 'Correction,' she said. 'Your father went soft; I would have let you starve. Meade, quit turning your head.'

'Check,' announced their four-year old brother and got up from the floor where he had been playing chess with their grandmother. He ran towards them. 'Hey, Cas, Pol — where you been? Did you go to the port? Why didn't you take me? Did you bring me anything?'

Castor swung him up by his heels and held him upside down. 'Yes. No. Maybe. And why should we? Here, Pol — catch.' He sailed the child through the air; his twin reached out and caught him, still by the

heels.

'Check yourself,' announced Grandmother, 'and mate in three moves. Shouldn't let your social life distract you from your game, Lowell.'

The youngster looked back at the board from his upside down position. 'Wrong, Hazel. Now I let you take my queen, then — Blammie!'

His grandmother looked again at the board. 'Huh? Wait a minute — suppose I refuse your queen, then — Why, the little scamp! He's trapped me again.'

Meade said, 'Shouldn't let him beat you so often, Hazel. It's not good for him.'

'Meade, for the ninth time, quit turning your head!'

'Sorry, Mother. Let's take a rest.'

Grandmother snorted. 'You don't think I let him beat me on purpose, do you? You play him; I am giving up the game for good.'

Meade answered just as her mother spoke; at the same time Pollux chucked the boy back at Castor. 'You — take him. I want to eat.' The child squealed.

Mr Stone shouted, 'QUIET!'

'And stay quiet,' he went on, while unfastening the throat mike. 'How is a man to make a living in all this racket? This episode has to be done over completely, sent to New York. tomorrow, shot, canned, distributed, and on the channels by the end of the week. It's not possible.'

'Then don't do it,' Dr Stone answered serenely. 'Or work in your room — it's soundproof.'

Mr Stone turned to his wife. 'My dear, I've explained a thousand times that I can't work in there by myself. I get no stimulation. I fall asleep.'

Castor said, 'How's it going, Dad? Rough?'

'Well, now that you ask me, the villains are way ahead and I don't see a chance for our heroes.'

'I thought of a gimmick while Pol and I were out. You have this young kid you introduced into the story slide into the control room while everybody is asleep. They don't suspect him, see? — he's too young so they haven't put him in irons. Once in the control room — ' Castor stopped and looked crestfallen. 'No, it won't do; he's too young to handle the ship. He wouldn't know how.'

'Why do you say that?' his father objected. 'All I have to do is to plant that he has had a chance to... let me see —' He stopped; his face went blank. 'No,' he said presently.

'No good, huh?'

'Eh? What? It smells — but I think I can use it. Stevenson did something like it in Treasure Island — and I think he got it from Homer. Let's see; if we — ' He again went into his trance.

Pollux had opened the warming cupboard Castor dropped his baby brother on the floor and accepted a dinner pack from his twin. He opened it. 'Meat pie again,' he stated bleakly and sniffed it. 'Synthetic, too.'

'Say that over again and louder,' his sister urged him. 'I've been trying for weeks to get Mother to subscribe to another restaurant.'

'Don't talk, Meade,' Dr Stone answered. 'I'm modelling your mouth.'

Grandmother Stone snorted. 'You youngsters have it too easy. When I came to the Moon there was a time when we had nothing but soya beans and coffee powder for three months.'

Meade answered, 'Hazel, the last time you told us about that it was two months and it was tea instead of coffee.'

'Young lady, who's telling this lie? You, or me?' Hazel stood up and came over to her twin grandsons. 'What were you two doing on Dan Ekizian's lot?'

Castor looked at Pollux, who looked back. Castor said cautiously, 'Who told you that we were there?'

'Don't try to kid your grandmother. When you have been on —'

The entire family joined her in chorus: '"- on the Moon as long as I have!"'

Hazel sniffed. 'Sometimes I wonder why I married!'

Her son said, 'Don't try to answer that question,' then continued to his sons, 'Well, what were you doing there?'

Castor consulted Pollux by eye, then answered, 'Well, Dad, it's like this -'

His father nodded. 'Your best flights of imagination always start that way. Attend carefully, everybody.'

'Well, you know that money you are holding for us?'

'What about it?'

'Three per cent isn't very much.' Mr Stone shook his head vigorously. 'I will not invest your royalties in some wildcat stock. Financial genius may have skipped my generation but when I turn that money over to you, it will be intact'

'That's just it. It worries you. You could turn it over to us now and quit worrying about it.'

'No. You are too young.'

'We weren't too young to earn it'

His mother snickered. 'They got you, Roger. Come here and I'll see if I can staunch the blood'

Dr Stone said serenely, 'Don't heckle Roger when he is coping with the twins, Mother. Meade, turn a little to the left.'

Mr Stone answered, 'You've got a point there, Cas. But you may still be too young to hang on to it. What is this leading up to?'

Castor signalled with his eyes; Pollux took over. 'Dad, we've got a really swell chance to take that money and put it to work. Not a wildcat stock, not a stock at all. We'll have every penny right where we can see it, right where we could cash in on it at any time. And in the meantime we'll be making lots more money.'

'Hmmm... how?'

'We buy a ship and put it to work.'

His father opened his mouth; Castor cut in swiftly, 'We can pick up a Detroit VII cheap and overhaul it ourselves; we won't be out a cent for wages.'

Pollux filled in without a break. 'You've said yourself, Dad, that we are both born mechanics; we've got the hands for it.'

Castor went on. 'We'd treat it like a baby because it would be our own.'

Pollux: 'We've both got both certificates, control and power. We wouldn't need any crew.'

Castor: 'No overhead — that's the beauty of it.'

Pollux: 'so we carry trade goods out to the Asteroids and we bring back a load of high-grade. We can't lose.'

Castor: 'Four hundred percent, maybe five hundred.'

Pollux: 'More like six hundred.'

Castor: 'And no worries for you.'

Pollux: 'And we'd be out of your hair.'

Castor: 'Not late for dinner.'

Pollux had his mouth open when his father again yelled, 'QUIET!' He went on, 'Edith, bring the barrel. This time we use it.' Mr Stone had a theory, often expressed, that boys should be raised in a barrel and fed through the bunghole. The barrel had no physical existence.

Dr Stone said, 'Yes, dear,' and went on modelling.

Grandmother Stone said, 'Don't waste your money on a Detroit. They're unstable; the gyro system is no good. Wouldn't have one as a gift. Get a Douglas.'

Mr Stone turned to his mother. 'Hazel, if you are going to encourage the boys in this nonsense —'

'Not at all! Not at all! Merely intellectual discussion. Now with a Douglas they could make some money. A Douglas has a very favorable —'

'Hazel!'

His mother broke off, then said thoughtfully, as if to herself, 'I know there is free speech on the Moon: I wrote it into the charter myself.'

Roger Stone turned back to his sons. 'See here, boys — when the Chamber of Commerce decided to include pilot training in their Youth-Welfare program I was all for it. I even favored it when they decided to issue junior licenses to anybody who graduated high in the course. When you two got your jets I was proud as could be. It's a young man's game; they license commercial pilots at eighteen and —'

'And they retire them at thirty,' added Castor. 'We haven't any time to waste. We'll be too old for the game before you know it.'

'Pipe down. I'll do the talking for a bit. If you think I'm going to draw that money out of the bank and let you two young yahoos go gallivanting around the system in a pile of sky junk that will probably blow the first time you go over two g's, you had better try another think. Besides, you're going down to Earth for school next September.'

'We've been to Earth,' answered Castor.

'We didn't like it' added Pollux.

'Too dirty.'

'Likewise too noisy.'

'Groundhogs everywhere,' Castor finished.

Mr Stone brushed it aside. 'Two weeks you were there — not time enough to find out what the place is like. You'll love it, once you get used to it. Learn to ride horseback, play baseball, see the Ocean.'

'A lot of impure water,' Castor answered.

'Horses are to eat'

'Take baseball,' Castor continued. 'It's not practical. How can you figure a one-g trajectory and place your hand at the point of contact in the free-flight time between bases? We're not miracle men.'

'I played it.'

'But you grew up in a one-g field; you've got a distorted notion of physics. Anyhow, why would we want to learn to play baseball? When we come back, we wouldn't be able to play it here. Why, you might crack your helmet'

Mr Stone shook his head. 'Games aren't the point. Play baseball or not, as suits you. But you should get an education.'

'What does Luna City Technical lack that we need? And if so, why? After all, Dad, you were on the Board of Education'

'I was not; I was mayor.'

'Which made you a member ex-officio — Hazel told us.'

Mr Stone glanced at his mother; she was looking elsewhere. He went on, 'Tech is a good school, of its sort' but we don't pretend to offer everything at Tech. After all, the Moon is still an outpost, a frontier —'

'But you said,' Pollux interrupted, 'in your retiring speech as mayor, that Luna City was the Athens of the future and the hope of the new age.'

'Poetic license. Tech is still not Harvard. Don't you boys want to see the world's great works of art? Don't you want to study the world's great literature?'

'We've read Ivanhoe,' said Castor.

'And we don't want to read The Mill on the Floss,' added Pollux.

'We prefer your stuff.'

'My stuff? My stuff isn't literature. It's more of an animated comic strip.'

'We like it' Castor said firmly.

His father took a deep breath. 'Thank you. Which reminds me that I still have a full episode to sweat out tonight, so I will cut this discussion short. In the first place you can't touch the money without my thumbprint — from now on I am going to wear gloves. In the second place both of you are too young for an unlimited license.'

'You could get us a waiver for out-system. When we got back we'd probably be old enough for unlimited.'

'You're too young!'

Castor said, 'Why, Dad, not half an hour ago you accepted a gimmick from me in which you were going to have an eleven-year-old kid driving a ship.'

'I'll raise his age!'

'It'll ruin your gimmick.'

'Confound it! That's just fiction — and poor fiction at that. It's hokum, dreamed up to sell merchandise.' He suddenly looked suspiciously at his son. 'Cas, you planted that gimmick on me. Just to give yourself an argument in favor of this hair-brained scheme — didn't you?'

Castor looked pious. 'Why, Father, how could you think such a thing?'

'Don't "Father" me! I can tell a hawk from a handsaw.'

'Anybody can,' Grandmother Hazel commented. 'The Hawk class is a purely commercial type while the Hanshaw runabout is a sport job. Come to think about it, boys, a Hanshaw might be better than a Douglas. I like its fractional controls and —'

