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THE JUPITER WEAPON

By CHARLES L. FONTENAY

***He was a living weapon of
destruction—immeasurably
powerful, utterly
invulnerable.
There was only one
question: Was he human?***

TRELLA feared she was in for trouble even before Motwick's head dropped forward on his arms in a drunken stupor. The two evil-looking men at the table nearby had been watching her surreptitiously, and now they shifted restlessly in their chairs.

Trella had not wanted to come to the Golden Satellite. It was a squalid saloon in the rougher section of Jupiter's View, the terrestrial dome-colony on Ganymede. Motwick, already drunk, had insisted.

A woman could not possibly make her way through these streets alone to the better section of town, especially one clad in a silvery evening dress. Her only hope was that this place had a telephone. Perhaps she could call one of Motwick's friends; she had no one on Ganymede she could call a real friend herself.

Tentatively, she pushed her chair back from the table and arose. She had to brush close by the other table to get to the bar. As she did, the dark, slick-haired man reached out and grabbed her around the waist with a steely arm.

Trella swung with her whole body, and slapped him so hard he nearly fell from his chair. As she walked swiftly toward the bar, he leaped up to follow her.

There were only two other people in the Golden Satellite: the fat, mustached bartender and a short, square-built man at the bar. The latter swung around at the pistol-like report of her slap, and she saw that, though no more than four and a half feet tall, he was as heavily muscled as a lion.

His face was clean and open, with close-cropped blond hair and honest blue eyes. She ran to him.

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"Help me!" she cried. "Please help me!"

He began to back away from her.

"I can't," he muttered in a deep voice. "I can't help you. I can't do anything."

The dark man was at her heels. In desperation, she dodged around the short man and took refuge behind him. Her protector was obviously unwilling, but the dark man, faced with his massiveness, took no chances. He stopped and shouted:

"Kregg!"

The other man at the table arose, ponderously, and lumbered toward them. He was immense, at least six and a half feet tall, with a brutal, vacant face.

Evading her attempts to stay behind him, the squat man began to move down the bar away from the approaching Kregg. The dark man moved in on Trella again as Kregg overtook his quarry and swung a huge fist like a sledgehammer.

Exactly what happened, Trella wasn't sure. She had the impression that Kregg's fist connected squarely with the short man's chin *before* he dodged to one side in a movement so fast it was a blur. But that couldn't have been, because the short man wasn't moved by that blow that would have felled a steer, and Kregg roared in pain, grabbing his injured fist.

"The bar!" yelled Kregg. "I hit the damn bar!"

At this juncture, the bartender took a hand. Leaning far over the bar, he swung a full bottle in a complete arc. It smashed on Kregg's head, splashing the floor with liquor, and Kregg sank stunned to his knees. The dark man, who had grabbed Trella's arm, released her and ran for the door.

Moving agilely around the end of the bar, the bartender stood over Kregg, holding the jagged-edged bottleneck in his hand menacingly.

"Get out!" rumbled the bartender. "I'll have no coppers raiding my place for the likes of you!"

Kregg stumbled to his feet and staggered out. Trella ran to the unconscious Motwick's side.

"That means you, too, lady," said the bartender beside her. "You and your boy friend get out of here. You oughtn't to have come here in the first place."

"May I help you, Miss?" asked a deep, resonant voice behind her.

She straightened from her anxious examination of Motwick. The squat man was standing there, an apologetic look on his face.

She looked contemptuously at the massive muscles whose help had been

denied her. Her arm ached where the dark man had grasped it. The broad face before her was not unhandsome, and the blue eyes were disconcertingly direct, but she despised him for a coward.

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"I'm sorry I couldn't fight those men for you, Miss, but I just couldn't," he said miserably, as though reading her thoughts. "But no one will bother you on the street if I'm with you."

"A lot of protection you'd be if they did!" she snapped. "But I'm desperate. You can carry him to the Stellar Hotel for me."

The gravity of Ganymede was hardly more than that of Earth's moon, but the way the man picked up the limp Motwick with one hand and tossed him over a shoulder was startling: as though he lifted a feather pillow. He followed Trella out the door of the Golden Satellite and fell in step beside her. Immediately she was grateful for his presence. The dimly lighted street was not crowded, but she didn't like the looks of the men she saw.

The transparent dome of Jupiter's View was faintly visible in the reflected night lights of the colonial city, but the lights were overwhelmed by the giant, vari-colored disc of Jupiter itself, riding high in the sky.

"I'm Quest Mansard, Miss," said her companion. "I'm just in from Jupiter."

"I'm Trella Nuspar," she said, favoring him with a green-eyed glance. "You mean Io, don't you—or Moon Five?"

"No," he said, grinning at her. He had an engaging grin, with even white teeth. "I meant Jupiter."

"You're lying," she said flatly. "No one has ever landed on Jupiter. It would be impossible to blast off again."

"My parents landed on Jupiter, and I blasted off from it," he said soberly. "I was born there. Have you ever heard of Dr. Eriklund Mansard?"

"I certainly have," she said, her interest taking a sudden upward turn. "He developed the surgiscope, didn't he? But his ship was drawn into Jupiter and lost."

"It was drawn into Jupiter, but he landed it successfully," said Quest. "He and my mother lived on Jupiter until the oxygen equipment wore out at last. I was born and brought up there, and I was finally able to build a small rocket with a powerful enough drive to clear the planet."

She looked at him. He was short, half a head shorter than she, but broad and powerful as a man might be who had grown up in heavy gravity. He trod the street with a light, controlled step, seeming to deliberately hold himself down.

"If Dr. Mansard succeeded in landing on Jupiter, why didn't anyone ever hear from him again?" she demanded.

"Because," said Quest, "his radio was sabotaged, just as his ship's drive was."

"Jupiter strength," she murmured, looking him over coolly. "You wear Motwick on your shoulder like a scarf. But you couldn't bring yourself to help a woman against two thugs."

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He flushed.

"I'm sorry," he said. "That's something I couldn't help."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. It's not that I'm afraid, but there's something in me that makes me back away from the prospect of fighting anyone."

Trella sighed. Cowardice was a state of mind. It was peculiarly inappropriate, but not unbelievable, that the strongest and most agile man on Ganymede should be a coward. Well, she thought with a rush of sympathy, he couldn't help being what he was.

They had reached the more brightly lighted section of the city now.

Trella could get a cab from here, but the Stellar Hotel wasn't far. They walked on.

Trella had the desk clerk call a cab to deliver the unconscious Motwick to his home. She and Quest had a late sandwich in the coffee shop.

"I landed here only a week ago," he told her, his eyes frankly admiring her honey-colored hair and comely face. "I'm heading for Earth on the next spaceship."

"We'll be traveling companions, then," she said. "I'm going back on that ship, too."

For some reason she decided against telling him that the assignment on which she had come to the Jupiter system was to gather his own father's notebooks and take them back to Earth.

Motwick was an irresponsible playboy whom Trella had known briefly on Earth, and Trella was glad to dispense with his company for the remaining three weeks before the spaceship blasted off. She found herself enjoying the steadier companionship of Quest.

As a matter of fact, she found herself enjoying his companionship more than she intended to. She found herself falling in love with him.

Now this did not suit her at all. Trella had always liked her men tall and dark. She had determined that when she married it would be to a curly-haired six-footer.

She was not at all happy about being so strongly attracted to a man several inches shorter than she. She was particularly unhappy about feeling drawn to a man who was a coward.

The ship that they boarded on Moon Nine was one of the newer ships that could attain a hundred-mile-per-second velocity and take a hyperbolic path to Earth, but it would still require fifty-four days to make the trip. So Trella was delighted to find that the ship was the *Cometfire* and its skipper was her old friend, dark-eyed, curly-haired Jakdane Gille.

"Jakdane," she said, flirting with him with her eyes as in days gone by, "I need a chaperon this trip, and you're ideal for the job."

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"I never thought of myself in quite that light, but maybe I'm getting old," he answered, laughing. "What's your trouble, Trella?"

"I'm in love with that huge chunk of man who came aboard with me, and I'm not sure I ought to be," she confessed. "I may need protection against myself till we get to Earth."

"If it's to keep you out of another fellow's clutches, I'm your man," agreed Jakdane heartily. "I always had a mind to save you for myself. I'll guarantee you won't have a moment alone with him the whole trip."

"You don't have to be that thorough about it," she protested hastily. "I want to get a little enjoyment out of being in love. But if I feel myself weakening too much, I'll holler for help."

The *Cometfire* swung around great Jupiter in an opening arc and plummeted ever more swiftly toward the tight circles of the inner planets. There were four crew members and three passengers aboard the ship's tiny personnel sphere, and Trella was thrown with Quest almost constantly. She enjoyed every minute of it.

She told him only that she was a messenger, sent out to Ganymede to pick up some important papers and take them back to Earth. She was tempted to tell him what the papers were. Her employer had impressed upon her that her mission was confidential, but surely Dom Blessing could not object to Dr. Mansard's son knowing about it.

All these things had happened before she was born, and she did not know what Dom Blessing's relation to Dr. Mansard had been, but it must have been very close. She knew that Dr. Mansard had invented the surgiscope.

This was an instrument with a three-dimensional screen as its heart. The screen was a cubical frame in which an apparently solid image was built up of an object under an electron microscope.

The actual cutting instrument of the surgiscope was an ion stream. By operating a tool in the three-dimensional screen, corresponding movements were made by the ion stream on the object under the microscope. The principle was the same as that used in operation of remote control "hands" in atomic laboratories to handle hot material, and with the surgiscope very delicate operations could be performed at the cellular level.

Dr. Mansard and his wife had disappeared into the turbulent atmosphere of Jupiter just after his invention of the surgiscope, and it had been developed by Dom Blessing. Its success had built Spaceway Instruments, Incorporated, which Blessing headed.

Through all these years since Dr. Mansard's disappearance, Blessing had been searching the Jovian moons for a second, hidden laboratory of Dr. Mansard. When it was found at last, he sent Trella, his most trusted secretary, to Ganymede to bring back to him the notebooks found there.

Blessing would, of course, be happy to learn that a son of Dr. Mansard lived, and would see that he received his rightful share of the inheritance. Because of this, Trella was tempted to tell Quest the good news herself; but she decided against it. It was Blessing's privilege to do this his own way, and he might not appreciate her meddling.

At midtrip, Trella made a rueful confession to Jakdane.

"It seems I was taking unnecessary precautions when I asked you to be a chaperon," she said. "I kept waiting for Quest to do something, and when he didn't I told him I loved him."

"What did he say?"

"It's very peculiar," she said unhappily. "He said he *can't* love me. He said he wants to love me and he feels that he should, but there's something in him that refuses to permit it."

She expected Jakdane to salve her wounded feelings with a sympathetic pleasantry, but he did not. Instead, he just looked at her very thoughtfully and said no more about the matter.

He explained his attitude after Asrange ran amuck.

Asrange was the third passenger. He was a lean, saturnine individual who said little and kept to himself as much as possible. He was distantly polite in his relations with both crew and other passengers, and never showed the slightest spark of emotion ... until the day Quest squirted coffee on him.

It was one of those accidents that can occur easily in space. The passengers and the two crewmen on that particular waking shift (including Jakdane) were eating lunch on the center-deck. Quest picked up his bulb of coffee, but inadvertently pressed it before he got it to his lips. The coffee squirted all over the front of Asrange's clean white tunic.

"I'm sorry!" exclaimed Quest in distress.

The man's eyes went wide and he snarled. So quickly it seemed impossible, he had unbuckled himself from his seat and hurled himself backward from the table with an incoherent cry. He seized the first object his hand touched—it happened to be a heavy wooden cane leaning against Jakdane's bunk—propelled himself like a projectile at Quest.

Quest rose from the table in a sudden uncoiling of movement. He did not unbuckle his safety belt—he rose and it snapped like a string.

For a moment Trella thought he was going to meet Asrange's assault. But he fled in a long leap toward the companionway leading to the astrogation deck above. Landing feet-first in the middle of the table and rebounding, Asrange pursued with the stick upraised.

In his haste, Quest missed the companionway in his leap and was cornered against one of the bunks. Asrange descended on him like an avenging angel and, holding onto the bunk with one hand, rained savage blows on his head and shoulders with the heavy stick.

Quest made no effort to retaliate. He cowered under the attack, holding his hands in front of him as if to ward it off. In a moment, Jakdane and the other crewman had reached Asrange and pulled him off.

When they had Asrange in irons, Jakdane turned to Quest, who was now sitting unhappily at the table.

"Take it easy," he advised. "I'll wake the psychosurgeon and have him look you over. Just stay there."

Quest shook his head.

"Don't bother him," he said. "It's nothing but a few bruises."

"Bruises? Man, that club could have broken your skull! Or a couple of ribs, at the very least."

"I'm all right," insisted Quest; and when the skeptical Jakdane insisted on examining him carefully, he had to admit it. There was hardly a mark on him from the blows.

"If it didn't hurt you any more than that, why didn't you take that stick away from him?" demanded Jakdane. "You could have, easily."

"I couldn't," said Quest miserably, and turned his face away.

Later, alone with Trella on the control deck, Jakdane gave her some sober advice.

"If you think you're in love with Quest, forget it," he said.

"Why? Because he's a coward? I know that ought to make me despise him, but it doesn't any more."

"Not because he's a coward. Because he's an android!"

"What? Jakdane, you can't be serious!"

"I am. I say he's an android, an artificial imitation of a man. It all figures.

"Look, Trella, he said he was born on Jupiter. A human could stand the gravity of Jupiter, inside a dome or a ship, but what human could stand the rocket acceleration necessary to break free of Jupiter? Here's a man strong enough to break a spaceship safety belt just by getting up out of his chair against it, tough enough to take a beating with a heavy stick without being injured. How can you believe he's really human?"

Trella remembered the thug Kregg striking Quest in the face and then crying that he had injured his hand on the bar.

"But he said Dr. Mansard was his father," protested Trella.

"Robots and androids frequently look on their makers as their parents," said Jakdane. "Quest may not even know he's artificial. Do you know how Mansard died?"

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"The oxygen equipment failed, Quest said."

"Yes. Do you know when?"

"No. Quest never did tell me, that I remember."

"He told me: a year before Quest made his rocket flight to Ganymede! If the oxygen equipment failed, how do you think *Quest* lived in the poisonous atmosphere of Jupiter, if he's human?"

Trella was silent.

"For the protection of humans, there are two psychological traits built into every robot and android," said Jakdane gently. "The first is that they can never, under any circumstances, attack a human being, even in self defense. The second is that, while they may understand sexual desire objectively, they can never experience it themselves.

"Those characteristics fit your man Quest to a T, Trella. There is no other explanation for him: he must be an android."

Trella did not want to believe Jakdane was right, but his reasoning was unassailable. Looking upon Quest as an android, many things were explained: his great strength, his short, broad build, his immunity to injury, his refusal to defend himself against a human, his inability to return Trella's love for him.

It was not inconceivable that she should have unknowingly fallen in love with an android. Humans could love androids, with real affection, even

knowing that they were artificial. There were instances of android nursemaids who were virtually members of the families owning them.

She was glad now that she had not told Quest of her mission to Ganymede. He thought he was Dr. Mansard's son, but an android had no legal right of inheritance from his owner. She would leave it to Dom Blessing to decide what to do about Quest.

Thus she did not, as she had intended originally, speak to Quest about seeing him again after she had completed her assignment. Even if Jakdane was wrong and Quest was human—as now seemed unlikely—Quest had told her he could not love her. Her best course was to try to forget him.

Nor did Quest try to arrange with her for a later meeting.

"It has been pleasant knowing you, Trella," he said when they left the G-boat at White Sands. A faraway look came into his blue eyes, and he added: "I'm sorry things couldn't have been different, somehow."

"Let's don't be sorry for what we can't help," she said gently, taking his hand in farewell.

Trella took a fast plane from White Sands, and twenty-four hours later walked up the front steps of the familiar brownstone house on the outskirts of Washington.

Dom Blessing himself met her at the door, a stooped, graying man who peered at her over his spectacles.

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"You have the papers, eh?" he said, spying the brief case. "Good, good. Come in and we'll see what we have, eh?"

She accompanied him through the bare, windowless anteroom which had always seemed to her such a strange feature of this luxurious house, and they entered the big living room. They sat before a fire in the old-fashioned fireplace and Blessing opened the brief case with trembling hands.

"There are things here," he said, his eyes sparkling as he glanced through the notebooks. "Yes, there are things here. We shall make something of these, Miss Trella, eh?"

"I'm glad they're something you can use, Mr. Blessing," she said. "There's something else I found on my trip, that I think I should tell you about."

She told him about Quest.

"He thinks he's the son of Dr. Mansard," she finished, "but apparently he is, without knowing it, an android Dr. Mansard built on Jupiter."

"He came back to Earth with you, eh?" asked Blessing intently.

"Yes. I'm afraid it's your decision whether to let him go on living as a man or to tell him he's an android and claim ownership as Dr. Mansard's heir."

Trella planned to spend a few days resting in her employer's spacious home, and then to take a short vacation before resuming her duties as his confidential secretary. The next morning when she came down from her room, a change had been made.

Two armed men were with Dom Blessing at breakfast and accompanied him wherever he went. She discovered that two more men with guns were stationed in the bare anteroom and a guard was stationed at every entrance to the house.

"Why all the protection?" she asked Blessing.

"A wealthy man must be careful," said Blessing cheerfully. "When we don't understand all the implications of new circumstances, we must be prepared for anything, eh?"

There was only one new circumstance Trella could think of. Without actually intending to, she exclaimed:

"You aren't afraid of Quest? Why, an android can't hurt a human!"

Blessing peered at her over his spectacles.

"And what if he isn't an android, eh? And if he is—what if old Mansard didn't build in the prohibition against harming humans that's required by

law? What about that, eh?"

Trella was silent, shocked. There was something here she hadn't known about, hadn't even suspected. For some reason, Dom Blessing feared Dr. Eriklund Mansard ... or his heir ... or his mechanical servant.

She was sure that Blessing was wrong, that Quest, whether man or android, intended no harm to him. Surely, Quest would have said something of such bitterness during their long time together on Ganymede and aspace, since he did not know of Trella's connection with Blessing. But, since this was to be the atmosphere of Blessing's house, she was glad that he decided to assign her to take the Mansard papers to the New York laboratory.

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Quest came the day before she was scheduled to leave.

Trella was in the living room with Blessing, discussing the instructions she was to give to the laboratory officials in New York. The two bodyguards were with them. The other guards were at their posts.

Trella heard the doorbell ring. The heavy oaken front door was kept locked now, and the guards in the anteroom examined callers through a tiny window.

Suddenly alarm bells rang all over the house. There was a terrific crash outside the room as the front door splintered. There were shouts and the sound of a shot.

"The steel doors!" cried Blessing, turning white. "Let's get out of here."

He and his bodyguards ran through the back of the house out of the garage.

Blessing, ahead of the rest, leaped into one of the cars and started the engine.

The door from the house shattered and Quest burst through. The two guards turned and fired together.

He could be hurt by bullets. He was staggered momentarily.

Then, in a blur of motion, he sprang forward and swept the guards aside with one hand with such force that they skidded across the floor and lay in an unconscious heap against the rear of the garage. Trella had opened the door of the car, but it was wrenched from her hand as Blessing stepped on the accelerator and it leaped into the driveway with spinning wheels.

Quest was after it, like a chunky deer, running faster than Trella had ever seen a man run before.

Blessing slowed for the turn at the end of the driveway and glanced back over his shoulder. Seeing Quest almost upon him, he slammed down the accelerator and twisted the wheel hard.

The car whipped into the street, careened, and rolled over and over, bringing up against a tree on the other side in a twisted tangle of wreckage.

With a horrified gasp, Trella ran down the driveway toward the smoking heap of metal. Quest was already beside it, probing it. As she reached his side, he lifted the torn body of Dom Blessing. Blessing was dead.

"I'm lucky," said Quest soberly. "I would have murdered him."

"But why, Quest? I knew he was afraid of you, but he didn't tell me why."

"It was conditioned into me," answered Quest "I didn't know it until just now, when it ended, but my father conditioned me psychologically from my birth to the task of hunting down Dom Blessing and killing him. It was an unconscious drive in me that wouldn't release me until the task was finished.

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"You see, Blessing was my father's assistant on Ganymede. Right after my father completed development of the surgiscope, he and my mother blasted off for Io. Blessing wanted the valuable rights to the surgiscope, and he sabotaged the ship's drive so it would fall into Jupiter.

"But my father was able to control it in the heavy atmosphere of Jupiter, and landed it successfully. I was born there, and he conditioned me to

come to Earth and track down Blessing. I know now that it was part of the conditioning that I was unable to fight any other man until my task was finished: it might have gotten me in trouble and diverted me from that purpose."

More gently than Trella would have believed possible for his Jupiter-strong muscles, Quest took her in his arms.

"Now I can say I love you," he said. "That was part of the conditioning too: I couldn't love any woman until my job was done."

Trella disengaged herself.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Don't you know this, too, now: that you're not a man, but an android?"

He looked at her in astonishment, stunned by her words.

"What in space makes you think that?" he demanded.

"Why, Quest, it's obvious," she cried, tears in her eyes. "Everything about you ... your build, suited for Jupiter's gravity ... your strength ... the fact that you were able to live in Jupiter's atmosphere after the oxygen equipment failed. I know you think Dr. Mansard was your father, but androids often believe that."

He grinned at her.

"I'm no android," he said confidently. "Do you forget my father was inventor of the surgiscope? He knew I'd have to grow up on Jupiter, and he operated on the genes before I was born. He altered my inherited characteristics to adapt me to the climate of Jupiter ... even to being able to breathe a chlorine atmosphere as well as an oxygen atmosphere."

Trella looked at him. He was not badly hurt, any more than an elephant would have been, but his tunic was stained with red blood where the bullets had struck him. Normal android blood was green.

"How can you be sure?" she asked doubtfully.

"Androids are made," he answered with a laugh. "They don't grow up. And I remember my boyhood on Jupiter very well."

He took her in his arms again, and this time she did not resist. His lips were very human.

THE END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE JUPITER
WEAPON ***

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