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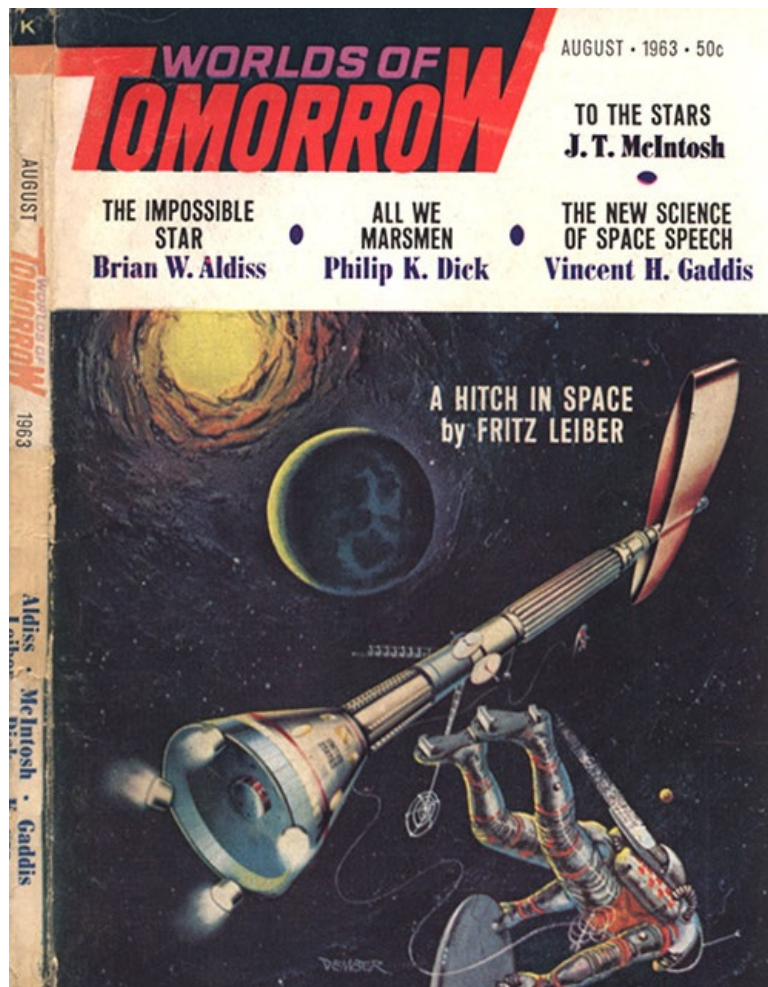
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A HITCH IN SPACE ***



A HITCH IN SPACE

BY FRITZ LEIBER

ILLUSTRATED BY GRAY

My Space-partner was a good reliable sidekick—but *his* partner was something else!

Once when I was doing a hitch with the Shaulan Space Guard out Scorpio way, my partner Jeff Bogart developed just about the most harmless psychosis you could imagine: he got himself an imaginary companion.

And the imaginary companion turned out to be me.

Well, I'm a pretty nice guy and so having two of me in the ship didn't seem a particularly bad idea. At first. In fact there'd be advantages of it, I thought. For instance, Jeff liked to talk a weary lot ... and the imaginary Joe Hansen could spell me listening to him, while I projected a book or just harkened to the wheels going around in my own head against the faint patter of starlight on the hull.

I met Jeff first at a space-rodeo, oddly enough, but now the two of us were out on a servicing check of the orbital beacons and relays and rescue depots of the five planets of the Shaulan system. A completely routine job, its only drawback that it was lengthy. Our ship was an ionic jeep that looked like a fancy fountain pen, but was very roomy for three men—one of them imaginary.

I caught on to Jeff's little mania by overhearing him talking to me. I'd be coming back from the head or stores or linear accelerator or my bunk, and I'd hear him yakking at me. It embarrassed me the first time, how to go back into the cabin when the other me was there. But I just swam in, and without any transition-strain at all that I could observe Jeff looked around at me, smiling sort of glaze-eyed, and said warmly, "Joe. My buddy Joe. Am I glad they paired us."

If Jeff had a major fault, as opposed to a species of nuttiness, it was that he was strictly a speak-only-good, positive-thinking guy who always deferred to me. Even idolized me, if you can imagine that. He'd give me such fulsome praise I'd be irked ten times an orbit.

Another thing that helped me catch on was that he always called the other me Joseph.

At first I thought the whole thing might be a gag, or maybe a deliberate way of letting off steam against me without violating his always-a-sweet-guy code—like happy husbands cursing in the bathroom—but then came the scrambled eggs.

I'd slept late and when I squinted into the cabin there was Jeff hovering over a plate of yellow fluff and shaking his finger at my empty seat and saying, "Dammit, Joseph, eat your scrambled eggs, I cooked 'em 'specially for you," and when he crawfished out toward the galley a couple seconds later he was saying, "Now you start on those eggs, Joseph, before I get back."

I thought for a bit and then I slid into my place and polished them off.

When he floated in with the coffee he gave me another of those glaze-eyed God-fearing looks—but just a mite disappointed, I thought—and said, "Dammit, Joe, you're perfect! You always clean your plate."

Apparently when I was there, Joseph just didn't exist for Jeff. And vice versa. It was sort of eerie, especially with the hum of space in my ears like a seashell and nobody else for five million miles.

Beginning with the scrambled eggs, I discovered that Jeff didn't exactly idolize Joseph—or even take with him the attitude of "My buddy can do no wrong," like he did with me. I overheard him criticizing Joseph. Reasonably at first; then I heard him chewing him out—next bullying him.

It made me wistful, that last, thinking how good it would feel to be full-bloodedly cursed to my face once in a while instead of all the sweetness and light. And right there I got the idea for some amateur therapy, Shaula-Deva help me.

I waited for a moment when we were both relaxed and then I said, "Jeff, the trouble with you is you're too nice. You ought to criticize things more. For a starter, criticize me. Tell me my faults. Go ahead."

He flushed a little and said, "Dammit, Joe, how can I? You're perfect!"

"No man is perfect, Jeff," I told him solemnly, feeling pretty foolish.

"But you're my buddy I always can trust," he protested, squirming a bit. "I wish you wouldn't talk this way."

"Jeff, you can't trust anybody too far," I said. "Even good guys can do bad things. When I was a boy there was a kid named Harry I practically worshipped. We lived on a pioneer world of Fomalhaut that had good snow, and we'd hitch rides with our sleds off little airscrew planes taking off. We'd each have a long white line on his sled and loop it beforehand around the plane's tail-gear and back to the sled. Then we'd hide. As soon as the pilot got aboard we'd jump on our sleds and each grab the free end of his line and have one comet of a ride, until the plane took off. Then we'd quick let go.

"Well, one frosty morning I let go and nothing happened, except I started to rise. Harry had tied the free end of my line tight to my sled.

"I could have just rolled off, I suppose, but I didn't want to lose my sled or my line either. Luckily I had a sheath knife handy and I used it. I even made a whizeroo of a landing. But ever afterwards my feelings toward Harry—"

"Stop it, please, Joe!" Jeff interrupted, very red in the face and shaking a little. "That boy Harry was utterly evil. And I don't want to hear any more about this, or anything like it, ever again. Understand?"

I told him sure I did. Heck, I could see I'd gone the wrong way about it. I even begged his pardon.

After that I just sweated it out. But I found I couldn't spend much time on books or my thoughts, I'd keep listening for what Jeff was saying to Joseph. And sometimes when he'd pause for Joseph's reply I'd catch myself waiting for the imaginary me to make one. So I took to staying in the same cabin as Jeff as much as I could.

That seemed to make him uncomfortable after a while, though he pretended to glory in it. He'd ask me questions like, "Tell me about life, Joe. So I'll know how to handle myself if we're ever parted."

But the weariest things come to an end, even duty orbits around Shaula. And so the time came when we were servicing our last beacon—outside the planet Shaula-by, it was. Next step would be a fast interplanetary orbit for Base at Shaula-near.

I was out working—on a safety line of course, but suit-jetting around more than I needed to, just for the pure joy of it, so that my suit tank was almost dry. I'd switched my suit radio off for a bit, because, working in space, Jeff had taken to just gabbling to me nervously all the time—maybe because he figured there couldn't be room for Joseph with him in his suit.



I finished up and paused for a last look at the ship. She was sweetly slim from her conical living quarters to the taper-tail of her ionic jet, but she had more junk on her than an amateur asteroid prospector hangs on his suit the first time out. Every duty orbit, fifty scientists come with permission from the Commandant to hang some automatic research gadget on the hull. The craziest one this time was a huge flattened band of gold-plated aluminum, little more than foil-thick, attached crosswise just in front of the tail and sticking out twenty feet on each side. I don't know what it was there for—maybe to measure the effects of space on a Moebius strip—but it looked like a wedding ring that had been stepped on. So Jeff and I called it Trompled Love.

But in spite of the junk, the ship looked mighty sweet against the saffron steppes and baby-blue seas of Shaula-by with Shaula herself, old Lambda Scorpii, flaming warm and wildly beyond, and with "United States" standing out big as life on the ship's living quarters. United States of Shaula, of course.

I was almost dreaming out there, thinking how it hadn't been such a terrible duty after all, when I saw the ship begin to slide past Shaula.

Poking out of her tail, ghostlier than the flame over a cafe royale, was the evil blue glow of her jet. In an instant I'd guessed exactly what had happened and was beating myself on the head for not having anticipated it. Joseph had swum into the cabin right after Jeff. And Jeff had yelled at him. "It's about time, you lazy lunkhead! Everything secure? Okay, I'm switching on the beam!" And I'd probably brought the whole thing about by telling him that damfool sled story—and then sticking to him so close he just had to get rid of me, so as to be with Joseph.

Meanwhile the ship was gathering speed in her sneaky way and the wavy safety line between me

and the airlock was starting to straighten.

As you know, an ionic jet's only good space-to-space. It's not for heavy-G work; ours could deliver only one-half G at max and was doing less than one-quarter now. Which meant the ship was starting off slower than most ground cars.

But the beam would fire for hours, building up to a terminal velocity of fifteen miles a second and carrying the ship far, far away from lonely Joe Hansen.

Except that we were tied together, of course.

I was very grateful then for the weeks I'd practiced space-roping, though I'd never won any prizes with it, because without thinking I started to whip my line very carefully. And on the third try, just as it was getting pretty straight, I managed to settle it in a notch in one outside end of Trompled Love. After that I took up strain on the line as gradually as I could, letting it friction through my gloves for as long as I could before putting all my mass on it—because although one-quarter G isn't much, it piles up in a few seconds to quite a jerk. I spread that jerk into several little ones.

Well, the last jerk came and the line didn't part and Trompled Love didn't crumple much, though the Shaula-light showed me several very nasty-looking wrinkles in it. And there I was trailing along after the ship, though out to one side, and feeling about as much strain on the line as if I were hanging from a cliff on the moon, and knowing I was going about five feet a second faster every second.

My idea wanting to be out to the side (and bless my impulses for realizing it was the one important thing!) was to keep my line and myself out of the beam. An ionic jet doesn't look hot from the side. But from straight on it's a lot brighter than an arc light—it's almost as tight as a laser beam—and I didn't want to think about what it would do to me, even trailing as I was a hundred yards aft.

Though of course long before it had ruined me, it would have disintegrated my line.

My being out to the side was putting the ship off balance on its jet and presumably throwing its course toward base and Shaula-near little by little into error. But that was the least of my worries, believe me.

I thought for a bit and remembered I could talk to Jeff over my suit radio. I decided to try it, not without misgivings.

I tongued it on and said, "Jeff. Oh, Jeff. I'm out here. You forgot me."

I was going to say some more, but just then he broke in, angry and so loud it made my helmet ring, with, "Joseph! Did you hear anything then?" A pause, then, "Well, clean the wax out of your ears, stupid, because I did! I think we got an enemy out there!"

Another and longer pause, while my blood curdled a bit thicker, then, "Well, okay, Joseph, I'll go along with you this time. But if I hear the enemy once more, I'm going to suit up and take a rifle and sit in the airlock door until I've potted him."

I tongued the radio off quick, fearful I'd sneeze or something. I had only one faint consolation: Joseph seemed to be a bit on my side, or maybe he was just lazy.

I thought some more, a mite frantic-like now, and after a while I said to myself, *Been going five minutes now, so I'm doing about a quarter of a mile a second—that's fifteen miles a minute, wow!—but out here velocities are purely relative. My suit does a little better than a quarter G full on. Okay. I'll jet to the ship.*

No sooner said than acted on—I was beginning to rely too much on impulse now. The suit jet killed my false weight at once and I was off, mighty careful to aim myself along my line or a little outside it, so as not to wander over into the beam.

Pretty soon the tail and Trompled Love were getting noticeably bigger.

Then a lot bigger.

Then my suit fuel ran out.

I'd built up enough velocity so that I was still gaining on the ship for a few seconds. In fact, I almost made it. My gauntlet was about to close on Trompled Love when the ship started slowly to pull away. Oh, it was frustrating!

I remembered then what I should have a lot earlier, and grabbed for the ship-end of my line so as not to lose the distance I'd gained—and in my haste I knocked it away from me. The only good thing was that I didn't knock it out of the notch.

Now I was losing space to the ship faster and faster. Yet all I could do was reel in the me-end of the line as fast as I could. Suddenly the whole line straightened and gave me a bigger jerk than I'd intended. I could see Trompled Love crumple a little. And I was swinging just a bit, like a pendulum.

I used a glove-friction to spread the rest of the jerk, but still I was at the end of my line and Trompled Love had crumpled a bit more before I was coasting along with the ship again.

My side of Trompled Love was bent back maybe twenty degrees. The eye of the beam shone at me from the tail like a pale blue moon. For quite a while it brightened and dimmed as I tick-tock swung.

Meanwhile I was beating my skull for not having thought earlier of the obvious slow-but-safe way of doing it, instead of that lunatic suit-jetting. I once heard a psychologist say we're mental slaves to power-machinery and I guess he had something.

Clearly all I had to do was climb hand-over-hand up the line to the ship. At moon gravity that would be easy. If I should get tired I only had to clamp on and rest.

So I waited for my emotions to settle a bit, and then I reached along the line and gave a smooth, medium-strength heave.

Maybe there is something to ESP—at least in a devilish sort of way—because I picked the exact moment when Jeff decided to feed the beam more juice.

There was a *big* jerk and I saw Trompled Love crumple a lot, so that it was pointing more than forty-five degrees aft.

Now there was a steady pull on the line like I was hanging from a cliff on Mars. And the eye of the beam was a blue moon not so pale—in fact more like a sizzling blue sun seen through a light fog.

After that I just didn't have the heart to try the climb again. Once I started to draw myself up, very cautious, but on the first handhold I seemed to feel along the line Trompled Love crumpling some more and I quit for good.

I figured that at this boost Jeff would be up to proper speed for Shaula-near in less than two hours. Well, I had suit-oxy and refrigeration for longer than that.

Of course if Jeff decided not to cut the beam on schedule, maybe with the idea of eloping with Joseph to the next solar system—well, I'd discover then whether suit-oxy running out would stimulate me to try the climb again alongside the beam.

(Or I could wait until he got her up near the speed of light, when by the General Theory of Relativity the line ought to be shortened enough so that I could hop aboard if I were sudden enough about it.... *No, Joe Hansen, you quit that, I told myself, you don't want to die with the gears in your head all stripped.*)

Thinking about the beam got me wondering exactly how close I was to it. I unshipped my suit-antenna and pulled it out to full length—about eight feet—and fished around with it in the direction of the beam.

Nothing seemed to happen to it. It didn't glow or anything; but I suddenly got a little electric shock, and when I drew it back I could see three inches of the tip were gone and the next couple inches were pitted. So much for curiosity.

Next I reattached the antenna to my suit—which turned out to be a lot more troublesome job than unshipping it—and tongued on the radio with the idea of listening in on Jeff.

Right away I heard him say, "Wake up, Joseph! I'm going to tell you your faults again. I got a new way of cataloguing them—chronologically. Begin with childhood. You hitched sled-rides on airplanes. That was bad, Joseph, that was against the law. If the man had caught you doing it, if he'd seen you whizzing along there back of him, he'd have had every right to shoot you down in cold blood. Life is hard, Joseph, life is merciless...."

Right then I felt a tickle in my throat.

I tried quick to shut off the radio, but it is remarkably difficult to tongue anything when you have a cough coming. It came out finally in a series of squeaky glubs.

"Snap to, Joseph, and listen hard," I heard Jeff say. "It's started again. Animal noises this time. You know if they make spacesuits for black panthers, Joseph?"

I tongued off the radio quick, before the follow-up cough came.

I didn't have anything left to do now but think. So I thought about Jeff—how there seemed to be one Jeff who hated my guts and another Jeff who idolized me and another Jeff sneaking around in a jungle of sabertooth tigers and ... heck, there was probably a good twenty Jeffs sitting around inside his skull, some in light, some in darkness, but all of them watching each other and arguing together all the time. It was an odd way to think of a personality—a sort of perpetual *Kaffeeklatsch*—but it had its points. Maybe some of the little guys weren't Jeffs at all, but his father and mother and a caveman ancestor or two and maybe some great-great-grandchild butting in now and then from the future....

Well, I saw that speculation was getting out of hand so, taking a tip from Jeff, I began to count my own sins.

It took quite a while. Some of them were pretty interesting reading, almost enough to take my mind off my predicament, but I tired of it finally.

Then I began to count the stars.

It was really the longest two hours plus I ever spent, except maybe the time my first big girl disappeared. But I don't know. The experiences are hard to compare.

I was about halfway through the stars when I went weightless. For an awful instant I thought the line had parted at last, but then I looked toward the ship and saw the bright little moon was gone.

Right away I gave a couple of tugs on the line and began to close slowly with the tail. No trouble at all—actually my only difficulty was resisting the temptation to build up more momentum, which would have resulted in a crash landing.

I softened-in on Trompled Love okay, except there was a big spark. The beam must have charged me good. Then I worked my way to the true hull. After that there were handholds.

Finally I got to a porthole in the living quarters, and I looked in, and there was Jeff jawing away at my empty seat. I put my helmet against the hull and very faintly I heard him say, "Joseph, I'm still worried about the enemy. I keep thinking I hear him or it. I'm going to make us some coffee, so we'll stay real alert. You break out the guns."

I don't suppose anyone ever moved quite so quietly *and* so quickly in a spacesuit as I did then. I got in the airlock, I got her up to pressure, I got unsuited—and all in less than five minutes, I'm sure. Maybe less than four.

I swam to the cabin. It was empty. I slid into my seat just as Jeff floated in with the coffee.

He went real pale when he spotted me. I saw there might be some trouble this time with the Joseph-Joe transition. But I knew the only way to play it was real cool. I nested there in my seat as if I hadn't a worry or urge in the world—though my nerves and throat were just screaming for a squirt of that coffee.

"Joe!" he squeaked at last. "Migod, you gave me an awful scare. I thought you'd done a bunk, I thought, you'd spaced yourself, I kept picturing you outside the ship."

"Why no, Jeff," I answered quietly. "One way or another, I've been in this seat ever since take-off."

His brow wrinkled as he thought about that.

I looked at the board and noticed that our terminal trip-velocity read fifteen miles a second. My, my.

Finally Jeff said, "That's right, you have." And then, just a shade unhappily, "I might have known. You always tell the truth, Joe—you're perfect."

END

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