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MIRAGE FOR PLANET X

By STANLEY MULLEN

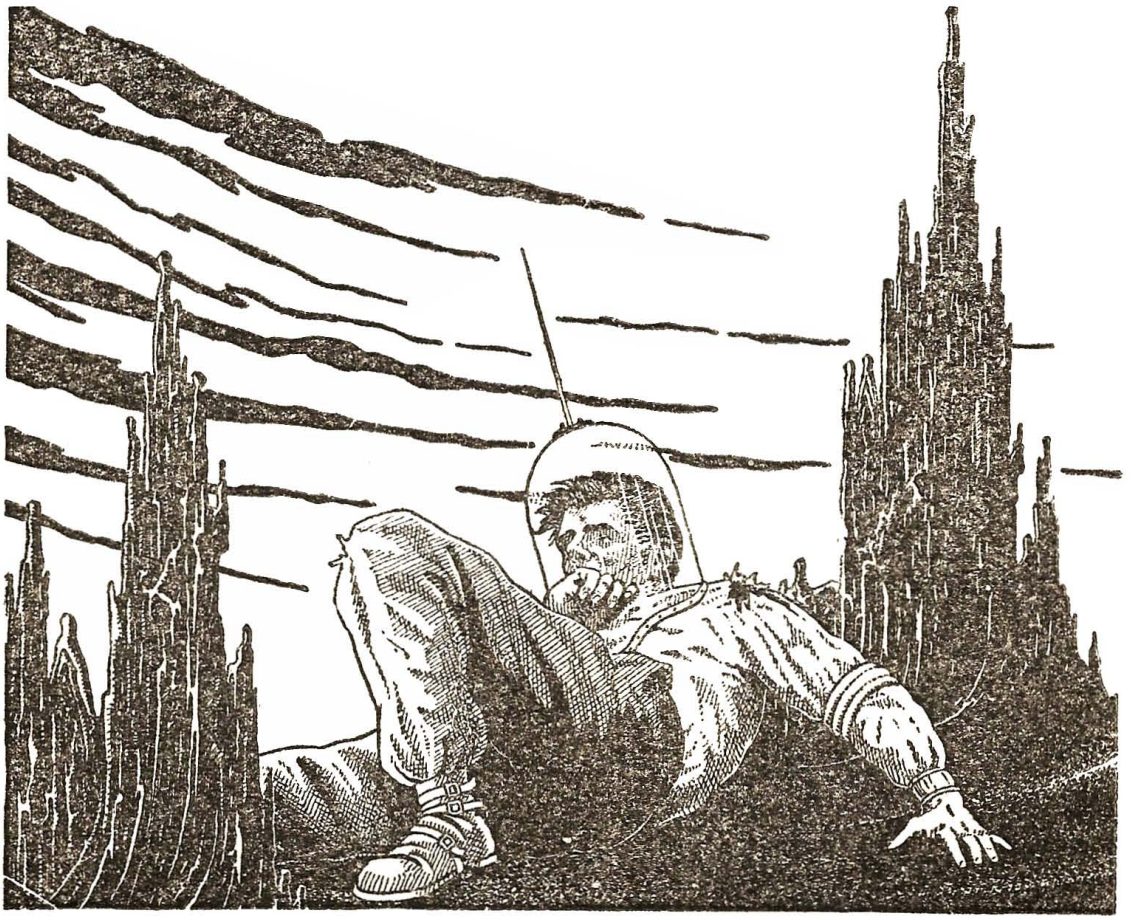
The prize was sealed, its contents unknown. Yet scavengers from a dozen barbaric Moons; adventurers from nameless, semi-explored asteroids, arrived for the deathless auction. . . . To bid on Roper's notorious loot.

THEY were bringing in the prisoners who had escaped from Phobos. Sand skimmer ambulances had raced to the spaceport outside the terraced Martian city and waited. Dust devils danced on the wide, wind-whipped Martian plains. Grannar of the Police and his silent companion examined each body as it was lowered from the rescue ship.

Death anywhere is an ugly business. On Mars, you get used to bodies that never rot. Deep-freeze temperatures hold down decay bacteria, and the dry, cold air quickly desiccates the tissue. Bodies turn into mummies that look and weigh like so much shredded wheat. But these corpses were worse—they were meaningless parodies that might never have been men. In primal disgust, Torry studied each one in turn, then shuddered and shook his head.

Grannar was tough minded, or stronger stomached. Police routines had taught him not to shudder.

"You can get used to this," he observed, enjoying Torry's revulsion. "Since you'd known Roper, we thought you could help



us identify him. Thanks for coming along."

"Had I a choice?" asked Torry bitterly.

The policeman's laugh was brutal, explosive. "There is always a choice. You can do as you're told or be dragged in screaming."

Torry grimaced. "Much more of this and I'll be dragged out screaming."

The prisoner-escapees, what was left of them, were an unpleasant sight. Explosive decompression in airless space does curious things to men's bodies. Blood boils in the veins and flesh bursts from internal pressures. Also, there are heat-cold curiosities, with half a body burnt raw on the sunward side, and the rest frozen iron-hard with a lacy overlay of snowflake patterns in red.

Holden was still alive, by a miracle. Forward compartments had held together when the makeshift spacer blew its flimsy self inside out. He was alive but not talking. They brought the bulging mass of pulped, purple flesh back to Mars and dumped it in a basket. There was no face, no eyes, no recognizable hands or feet. For the time that remained to him, Holden would be less than a functioning animal, fed by tube, cared for by people he could not see or hear, living a precarious existence on the raw, black fringe of life. Holden was through talking. And for any practical purpose, through living.

"Too bad," said Grannar, looking into the basket. "He could have told us about a lot of things . . . if he'd wanted to."

"Holden was a nice guy before he knew Bart Roper," Torry snapped angrily.

"You sound pretty bitter about Roper."

"I should be. I know him better than you do. I am bitter about Roper."

"Because of Holden?" pressed Grannar.

"Not . . . Holden. But it might as easily have been me in that basket. Six years ago I was Roper's partner. I got out quickly when I found out some of his business methods. And I had very little he could steal from me then. A lot of people have a variety of good reasons to hate Roper. Just say that I'm one of them."

Grannar whistled a Martian tune. The sound was shrill and eery in the thin air.

"You may as well ride back to the city in the police car with me," he suggested. "We can talk—"

"Talk!" blurted Torry. He swore savagely. "All this ugly business for nothing. You haven't found Roper yet. You don't even know if he made good his escape from your prison moon. In short, you don't know anything."

"True, up to a point," agreed the policeman quietly. "There are always many things I don't know. So I concentrate on the few things I do know. For example, you're very much interested in finding Roper. I'm wondering why. You can tell me about that on our way back to the city. About Roper himself, I know a few minor facts. Nobody has ever escaped from Phobos, the prison moon, but Roper may have managed it. With outside help, he got materials and fittings smuggled in to construct a scratch spacer. It blew up, as we know, but Roper may have expected that. In a good spacesuit, he could have survived. Since we still haven't found him, dead or alive, he's probably circling somewhere in a private orbit, waiting to be picked up."

"It could be a long wait. One man is hard to find in all that space."

"Not necessarily. A code transmitter powered by transuranic alloys would keep sending indefinitely. And Roper could have agreed upon being picked up at some point of a fixed orbit by his outside friends. We'll find him, I think. In the meantime, we have you . . . and some questions. Wait in my car. I'll be with you as soon as I thumbprint some papers."

TORRY stumbled across the barren sand wastes of the spaceport, pitted or glazed here and there by old take-off blasts. Without trouble he located the half track vehicle bearing police insignia. He got in and settled himself sourly to await Grannar's probing third degree. He meditated grimly on Roper, himself, and his reasons for coming to Mars. . . .

Had it only been last night he arrived? It seemed eternities ago. Coming in from Earth by short orbit express, green with deceleration sickness, he had wondered why he was in such a rush. After four years a cold trail would not get any colder. It had not, of course. It was hot when he arrived and had been getting hotter by the minute. Only the fact of being aboard the express at the

time of the prison break had cleared him in Grannar's eyes of being involved physically. And even that alibi did not erase suspicion from Grannar's suspicious nature.

Grannar was shrewd and deadly, a born hunter of men. Since the Martians never trust each other, most of the policing is done by hirelings from other planets. Grannar was an Earthman originally. But he was a long way from home, and twenty years on Mars had made him more Martian than the natives. He was hard, smart, dangerous, and a tough man to fool.

Torry had learned that at once last night.

But Grannar's return to the police car cut short his reverie. Torry watched the official cross the spaceport toward him, impressed by the lithe grace and sureness of movement over treacherous sand. Mars does something to a man who stays there. The body dries up and the soul withers, but if he survives, a man grows into something lean and leathery with pantherish strength and easy, poised motions.

Grannar vaulted to the driver's seat and slammed on power. With a skirl of steering runners, the half track took off toward the bubble city of New Chicago, named without tenderness by some long forgotten exile. Grannar drove with careless violence, but the half track skimmer shot among the dunes and low, lichen-clad hills without incident.

There is no truth to the charge that it takes as long to get from the spaceport to New Chicago as it does to reach Mars from Earth. But the distance is impressive and the going rough. Grannar talked as he drove, seeming casual, but his questioning had the same icy skill and unerring judgment.

"We'll start at the beginning," he said.

"There is no beginning," Torry jerked out angrily. "I got in last night. Fresh from the spaceport and customs, I put a coin in the public visiphone and asked Central Information about Roper. Central had no information and returned my coin. It was a police trap. Your men picked me up, searched me with a Geiger counter and found the coin. You keep faintly radioactive coins in the visiphone machines for Central to return when someone is curious about police business. It came out even. You found out I was curious about Roper, and I found out he is police business, and his case is current. Do you think I'd be fool enough to call such attention to myself if I knew about Roper's prison break?"

"You might be. And it might be smart. That way you'd find out what the police knew and what they were doing. And it could be an alibi in case the breakout was delayed. We'll skip those possibilities for now. You were mulish last night about certain questions. I'm still not clear about why you are so desperate to find Roper. Why?"

Torry smiled coldly. "That's easy. I have to find him for a legal release. Preferably dead, which will make things easier for everybody. But if he's alive, I want his signature and prints on some papers."

"Why? What papers?"

Torry hesitated. "It's a touchy subject. A personal matter. Nothing to do with the police."

"I'll be the judge of that. Keep talking."

"Have you ever spent five years on an asteroid all by yourself?"

Grannar grunted. "Fortunately not. Twenty years on Mars is bad enough for me. Have you?"

Torry's face twisted in bitterness. "I have. I cracked up my one-man spacecan while prospecting in the asteroids. I was there five years until a survey ship happened by. There were minerals, low grade transuranics, but good enough to work when you had nothing else to do. I worked out the whole asteroid and had a good payload for the survey ship when it brought me back. Not a big fortune, but a stake that looked pretty good to me. I'm not rich now, but I can get along without skipping meals."

"What's the connection with Roper?"

"None in that part of it. I went prospecting after I'd dissolved my partnership with Roper. Times were bad, and I couldn't tie up with a decent job. There was a girl—"

"There usually is. Who was she?"

"Rose Mead, then. She promised to wait for me. She didn't. She's Roper's wife now. Not that I blame her too much. A year can be a long time, and five years is longer when you're a castaway on a small asteroid. Nothing to look at but a skyful of stars. Nothing to breathe but hydroponic-cycle air. No food but your homemade synthetics and the green stuff you grow in your chemi-

cal vats. You work and eat and sleep, and any idea can become an obsession. Sometimes it's one woman, sometimes an imaginary harem. I had a 3-d picture of Rose. It helped to hold me together, or maybe it just channeled an idea that was bound to go haywire."

"You're beginning to make sense," commented Grannar. "So you have an obsession about Roper's wife?"

"I call it that. But I figure that all my money is not worth much if it won't buy just one thing I've dreamed about for five long years. There's a technicality about divorcing a man who's away from Earth, in space. Rose is funny about it. But she's agreed that her marriage was a mistake. She'll marry me if I can prove Roper is dead, or can get a release from him."

"Is the girl worth all this trouble?"

TORRY grinned cynically. "Probably not. But Rose is a good, sound, practical minded girl. Maybe my money looks good to her. Roper left her four years ago with hardly any resources. For myself, after five years of dream stuff, a solid human girl like Rose looks pretty good. Dream stuff looks fragile, but it's mighty tough eating for a daily diet."

"So you want to find Roper. Preferably dead, you say. Does that include pushing him off a cliff if you find him?"

Torry snorted. "It could. That depends on Roper."

The policeman echoed the snort. "Roper is dangerous. You may have forgotten how tricky and ruthless he can be. Sounds to me like hunting a tiger with a butterfly net."

Torry smiled viciously. "Even that can be done . . . if the net is big enough and strong enough. I'm counting on a curious twist in Roper's mind. I'm a challenge to him—the one man so far he failed to swindle or corrupt. He pulled a fast one about Rose, but he knows I wasn't there to fight back. It galls him. And if he knows I'm here, alive, and looking for him, maybe he'll find me and try to wipe out the one flaw in his record."

Grannar shot a glance of grudging admiration, but shook his head. "At the moment, I wouldn't count on it. He'll be busy and we'll see to it that he is. But if you want to go looking for him, maybe I can help you."

"Do you know where he is?"

"No, but I can give you some hints where to look."

"Why?" Torry was baffled.

"Two reasons. Maybe more, but two will do. I'm a cop, so I hate men like Roper. If he's on Mars I'll get him sooner or later because I'm a good cop. And it's my job. I hate crooks, so I'll kill him or catch him and send him to Phobos for keeps. The second reason is that I hate Mars. It's a tough world—what government there is is corrupt and vicious. Offend the wrong people or stir things up, and you're out without your pension. You can even get hurt. I want out while I'm still ahead, with enough money to go back to Earth and live decently. And so far I haven't that kind of money."

"I don't see the connection," protested Torry.

Grannar's bushy eyebrows crawled up and down like caterpillars.

"There's big money in this Roper business. There has to be for anyone to take the risk of arranging a breakout from Phobos that costs plenty."

"Roper must have something pretty good this time to attract help like that. What is it?"

Grannar shrugged. "I don't know. My guess is transuranics—the heavy metals beyond uranium in the atomic table; the stuff that powers planets. Without it our whole economy breaks down, and we can't even afford to make air for places like Mars. But you've mined it yourself. You know how rare and valuable it is."

"I know," said Torry. "You think Roper has a new source?"

"Maybe that, and maybe he's discovered or stolen a cheaper way to process or transport it."

"It figures," admitted Torry. "Roper was always interested in transuranics, and always looking for a squeeze play like that. He'd be able to make his own terms, wouldn't he? Including squaring the charges against him?"

"Just about any terms he dictated," grated the detective.

"Why tell me this?"

Grannar's eyes narrowed. "You want

Roper for your own good reasons. I want him for mine. My hands are tied but yours are not. If you want him, go after him. I'll help, short of risking my job. I'm offering to make a deal with you. It occurs to me that a couple of smart men could make a real killing by knowing the right time to buy a few shares of stock in transuranics. A man like me might even make enough to retire to Earth, comfortably."

"You're beginning to make sense," said Torry. "What makes you so sure I'll cut you in for a slice?"

Grannar laughed harshly. "My nuisance value, for one thing. My usefulness for another. I'm an honest cop. But there's nothing in the rule book that says I can't pick up valuable information on the side while I'm doing my job. And nothing that says I can't put pressure on you to help me do it. Besides, why should you balk at doing me a favor when you're doing yourself one at the same time?"

"I'm still listening."

"New to Mars, aren't you?"

"New enough. I've been here before, but a long time ago and not for long then. Why?"

"Do you know anything about the local set-up, the governments?"

"Not much. It's a kind of anarchy, I think. The big companies and even the labor racketeers have private armies like the old goon squads. Legal government is just a front for feudal gangs, with the police sitting politely on the lid. Lobbies and pressure groups are the real bosses. Is that right?"

GRANNAR whistled his aimless Martian tune. "You said it. I didn't. Not out loud. I never even think it in a room that might have microphones or scanners. Mars is interesting, beautiful, with shreds and tatters of an old, picturesque culture clinging to ivy-patterns to the new, modern, cosmopolitan, industrial set-up. It says that in the books and travel ads. Out here in the clean and lifeless air of a worn-out planet I can have the precarious luxury of hating it. I want out, and you're going to help me get out."

"Why stay anyhow?"

"Because I'm a cop and it's the only job I know. And bad as it is, it's better than nothing. You've heard the yarn of the brash young rookie in Earth's Sahara City, the guy famous for arresting the police commissioner's daughter. I'm that cop. I hung a ticket on her for traffic violation. It turned out she was drunk and speeding away from an accident that killed somebody. The mess was too ugly to hush up, so she went to prison and I went to the sticks for keeps. I resigned and came here. So I learned to keep my mouth shut, do as I was told, and never to move an inch out of line with the people who count."

"You're breaking my heart," Torry said bitterly. "Go on."

"Roper's not alone in this. Somebody with money and political influence arranged that escape, probably picked him up off the wreck. Before he went to Phobos he was mixed up with Trans-Uranic Miners Union, and also with a Martian pressure group headed by old Sen Bas, the importer. He may still be. I want no trouble with either. With you it doesn't matter. Maybe you'll dig up a lot of interesting facts before you get yourself killed."

"Get to the point."

"Spacefreight. Two large boxes consigned to Roper and Holden, his partner. Still unopened, held in the unclaimed spacefreight warehouse. Charges are high and Roper was broke. He tried to get money from Trans-U and the Martians, but neither was buying a pig in a poke. Not then. Maybe they are now. He must have convinced his backers, somehow. But they can't get the space crates either unless I say so. Roper and his pal tried robbery to raise money and landed on Phobos. I put the crates under police seal."

"Why weren't they condemned and opened?"

"Too much red tape and money. The transport company can sell the stuff legally for charges, but only at public auction, unopened, and bids start at charges plus storage. Are you interested?"

Torry frowned. "My funds are not unlimited. . . ."

"That's a chance we'll both have to take. I'm taking a chance on you anyhow, but don't try any smart tricks. I always cover bets. The boxes will be officially released for

tomorrow's auction. All I ask is a look inside at Roper's gimmick, whatever it is, so I'll know whether to buy transuranics or not. If you buy the boxes the contents are yours. Fair enough?"

Torry grunted. "If they sell low enough you'll get your look after I've had mine."

"See that I do," warned Grannar. "And a word of advice. You can't import weapons to Mars, but there's no law says you can't buy one here and sleep with it. Shall I drop you at your hotel?"

The half track was nearing the domed city. A gigantic half bubble of polarized plastic rose from the plain to enclose both the old Martian town and the bustling, strident metropolis of New Chicago. From the desert the dome was nearly invisible, but the architectural jumbles looked like a forest of lighted Christmas trees appearing by magic in the swift dusk of the red planet.

Torry grinned. "You're forgetting I spent my first night in jail."

Grannar scoffed, "Routine, one in jail, one in a hotel, the next in the morgue. . . ."

II

AN AUCTION of unclaimed, refused or damaged spacefreight held more surprises and excitements than a Martian wedding. All shipments were sold "as is, unopened," which offered endless possibilities to a daring purchaser.

Anything could pop out of a sealed space crate when the container was broken into, and sometimes it did, literally. One unlucky bidder got seven full grown grull cats, shipped from Venus in suspended animation. His purchase caused seven minor riots until company guards with gas guns could subdue the savage killers. Loot from a dozen inhabited worlds and a hundred half explored moons and asteroids littered the floor or spilled from damaged cases.

Bids ran high and two dozen small fortunes changed hands as Lots 1 to 24 went up at auction and were knocked down. Any bid on unclaimed freight was a gamble, the one form not taxed to death by a greedy government. And the inhabitants of New Chicago were gamblers, or they would not have been there. The crowd was mixed and polyglot; human and half-human species rubbed elbows and tempers to a fine frenzy.

"Lot 25," sang the auctioneer. "Who'll open?"

To avoid attracting attention, Torry had bid half-heartedly on several previous items, breathing a sigh of relief when bids pyramided and the lots sold to someone else.

This time, he merely sparked off the bidding, only to have a Martian importer jump down his throat with an offer of twice the amount. Torry dropped out as the bidding climbed in dizzy spirals, and the shipment went to the impatient Martian for the price of a small spaceline. Laughter rippled over the auction lofts as the boxes were opened and found to contain forty small air conditioners of a type useless on Mars.

Lot 26 sold badly after that disappointment. It proved to be a treasure of rare luminous birds from Venus, and collectors immediately offered the fortunate purchaser triple his money for the lot.

"Lot 27," roared the auctioneer before excitement could die down. "Two large boxes to be sold separately. No information on these . . . except that they were held overtime in storage and have just been released from police seal. The space crates are undamaged. Who'll open?"

Torry felt like a small child back on Earth, clutching moist bronze pennies in his hot, grimy fist as he ran to the corner candy store. Nerves and muscles contracted in his throat. He opened his mouth but no sound came out.

"Fifty credits," shouted the Martian who had bought Lot 25. "I want to recoup my losses." He stared belligerently at Torry.

Somebody else doubled the bid.

Torry found a shadow of his voice and redoubled. Grinning evilly, the Martian raised again, but not before he shot a wary glance across the room. Torry met the challenge, then following the direction of the Martian's glance, he spotted a Martian girl standing near the doorway. She was so swathed in blue Venusian spidersilk as to be practically invisible, and there was time for only a general impression. But Torry did not miss the head-nod signal, instructing the Martian male to bid for her. After the man's previous performance, Torry braced himself for spirited competition.

Up and up went the bids . . . astronomically.

At twenty thousand credits the Martian hesitated for an automatic mute appeal to the feminine figure. The girl nodded again, but that moment's doubt cost the Martian.

". . . Third and last time. Sold to the Earthman . . . for twenty thousand credits."

Torry swallowed hard. He saw the girl glide toward him through the crowd, moving as smoothly and silently as a ghost.

Like a maniac the Martian charged to the platform, croaking a loud protest. Arguments became heated, voices were raised in harsh clamor, then blows struck. Grinning, Torry watched the scramble. A knot of uniformed company guards surged around the battling Martian and hustled him from the auction rooms. A gas gun was used finally to subdue the raging sportsman. While Torry waited for attendants to bring him the box and his purchase receipts, he looked again for the girl but she had melted into the crowd."

Interest was now roused to a high pitch. The auctioneer went into his spiel in whatever alien language auctioneers use, and it was only by knowing in advance what was being said that anyone could make sense of the garble.

". . . Other half of Lot 27," droned the husky voice. "How about a thousand credits to open?"

"One thousand," Torry bid hoarsely.

He felt sweaty and feverish at the same time. Mentally he calculated his remaining resources. A little more of this, and the show would be out of his price class.

Bidding was rapid. In jumps the price went up from twenty to thirty thousand. The Martian's hysteria seemed to have infected everyone. At thirty-five thousand, bidding slowed.

"Thirty-six thousand," Torry bid.

MOMENTS lengthened and Torry's breath came slowly back. It was the absolute limit of his available cash, and the auction terms were cash on the spot. Numbly, he realized that his bid, if it were accepted, used up more than half of his fortune from five years of lonely work.

"Thirty-seven thousand," offered a bull-throated voice. And a barrel-bodied mine owner from Iobololy thrust himself forward as if to give authority to his bid.

Torry had shot his wad. He could not raise the bid, and it meant loss of the second box. Slowly, the starch dissolved out of him and he let his excitement wilt.

With bidding so high, the auctioneer was not impatient. He studied Torry hopefully. The moment extended. The gavel raised, slammed down.

"Going once."

A thrusting hand delved into Torry's pocket where he clutched grimly at his sheaf of paper credits. For an awful moment he thought his pocket was being picked. Then crisp, rustling paper bulged his pocket, and realization bulged his eyes. There was no time for thought or argument. In blind confusion, he drew out a packet of paper money and stared at it. A cruel fist jabbed into Torry's ribs.

"Going twice . . . at thirty-seven thousand."

"Forty thousand!" screamed Torry.

Bids climbed again, to fifty thousand, to fifty-five, then to sixty. At sixty-two thousand, the fat man from Io gave up.

"Sold," droned the auctioneer. "I hope the man from Earth has the money, and his money's worth. Now, Lot 28, five cases, one broken open. The rest. . . ."

Torry did not hear any more. He turned and stared blankly at a vision in blue spider-silk. Gossamer fabric so swathed the girl, covering so densely in so many folds, that she had no more form than an ear of corn. A face showed dimly through layers of diaphanous cloth, but no features were clear enough to have real definition.

"Who are you?" gasped Torry.

"Your partner." The voice, as smooth and silken as the garments, seemed bodiless, but it suggested purringly that the girl was not. "Don't be so obvious about it. We won't open the boxes here. Hire men to move our loot and I'll have a robotruck waiting outside the freight doors in five minutes. Be there."

Torry nodded dumbly. She vanished again, so quickly that he almost wondered if he had imagined her. But her money was real enough. He fumbled it, paying grim-faced attendants, then hired men to move the heavy crates to the freight elevator. At

street level, with the boxes blocking most of the entrance, he waited.

A wheeled robotruck quickly appeared and the girl descended the ramp. Like a blue fury, she directed the men and had the space crates loaded in a brace of minutes. Then a hand snaked out from the fabric folds.

"Half of eighty-two thousand is forty-one thousand," she said. "We can settle up now."

"Half of sixty-two thousand," objected Torry.

"You don't know me very well," she murmured. "It has to be all or nothing."

The gun against his stomach decided Torry. "Don't be like that. You win. He shrugged. "I guess we're both taking a chance at that. Forty-one thousand is a heavy investment in curiosity."

The gun vanished. "You've no idea how much of a chance we're taking," she mused aloud. "People are curious. Yo Tyal is a fool, and I didn't dare attract attention by bidding myself. Half of the Trans-U Miners' goon squad was at that auction just watching me. You should know what that means."

"Should I?"

"You should—if you don't. But we can't stand here talking like moonstruck lovers. Not unless we're tired of living. Which is it, partner, me or the goon squad?"

"You, I guess." Torry laughed grimly. "Though if I'd known about the goon squad I'd have given you less argument."

Her head tossed under the myriad veilings of spidersilk. She scrambled aboard the robotruck and pressed the motor stud. "Come on, then," she ordered sharply.

The truck was in motion almost before Torry could leap to the seat beside her.

Going at suicidal speed through the twisting alleyways of the old city, Torry felt hopelessly confused and lost. Worse, the girl kept glancing over her shoulder, and her driving suffered. It was reckless enough at best.

"You drive," Torry urged. "Unless you're psychic you can't watch where you're going and where we've just been. If anything's following us, it's probably just an ambulance looking for business."

"Make sure," she ordered breathlessly.

At first Torry could distinguish nothing but a blurred rush of shadowy buildings whirling away behind them as if being drawn toward some colossal whirlpool. But he sensed pursuit, just as the girl had, perhaps because she seemed to expect it. Then he saw two huge dark vehicles race into view just before she swerved the robotruck around a corner and shut off rear vision.

"We are being followed," he grudged. "Now where, partner?"

"Home, I had thought," she said. "But we'll never make it. And I don't want those wolves going through our place. It's bad enough without that."

THE robotruck hit a straight stretch. Pencil beams of light licked out from the street-shadows behind. Fire flowers blossomed, but the noise of heavy explosions was lost in the roar of racing motors. Showers of dust and flakes of fiery, disintegrating masonry deluged the careening robotruck.

Hurtling around a blind corner, the truck aimed itself into a narrow opening between buildings. Metal ground and screamed in abrasive contact with stone but the robotruck rebounded and careened down side alleys, around sharp corners, and over moving walks fortunately deserted. With the nerveless skill of an old trucker, the girl wrestled some sanity into the vehicle and chose her route from the most unlikely possibilities. At last, after a sprint through a tangle of dark avenues and narrow alleys she brought the robotruck to a brake melting halt in the deep shadow of high, blank-faced buildings.

"See what I mean?" she said, voice loud and shrill in the silence that seemed deafening with the motor cut out.

Shuddering, the girl crouched behind the seat shield and fumbled inside her garment for the gun, alert for signs of pursuit.

"Relax," advised Torry. "We're alone for the moment. Wherever we are."

"It's an abandoned warehouse. Belongs to my grandfather," she gasped. "Can you get those boxes inside with only me to help."

"Of course, if there's tackle, some wheels and a ramp."

With a coded light-key the girl opened heavy doors and got necessary equipment. Fortunately, she was stronger than she

looked, and about as fragile as steel wire. She gave Torry no more mercy than she gave herself. It was still a mean job.

Inside the vast, echoing interior, Torry and his companion seemed as unimpressive as ants in an auditorium. Huge, vaulted lofts were dusty with disuse. The huge cubes of the space crates looked like unmarked dice, rolled by giants, and forgotten.

Torry was tired and irritable. "I've played along with you," he said. "Now that we're here I'd like some facts. Because of the boxes, I'll assume your connection with Roper. Who are you, and what is all this about?"

"Don't you know?" demanded the girl. Laughing an icy trill, she threw back the veiling spidersilk from head and face, bunching the material neatly behind her neck. Her face was oddly elfin, and distorted to curious proportions by the Martian half-mask of delicately etched glass. Wide set eyes of periwinkle blue tilted at the corners, and the smile of her sword-slash mouth was both teasing and disarming. Torry was suddenly glad that there had been no such face as hers to remember during his five-year exile.

"I'm Tharol Sen," she murmured. "My grandfather is Sen Bas, the Martian importer. Does that explain anything?"

"It may," said Torry, "but not to me. I'm a stranger here, myself. Long ago I was Roper's partner. We heard he was dead. You might say I'm acting for his estate."

"Roper is still alive, very much alive. And don't worry, he can look after his own affairs."

An ugly thought struck Torry, then, though he had gnawed at the idea before. "You don't happen to be one of his affairs?"

Her smile vanished. The dark hair swirled like black smoke as she tossed her head. Her eyes turned dark and cold with the arrogant pride of her ancient race.

"That was a bad choice of words, partner," she said with a haughty stare. "I have promised to marry Bart Roper."

Anger surged hotly in Torry.

"Bad choice of words for you, not me. Roper can't marry you or anyone else. "Whatever arrangement you have—" He stopped. "Did he happen to mention a wife back on Earth?" He hoped the flash of resentment in him was for Rose, not for himself.

"Roper said she was dead," the girl answered. "Perhaps he believes she is dead. In any case, it doesn't matter. Martian law does not recognize marriages on other planets. He can pay her off and I'll see that he forgets her."

"Perhaps." Torry mastered himself. "I'd still like to know what I paid all those credits for."

"Why not open the boxes and find out?"

FROM a trapdoor locker she brought tools, an atomic torch and a huge wrecking bar. The boxes yielded easily to persuasion.

The first box, which was smaller, contained an assortment of lenses. Banks of atomic-electric batteries hooked up into an intricate arrangement of copper wire coils did not explain any puzzles. Nor did the contents of the larger case, which were mainly a folding framework of metal suspending endless layers of foil or metalcloth too finely woven for the eye to follow. The foil or fabric was eery stuff, as unsubstantial as curdled moonlight. Like liquid mercury, it seemed almost alive as it crawled away from the touch.

"I thought the only mirages you could buy came in bottles," commented Torry unhappily.

"Don't be a fool," rasped the girl in a strange tone. "It is a mirage . . . for Planet X. I thought you knew more since you knew Roper. But I'll stand by my agreement. All or nothing, both ways. I'd better explain. And now that you're in, try to act intelligent. I'll tell you all I can, then we'd better get this equipment to . . . to my grandfather before anything else happens."

A buzzer near the metal sliding doors droned a warning. The girl's face turned upward toward a blinking red alarm light.

"I'd say something was already happening," said Torry.

"Someone's in the alley outside," gasped Tharol Sen. "It can't be the police. They wouldn't dare interfere."

"Then who?—"

"Probably Ferax of Trans-U Miners Union. Or his strong-arm squad. If they

find us here with . . . with that they'll kill both of us. I don't know what to do."

"Why don't you stop fooling with that silly blaster gun? Give it to me and find yourself a hole to crawl in. This is my department. Let me do the worrying."

She laughed. "I might do just that." She handed over her pop-gun. It was a typical woman's weapon, squat, flat and short-barreled. Up close it could vaporize a man, but it would have no range worth mentioning. Torry grinned at it in contempt. Motioning her out of the line of fire, he crouched behind the wrecked crates.

A heavy crash echoed through the cavern-like vaults as force was applied to the metal doors. But the doors were dur-steel, two inches thick. They held, but the interior reverberated with harsh metallic clangor. Two more blows sounded, then a lengthening silence. A circle of redness glowed incandescent on the metal, spreading over the panels like spilled paint. Waves of heat sprang outward. Heat haze danced in the cool air as visible vibrations of blinding crimson radiated from the softening door. Runnels of melting steel channeled the metal surface, dripping to spatter on floor.

The girl was busy with something, but with his eyes riveted on the door, Torry could not spare her any attention. He imagined she might be trying to hide the contents of the boxes.

"They'll be through in a minute," she whispered.

Torry nodded. Drops of water splashed down suddenly. Torry felt it on hands and face, glanced upward. Rain, inside a building in a domed city! He must be crazy. But it was real. Drops became a deluge, slashing down in increasing torrents. Water sizzled on the incandescent door, and clouds of steam burst upward, obscuring everything. Pools formed, joined. In moments the floor was inches deep in water.

"Automatic sprinklers," said the girl. "Set for any upward shift of temperature."

Steam clouds cleared. A needle of light burned through. In rifts, Torry saw the door dissolve, slide suddenly into a bubbling, spitting mass that spread in fiery rush across the floor. In wild rush came dark figures, dancing gingerly to avoid tongues of hot metal. Torry fired carefully. He kept finger on stud until the blaster charge was used up. He flung the useless weapon. But the dark figures were gone. The doorway, with sagging leaves of soft metal, was empty.

"That's all, sister," he said, turning.

She was gone. Something like a blue flash whisked out of vision. There was only the metal framework supporting a cylinder of the woven quicksilver. And, as he watched, it vanished.

More dark figures blocked the doorway. They came at him in a surge of reckless violence. He stood up and met them with empty hands. Then darkness struck through his brain.

III

TORRY opened one eye cautiously. He was in bed, a soft bed with clean linens. Beside the bed loomed a monstrous figure. Something that might have been, and was, a Venusian type-R mutant. It seemed not quite human, and big even for a Venusian. But it was not a stranger.

"Ferax!" whispered Torry, opening both eyes.

"It's been a long time," said the Venusian in thick accents.

"Not long enough."

Ferax laughed brutally. His head was a hairless globe of coarse leather, into which some humorist had punched a parody of human features while the material was still pliable. Nothing about Ferax looked pliable now.

"You're still tough, Torry. And you're keeping fast company these days. But you'll never learn to work with your brain instead of your fists or a gun."

Torry smiled with bruised, pulpy lips. "Look who's talking. You're getting soft, Ferax. Last time your boys worked over Roper and me we couldn't walk or talk for a week. And I hear you're in fast company yourself since you gave up strike-breaking and took over union racketeering. You may be a big name now, but you're as ugly as ever. And to me, you'll always smell like the skunk in the perfume works."

Ferax bellowed happily. "Smells are more subtle in higher brackets, that's all. In a stinking world, nobody smells too pretty.

Not even you, and certainly not your girl friend—or is she Roper's?"

"Tharol Sen? Roper's, I guess. You'll have to ask them. I barely saw the girl myself. I just got in night before last, spent a day answering questions for the police, then rested up one night before buying myself a package of trouble. Nobody tells me anything, so I'll have to guess. Is Roper behind this rat race?"

Ferax grunted. "I could almost believe you don't know. So I'll tell you. He's in with a Martian power grab. They need transuranic metals to power their underground cities. The stuff is scarce and expensive. Everyone's looking for new sources and we'll have to find some soon or our whole economy will break down. The Martians are in the same jam, desperate."

"Roper has a new source?"

"Not new. We all know where the metals are. Neptune's big moon, Triton. And Pluto. The trouble is getting them out."

Torry shook his head. "But you've mined under bad conditions before. Triton and Pluto should be no worse than some."

"Not the mining. Transportation. Freight rates from Pluto or Triton would eat up all the profits. And take too much time. Who wants to spend twelve years hauling in one shipload of ore? The answer is, nobody. The Martians can afford the money since they're already paying top rates for whatever we can supply. But we think Roper has a short cut for transportation—"

"If he has I'd better get in with him. Sounds like a very good profit."

Ferax chuckled. "I know better than that. You and Roper hate each other worse than you hate me. Besides, I can offer a better deal. He'll only swindle you out of your cut, and you know it. Throw in with me and you'll stay alive, plus a slice of whatever I take."

"Are you serious about that? If so, I'll have to think it over. Is there any use asking you where I can find Roper?"

"No use at all," said Ferax, grinning. "I don't know. If I did, I'd go there after him. If you do I'll have you followed. You always did have a genius for picking the losing side, which makes it a pleasure to fight you. You're free to go as soon as you're strong enough. If you decide to play things my way, let me know. I'll give you a pass, day or night. Getting into union headquarters is like breaking into the mint. I live like a minor king, and the place is a fort."

Torry snorted. "It's probably safer that way, when so many people hate your guts."

Ferax shrugged. "For that compliment I'll give you some free advice. Don't tell the police about that shooting fray in the warehouse. You're nobody, and the police would love to clear the union and your Martian twirp by using you for scapegoat. You or the girl killed six of my best hardheads. Also, if you see her or old Sen Bas, watch yourself. They're both trickier than snakes and a lot more poisonous."

"One thing more," said Torry. "What happened to the girl?"

Ferax opened eyes wide. "You tell me. She was gone, along with the stuff from the boxes. My men found you sprawled out unconscious from a blow on the head. You were suckered, friend. Suckered."

Ferax produced a metal ident card impregnated with coded electronic inks. "This will keep you out of jail if your cop friend has any such ideas. Also, it will get you in here to see me anytime, day or night, if you change your mind."

Torry laughed, but accepted the card uneasily. "That will be the day or night. . . ."

LIKE all police stations, the building reeked of unwashed bodies and harsh disinfectants. In Grannar's office, Torry faced out the storm.

"Amateur!" said Grannar in disgust. "Why did I ever get mixed up with you?"

Torry glared back at him. "Our lovey-dovey arrangement is brittle enough to break off any time you want it that way."

Grannar shook himself like a wet dog. "Not yet. Whether you know it or not, you did pick up some interesting facts. I guess Tharol Sen has tricked smarter men than you. And she'll probably keep that partnership bargain, since Martians are funny about honor in a business deal. Since she was the one at the auction we can assume that the Martians picked up Roper from the wrecked escape ship and that he's alive."

"I'm sure she knows where Roper is," said Torry. "Now if I knew where to find her—"

"That's easy enough," Grannar told him acidly. "Her grandfather has a big place in the old Martian sector, about twenty acres on the surface and Thol knows how many cubic miles of tunnels and cellars underground. He calls himself an importer, and after his own quaint way, he is. Any vice for a price. Sen Bas' Garden of Delights is a combination gambling den, freak show, amusement park, carnival and emporium of forbidden drugs and narcotic liquors. We've tried raiding the joint but gave that up. Too risky, with their mines and booby traps, and the Martians just scamper into the holes and get lost. Below ground is a rabbit warren of caverns and tunnels and vaults that used to be for growing and curing mushrooms and commercial molds. We know the girl is there, somewhere, but—"

"But you're afraid to go in after her?"

"Not quite that. If ordered on regular police business I'd go poking into even that Martian hornet's nest. But we have nothing on her or Sen Bas, and only a suspicion that Roper's hiding there. Since you muffed something easy, like the auction, I doubt if you could manage to get in, let alone locate her or Roper."

"Who says I muffed anything?" demanded Torry irritably. "I know what was in the boxes, though I didn't tell the girl I knew. It's a matter transmitter, the only one in the Solar System. An inventor back on Earth was knocked on the head and his working model stolen. He's alive, but has lost his memory, and the plans were taken along with the model. Roper's big secret is stolen property, but getting it back may be a problem. I didn't guess what it was till the girl used it to escape from the warehouse. Probably they want the thing to bring back heavy metal ores from Triton or Pluto. I've learned more in three days than you did in four years."

Grannar bowed sardonically. "Oh, sure. I apologize. And now I'm sure you can lay hands on a man with a perfect escape method—from anywhere to anywhere. The ratholes were bad enough, but this really does it."

"The girl is still a good lead," said Torry quietly. "I'm going after her. Are you, or do I have to ask help from Ferax?"

"Suit yourself about Ferax. I won't risk my job on a chance Roper might be there—"

"How much is your job worth?" asked Torry, with a sneer.

Grannar's face twitched. "For half that dough you threw away at the auction, I could buy a plankton farm on Earth. . . ."

Torry licked his lips and left. Back at the hotel he cashed a bank draft and put twenty thousand credits in currency into an envelope with a note and sent it to Grannar. The note began:

I've always wanted to buy a policeman. Now you can afford to do your job. I'm seeing Ferax first, but with or without his help, I'm going after Roper.

Terse instructions followed. Torry did not expect too much of Grannar, but the man represented law and authority as far as either existed on Mars, and dealing with Roper, Ferax, and the Martians all at once was scarcely a one-man job.

TRANS-U MINERS UNION housed itself in a citadel remarkable even on Mars. It occupied the center of a large area, cleared, floodlighted and surrounded by a charged wire fence. Inside the defense circle were booby traps triggered for the first careless step off marked pathways patrolled by robot guards. Torry's metal ident card got him through the gateway by tripping electronic relays, and each incorruptible robot guard passed him after being shown the card.

At the building doorway he had to satisfy a series of dubious and hard bitten human questioners, but his pass and the magic name of Ferax got him inside.

Doors opened. Robot voices directed him across echoing lobbies to a bank of elevators. In a locked cage he descended five floors below surface level. In the corridor another bodiless voice spoke:

"End of the hall. Door on the right."

Torry followed directions. The ritual was getting on his nerves. His footsteps echoed hollowly. The place smelled damp and moldy as a tomb. Opening the door on the right with a wave of his keyed pass, he realized that it was, in a sense, a tomb. There was a body in it. A dead body.

Ferax sprawled across an ornate desk of Venusian chibar wood and kru-leather.

Luminous particles from a blaster discharge still danced in the air. A lingering bite of charred, exploding flesh stung the nostrils. There was little left of the torso, but a lolling globular head identified the corpse. A discarded gun clanked as Torry's foot kicked it. He hesitated, then picked it up and renewed the charge. It was an automatic reflex of defense, and fingerprint evidence was not likely to matter now. If found on the spot he would have little chance for explanations.

The thing had happened only minutes ago. Whoever did it, the killer must still be close at hand. A roving flicker of pale radiance warned Torry that a scanner was in use. By whom? From where? No complex mental processes were needed to convince Torry that he was in a bad spot. The goon squads were notorious for acting first and asking questions afterwards.

Getting into the citadel to see Ferax had been interesting enough. Getting out again promised to be more so. If he ever got out.

The office door was opening slowly. Silently Torry glided behind it. Reaching around it, he snatched cloth and flesh and dragged a struggling form into the room.

"Tharol Sen!" The girl was panting, her periwinkle eyes wide and glazed with horror.

Torry subdued her writhings by jamming the blaster muzzle hard into her flesh.

"Talk low," he ordered. "But talk fast. Why did you kill Ferax?"

"I didn't. I found him like that, just a moment ago. I heard the blaster and looked in quickly. Then I hid in the office across. I heard something and came back here. That's all I know." Her voice ended on a wail.

Torry jerked up the elfin face and studied it savagely. For some reason he believed her. But there was more to explain, even if someone else had killed the labor racketeer, and little time for explanations.

"How did you get in here?" he snapped. "And why?"

She threw back her head in a characteristic gesture. Her eyes sparkled.

"Roper had come here. He was so long that I got worried. I came through. . . ." She stopped talking suddenly.

"Through the transmitter? I know about it, so you can call it by the right name."

Tharol Sen nodded numbly.

"That means Roper killed him."

The girl jerked angrily. "Bart Roper wouldn't do that. He wouldn't kill an unarmed man. Probably you killed him, and just want to throw the blame on . . . on us."

Torry ignored her. "Roper would be too smart to leave any evidence. So I'll leave it for him." From his pocket he took a small lighter with a name engraved on it, quickly scrubbed it free of prints and dropped it on the floor as if it had fallen in the excitement of murder. It would not carry conviction, but it would be proof of Roper's presence and his reputation would do the rest.

"You fool," said Tharol Sen. "I'm a witness, and I saw you do that. I'll testify."

"Do that," taunted Torry viciously, "if it ever comes to a trial. Who'll believe you? And I don't think the strong arm boys will wait for a trial. If you can get back through that transmitter screen, we'd better do it before someone finds us here."

"Take you?" she snarled. "I'd rather die here."

"You have that choice."

She changed her mind. Torry did not misread the flash of wicked triumph on her face. He did not have to.

"All right," she yielded. "Bart Roper will know how to take care of you. Come ahead, if you dare. The transmitter screen is in the opposite office."

Torry sighed bitterly. "I'll chance Roper. I've already had one session with the goons."

THE quicksilver screen was three-dimensional, and possibly four, since it seemed to exist in two places at once and linked them without regard to intervening distance. It was a hollow cylinder supported by metal framework, and the insubstantial fabric glowed and pulsed with electrical current. Inside was darkness and a sense of infinite space. Walking through the odd fabric one encountered nothing material, but a prickling touched every skin surface, then soaked through the bone centers.

Leaving the force field of the screen was

more exhilarating, and almost painful. It was like breaking an electrical contact; muscles jerked spasmodically, hair stood on end, and hot sparks discharged from any moist portions of the skin. Torry had not realized how drenched his body was in cold sweat. He stepped out, gasping.

He stepped into paradise, or hell. Unreality.

Martian subcellar gardens are startling to outsiders. In the air was the bitter tang of narcotic incense. Smoke distorted vision. Nightmarish fantasies of mobile murals in rich colors writhed on the walls. The ceiling was an illusion of sky and stars, complete with intricacies of celestial mechanics, and the flooring resembled grassy sward, set with miniature pools and cool, gurgling streams, crossed by arching bridges of carved and tined ivory. Singing birds and trilling winged serpents filled the air with sound and motion. Luminous bubbles rose and burst above lighted, musical fountains. Musicians toyed with the acrid melodies of ancient Mars, and only close inspection proved the dancing girls 3-d projections.

It was a painstaking reproduction, pitiful and exquisite, of the richly barbaric and luxuriant youth of a now-dying planet. To a Martian, it would have been nostalgic and lovely. To Torry, fresh from the scent of blood and death, it was a garish mockery, like a painted corpse.

Torry recoiled painfully, both from the setting and from the living man who seemed part of it.

Sen Bas was as dried and shriveled as a Martian mummy. Only his eyes seemed alive.

"You can put away your gun," said Sen Bas, his wrinkled face a mask of malicious humor. "You are in no danger here."

Oddly, there was no feeling of menace, and Torry found himself putting away his weapon. Will power beat from Sen Bas as it does from hypno machines, and his personality held fearful compulsion.

"But he's—" began Tharol Sen hysterically.

Still smiling, Sen Bas nodded like a bizarre doll with a swinging pendulum attached to its head. "No matter. Since we made a deal with Roper when we picked him up off Phobos, we must do as he says . . . in some matters. Roper has gone ahead. He wants this man, Torry, sent to him . . . there. There is use for him . . . where Roper has gone. Until then, he is our guest, and we must show him every courtesy."

Torry studied the old man calmly. "You can use place names, Sen Bas. I know about the transuranics on Triton and Pluto. But how could Roper have gone ahead when we were using the transmitter? It can't be three places at once."

Sen Bas frowned. "No, it cannot. Unfortunately, it has many limitations. This is a second model copied by my engineers for study and experiment. To our distress we have learned that ores of the heavy metals cannot be transmitted since their radioactivity has an effect on the force field. But now, with trouble coming, this model must be destroyed."

From a pouch Sen Bas drew a tiny subsonic whistle upon which he blew a soundless note. Martian technicians quickly appeared. Sen Bas issued commands, and the transmitter was rapidly dismantled and removed to incinerators.

"Good idea," approved Torry. "Ferax is dead. The police—"

"I know. The transmitter is not as instantaneous as it seems to the user. Time also is distorted, as well as space. Hours have passed. You are the last person known to have seen Ferax, so you are wanted by the police and others for questioning. I was not certain you would come through the screens, so my agents are scouring the city for you. Roper has gone ahead to Triton, and wants you to join him there where we can make contact."

"How long will that take?"

Sen Bas blinked. "Who knows? My scientists say it depends on the relative positions of Triton and Mars. The best time will be in five or six days, but you may have to go sooner. Tharol Sen can show you around, and when the time is right, she will take you to the transmitter. It is securely hidden where the police will not find it. In the meantime—"

"I'm a prisoner?"

Sen Bas giggled. "Not exactly. Say, my guest. Your only jailers are outside. Let us hope they will stay there until you can go to Roper . . . as he requested."

"Roper must have been in a hurry to get away," grated Torry.

"He was. For excellent reasons. A Solar Survey ship is due off Triton at any time. Roper wanted to be in sole possession of the satellite, with samples to make good his claims to minerals."

Suddenly, everything happened at once. Shrill alarms blared from a dozen quarters. Red lights flared ominously. A fusillade of shots broke out.

Sen Bas swore luridly in Martian. "The police!"

Heavy explosions thundered overhead. The ceiling cracked, opened wide. An avalanche of steel and stone and breaking glass roared into the subcellar gardens. Dust clouds blinded Torry.

IV

FROM the collapsing roof tons of debris poured into the underground gardens and spread over the floor like advancing mountains. Dust choked, Torry staggered blindly before it in panic to avoid being caught and buried. It was like a swift, deadly race with an engulfing landslide.

Free of the confusion and deafening tumult, he turned to look about for Sen Bas and the girl. In the dust cloud it was impossible to see anything. Masses of masonry and fused glass from the collapsing cavern roof continued to detach themselves and crash down in random uproar. Cautiously, Torry picked his way over the mounds of rubble, searching.

A feeble cry led him to Sen Bas. The aged Martian looked like a tattered bundle of red rags. Half buried under a hillock of shattered stone and twisted steel, the old man showed little sign of life, save for still-glittering eyes and husks of sound emerging from bloodless lips. Spreading stains of red seeped from beneath the prisoning blocks.

"If I can lift the stones, can you drag yourself out?" asked Torry.

"Don't—think—so!" gasped Sen Bas.

"Where can I find help?"

"Don't try. Go—quickly. Save yourself. The alarms—police—maybe union killers. Go—"

"Not yet," snapped Torry. "We'll worry about the rest after I get you out."

The old man protested. "I'm—old. Does not matter. Get to—transmitter. My people must have—"

Ignoring him, Torry worked. Feverishly he searched for and found a length of reinforcing steel. With it, he dug into debris of glass and stone and tortured steel. Mass by mass, he levered it up and rolled it aside. Fingers raw, steel bending in his hands, he strained to uncover the writhing, bleeding form of Sen Bas. At last he wedged up the last mass and reached under to drag out the ancient Martian. Sen Bas screamed as he came free, but the agony left his face.

"You're hurting him," raged Tharol Sen. She stumbled toward them, her face a mask of hate.

"No!" cried Sen Bas. Gathering breath, he whispered, "He saved me." Then pallor flooded his pinched features.

Torry knelt beside him, not even looking at the girl. "Shut up!" he ordered. "Get bandages—painkilling drugs. He's badly crushed, bleeding to death. Don't argue. Hurry!"

Sen Bas blinked. "Do as he says. . . ." Tharol Sen disappeared.

Alone, Sen Bas stared curiously at his rescuer. "I should have ordered you both to the transmitter. My men could care for me . . . if it matters."

"Not soon enough. Roper can wait."

Sen Bas shook his head. "Roper might. My people cannot. We need heavier metals to power our underground cities. We are a dying race."

"You're a dying man. Don't talk."

The old Martian composed his features with great dignity. "What better time? Our need is desperate. We must claim the transuranics on Triton. Even though they must be freighted here, since they cannot be brought through the transmitter. We tried it, and failed. You know Roper. Will he deal fairly with us?"

Torry shook his head sadly. "No."

Sen Bas did not seem surprised. "I feared that. Will you?"

"I'll try, though I'll have to do what seems best when I get to it."

Sen Bas relaxed. "That is good enough. Did you come to Mars to kill him?"

A shiver wrenched Torry, his eyes glazed. "I haven't decided yet."

"Perhaps it would be best. But he will not be easy to kill. Tharol Sen will take you to him. Perhaps by the time fate has to choose between you and Roper, her blindness will be gone, and she can make a clear choice of her own. . . ."

"How did you—"

With a convulsive grimace, Sen Bas was dead. Moments later, when Tharol Sen appeared loaded with medical supplies, Torry glared at her. Her face a chalk mask, she whimpered.

"Forget it," Torry said angrily. "It's too late for tears."

"Why did you try to save him?"

"If you have to ask, you'd never understand."

Tharol Sen shuddered. "I don't understand anything about you. Who you are. Why you hate us so—"

"Who says I do?"

"Roper. He says—"

"Never mind what he says. I suppose there's no use trying to convince you that he never tells the truth if a lie will serve as well. He's a known criminal, a thief and swindler, and even a murderer. A man who abandoned his wife on Earth, and a small child he's never seen. Frankly, I don't understand you, and I'm not sure I'd want to. You're quite determined to marry him?"

"Quite." Tharol Sen stiffened.

"Well, that's your hard luck. He's no good. No good for you, or anyone. Not even for himself."

"Nothing you can say matters. He told me about that wife. She's too sane, too normal and practical for him. He thinks that I—"

Torry was not listening. Contrasting Tharol Sen with Rose, he was almost inclined to agree with Roper, and envy him such a loyal and spirited defender. The girl was pure-blood Martian, with all the eery beauty of the strange race. She was young but vibrantly alive and human. There was emotional depth in her, and a passionate savagery that might inspire a man to passion, or to devotion, depending upon the man.

"Besides," finished Tharol Sen, "there is no other man like him."

"Not quite like him, fortunately." Torry laughed bitterly. "I'm a lot like him, if you haven't noticed. But nicer . . . and sometimes smarter."

"That's a matter of opinion," she said acidly. "Yours and mine. But you do resemble him. You're . . . you're not—"

"I'm afraid I am. I'm ashamed to admit it, but Bart Roper and I had the same mother. He's my half-brother."

HER face was puzzled. "Then why—"

Torry tightened visibly. "I don't know. Or maybe I just don't want to face it yet. We hate each other as only brothers can. You'd better know that before you take me to him. I may have to kill him."

Tharol Sen sneered. "I don't think you can kill him. I'll take you to him because both Roper and my grandfather wanted me to. Roper can deal with you as he sees fit. But if I think you're a danger to him, I'll kill you. Understand that."

Torry shrugged. "On that basis I'll accept your help. Now you'd better find that transmitter. I suspect that the explosions were the police or the goon squads breaking in."

"They were," she said nastily. "They ran into booby traps in the upper levels. It will take them a while."

"I wouldn't count on too much time," warned Roper. "Grannar is a smart policeman, and the goon squads seemed to know their work."

"This way."

Tharol Sen was coldly aloof, and seemed both preoccupied and depressed, which was natural. She went ahead, wordlessly, and Torry followed, lost in his own reflections. At the far end of Sen Bas' wrecked garden was a steel-arched doorway, high, sombre and gothic. Beyond, and below, lay the sprawling vastness of vaults and caverns which was the Martian underworld. Long, curvings ramps led downward into a complex of subsurface workings far below New Chicago.

They descended and slipped quietly across large, echoing platforms whose dimensions were lost in gloom. Metal-shod stairways spiraled upward and downward into invisible infinities. Deep shafts vibrated with strange sounds the ear could not catch or identify. Freight tunnels were yawning

maws of darkness, like the staring, sightless eyes of some mythical monster created on too large a scale for man to understand.

Torry grew tense and nervous. He began to sense patterns of shivering, eery movement about him. Walls and ceilings closed in suddenly, and he could make out vague, monstrous forms set into niches within walls carved of bedrock. Old-Martian gods in sculpture—leering stone spectres, goblin-like, and subtly obscene.

Tharol Sen paused. Her hand sought Torry's and drew him close, but not in friendliness. She whispered harshly, warning him to silence and extreme caution.

"I was wrong. The police have broken through. Some are already in the vaults."

She followed a maze of barely visible threadlike guidelines of luminosity set into the metallic tiling. A few steps more brought them to a wide platform, from which many tunnel mouths opened. Along one wall ranged banks of elevators. Beyond were ranks of empty pneumatic tube cars on tracks which angled in sharp descent into wells a level below the platform. Spidery Martian hieroglyphs labeled various shafts and the tube terminals. Tharol Sen studied the markings closely before making her choice.

"I have been here only once before," she complained. "It is not easy to find the way. But I think the police will have more trouble."

She selected a pneumatic tube car. Torry boosted her to the door flap. She settled herself in the tiny seat cradle, then from inside, extended him a helping hand. For the first time she noticed his blistered palms and raw fingers. He grunted painfully as she drew him up beside her.

"I should have bandaged your hands," she mused.

Torry snorted. "Can you drive this shuttle? It has more gadgets than a space ship."

"One way to find out," murmured Tharol Sen icily, poking a slim finger at a keyboard of colored studs. Distant machinery whirred and whined. Flaps banged shut and the shuttle car shot forward and down at sickening speed. Tharol Sen laughed, and the sound was of ice chips trickling on metal foil.

Air whipped angrily about the shell of thin metal. There was no gut wrenching nausea of acceleration, only sharp awareness of speed. Movement became a blur streaming past the transparent plastic cartop. It was like being part of a hollow missile fired fron an air gun. As the car's original impetus diminished, speed dwindled. The car dipped and slowed, then ran into a stop valve, like a piston in a closed cylinder, and stopped on a dense cushion of compressed air.

Another vista of platforms radiated away from the terminal.

Gripping Torry's hand, Tharol Sen dragged him firmly along the platform, then down a steep slant to the lowest levels. At intervals, radilumes provided glaring light, but shadows of raw fantasy lingered curiously near the walls. Tomblike oppression gathered around them. Panic grows quickly underground; weight of rock pressing overhead translates itself to the brain in terms of claustrophobia.

METALLIC decking became raw stone floor, and an endless tunnel unwound before them. Torry lost all track of direction, even the primary up and down. They went through underground workings like city streets lined with open front factories. Gray, barren vistas of workrooms were relieved by the stark symmetries of sleek machines, shielded atomic converters, and patiently revolving turbines. Here was the marvelously efficient underground economy of the old Martian civilization, still functioning and serving the remnants of a great race of builders and scientists.

On soaring cantilevered balconies and in alcoves, Torry glimpsed cliff like structures of offices and dwellings. Giant compressors labored to force a mighty pulse of breakable air—but the atmosphere was warm, dry and stifling. Runnels of sweat ran down Torry's body and vanished in quick evaporation; fever and exertion alternated in him; he blew hot and cold as energy burned away too quickly, and as drying sweat produced intense, quick chills. Temperatures dropped. Air seemed denser and was poisonously clouded with dust, but it was cool. Slowly it became chill and depressing with a hint of dampness in it. They came into a maze of galleries and pits, tunnels and vaults, less

used and uninhabited portions of the deep-workings.

It was like a world apart, a place of dim storage bins with natural refrigeration, of packing sheds piled high with mountains of commercial molds, bales of dry, compressed and packed mushrooms. It smelled stale and foul, the air hideous with a powdery mist of mold dust and spores, and the incredible mustiness of mushroom spoilage. These caverns were empty of life, as if the troglodyte Martians had long ago joined their mummied dead.

Weakness suddenly caught up with Torry. Dizzy, he caught in panic at Tharol Sen for support. Grudgingly, after a moment's hesitation, she granted the help.

"I'm sorry," Torry apologized. "It's been a rather active three days. I guess Ferax and his boys hurt me more than I had thought."

"They are good at hurting people," admitted the girl. "You still want to go on in this condition?"

"Don't mind me. Just give me a minute." Torry was painfully aware of her strong, slender body beneath the filmy garments of spidersilk. To change the subject, he said, "Don't tell me you're planning to venture out to Pluto or Triton in that costume?"

Tharol Sen made a face. "Hardly. There are spacesuits ready. We'll need them, don't worry. Roper says Triton is hardly livable at all, even protected. You'll find out if you've the nerve to go through with me."

"So Planet X is not even a planet, just one of Neptune's moons?"

"Perhaps it was a planet once. Both Pluto and Triton are not like the rest of the solar system planets. They may have been two stray worlds from outer space, captured long ago by our sun. For their size they have mass out of all proportion. The quantities of heavy metals beyond uranium give them extreme weight and density. Pluto has a density of over fifty times that of water. Triton not so much, but still greater by far than Earth's density, which is roughly five or six times that of water. Though smaller than Mercury or Ganymede, Triton has a gravity only slightly less than Earth's and a far denser atmosphere blanket."

Torry laughed grimly. "That's a big speech for you."

"Too long a speech," she agreed irritably. "Especially with the police close behind us."

Torry sighed. "Okay. We'll go on. This is a lot of trouble over one slimy mirage salesman."

"Mirage salesman? Why do you call him that?"

"Simple enough. That's all he's ever peddled. Pot of gold at the end of the rainbow to tempt the greedy and unwary. And rainbows are circular, with no beginning and no end. Haven't you ever heard the term?"

"I have now. I wondered, that's all. There are mirages on Triton. He'll have plenty to sell."

Torry snorted. "I can see you've bought one."

Flasher signals on the wall began to blink rapidly.

They moved steadily onward, faster than before, into a still more shadowy region. Light itself seemed to exist only at long intervals where age-old radilumes peformed a feeble service. The spongy floor of rotten bedrock was scummed over with moss to make for slippery footing. Formations of natural rock seemed like stage furniture designed by elves and gnomes, in which stone mimicked monstrosities of the vegetable world. Fat, knotted stalagmites suggested tree trunks, and the darkness overhead appeared like shadowy densities of foliage. Seepage had fretted the walls into lacy limestone traceries like a fern forest. They went on, with tense silence savage between them.

Alarm blinkers flashed light codes of rapid pursuit.

"Your people must have had much contact with the police to have worked out such a set-up," observed Torry.

Tharol Sen nodded. "We have been persecuted for centuries. Not many Earthfolk have ever been here. Nor any others but my own people."

"Yet the police seem to be finding their way."

Tharol Sen frowned. "That puzzles me," she admitted. "How could they come here at all unless someone has betrayed us?"

From close behind sounded the loud buzzing of a radiation detector. A thin pencil beam flashed at them and splashed wetly over the cavern wall ahead. Rock shattered

in a brittle, crunchy explosion. Murderous chips deluged the tunnel.

Torry lunged at the girl, dragging her down in a savage fall. More beams of light licked out, this time from several directions. Continuous thunders roared and reverberated, stunning ears and brains with concussion and sound. Roughly, Torry thrust the girl into a wall niche for shelter.

"The police!" wailed Tharol Sen.

"Looks as if we're trapped. We'd better give ourselves up."

She stared at him with contempt. "You still have your gun. If you're afraid, give it to me."

"One gun against a dozen. No thanks."

Waiting a lull in the blast uproar, Torry called out. His voice rang hollowly in the cavern, still shuddering with echoes of the explosions.

"Hold your fire. We're coming out."

Grannar's voice answered. "Throw out your gun first."

Torry complied. His gun rattled on the floor of rock.

Pushing Tharol Sen sullenly before him, Torry stood clear. In a moment, the tunnel was full of uniformed figures.

Grannar studied Torry with some amusement. "You needn't have gone so fast. I got your note, but your trail ran into a dead end at Ferax's office. It took time to pick it up again but we found it beside Sen Bas' body in his gardens. Clever deal, Torry. Using radioactive dust on your shoes like that. Shall we handcuff Tharol Sen and take her back?"

"No," answered Torry glumly. "She's going to show us the way to Roper."

"So you betrayed us?" asked Tharol Sen, contempt making her face ugly.

"That's a matter of opinion."

Grannar broke in. "Better pick up your gun, Torry. You may need it. How many men shall we take?"

Torry shrugged. "That depends on the number of spacesuits available. How many, Tharol Sen?"

"Three," she replied bitterly. "Do you think two of you dare tackle Roper alone?"

"I think so. How about it, Grannar?"

The policeman grunted.

The matter transmitter was already set up. Upon its folding framework the screen glittered like woven quicksilver, vibrating to the hum of electro magnetic flow.

"Will this take us directly to Roper?" asked Grannar.

"Not quite," said Torry, grinning. "It's a delicate adjustment. Mars and Neptune both in motion, and Triton's orbit and axial rotation to consider. We'll be somewhere on Triton—"

"But Triton has more land surface than Earth. Can we find—"

Torry gestured. "She'll find him for us. Have your men stand by and switch on the transmitter every three hours."

Dressed for space, the three entered the screen.

V

PLANET X—or Neptune's moon, Triton . —was a vast mirage with many facets. Atmosphere was as dense and still as water in ocean deeps. Sky was cloudless, but not clear, apparently built up of different layers of gases, and the light was both glaring and erratic. At a distance of over three and a half billion miles from the Sun, most of the light was not sunlight, and the little that came through the air ocean was filtered and absorbed into curious colors and intensities. Other illumination sources were auroral displays, radioactive hotspots that glowed like eery ghosts, and volcanic outbursts of crimson or gold.

Surface pressure of the atmospheric ocean was extreme, and the gas densities and weird light gave an uncanny submarine illusion. Venturing onto the surface of Triton, Torry felt like a diver in that long-past period when man's last frontier on Earth had seemed the ocean deeps. Gravity, greater than on Mars, but less than Earth's, gave a sense of buoyancy; the spacesuiting was not unlike ancient diving costume; and the thickness of the atmosphere itself suggested deep, still water.

Most disturbing of all were the mirages. All the familiar effects of Earth mirages were present but magnified and even multiplied into infinite complexities. To a scientist of optics or meteorology, Triton would be a superb laboratory. To Torry, it was—

Near madness. . . !

Mirages by hundreds and thousands floated between surface and zenith, or hugged the ground like captive nightmares. Pinnacled dream mountains rose from bases of empty air. Phantom battlements and mock castles stormed upward from nothing. Magnified rockeries became goblin cities, looming near or far in equal scale. Water glittered in the sky and on the ground, and floating debris became fleets of fairy argosies. Lateral mirages played eery jokes with distance. All images seemed unreal, and diffraction haloed them with misty, rainbow coloring.

Triton itself was bleak, savage, merciless, nearly windless but for vagrant currents of slow-moving dense air, like currents in an ocean.

By levels, temperatures were absurdly high or low, depending upon location or freak circumstances. It was a lifeless world, inhospitable to man. But it wore a mask and costume of exotic, lying beauty, and masquerade was hard to distinguish from the harsh reality. Anything definite was hard to distinguish.

Grannar turned up the microphone in his helmet, and his words rattled from Torry's speaker.

"How can we find Roper in such a madhouse as this?" he roared.

Torry winced as the amplified outburst thundered in his ears.

"Simple enough," he replied. "Fine detective you are. There's a radio compass built into Tharol Sen's suit. Roper's sending all the time. She'll go to him like a homing pigeon."

"Pigeon is right," muttered Grannar. "Hope it's not too far. A little more of this would make me neurotic. Can we trust her?"

Torry laughed. "Yes and no. She hates us, but she'll lead us to Roper. That transmitter is his only way back to Mars. And hers, too. Isn't that right, Tharol Sen?"

Fortunately her reply did not come through clearly.

Following the radio compass, which behaved erratically due to magnetic discharges, they moved through the wilderness of the mirages. Progress was deceptive, without reliable landmarks. Rugged terrain made treacherous going. Megalithic cities and monstrous mountains appeared and disappeared like patterns in a kaleidoscope. In the eccentric lighting, vision itself seemed to flicker as treacherously as a three-d projector running out of balance. Constant distortions and fading out produced mental nausea and physical insecurity.

Torry was not sure where his next step would take him. One instant he seemed to flounder on the edge of abyss. The next, he would be climbing what seemed an interminable mountain, only to have solid floors of rock shimmer and vanish before his eyes. It was impossible to see where they were going, or even be certain what it was like where they had just been. Only the needle of the radio compass held any steadiness at all, and that jerked into wild whirlings now and then as magnetic currents ebbed and flowed in the ground.

They seemed, through rifts in the mirages, to be traversing a monstrous field of jagged boulders, inclined slightly upward. Even these rocks were not always as substantial as they looked, but for the most part, they were real obstacles. The thought crossed Torry's mind that it would be a bad place for an ambush if Roper were so inclined.

When the facts materialized his fears, the pencil beam of a blaster cutting through the mirages seemed only part of a dazzling auroral display.

THE explosion that followed demonstrated its reality. Rock chips and larger fragments rained about them. In the dense medium of atmosphere, the shock wave was terrific, and even his spacesuit did not completely insulate the blow. All three were flung about as if by earthquake. Torry missed his footing and went down in a long sprawl, which saved his life.

The second blaster flash would have targeted him dead center. It flickered harmless over him, touched the nearby boulders to sudden glare, then lost itself in fearful detonation. Dodging the hail of debris, Torry crawled quickly to shelter behind a larger boulder. With gauntleted hands, he tested its solidity before he trusted himsel to relax.

A harsh cry of pain and terror echoed in his ears. Its tones held desperation. And the voice was Grannar's.

By concentrating Torry could dimly make

out the figure of the detective. Grannar lay in tumbled heap, threshing wildly and trying to hold shut great rents in his space suit. He seemed to be injured, for one leg was motionless while the rest of his body worked in convulsions.

Torry left his shelter and bounded toward the casualty. He bundled Grannar roughly to his feet and hustled him into the nearest tangle of solid rocks. A hastily aimed blaster beam hurried him at the task. Crouching down, he examined Grannar. The policeman was conscious, swearing valiantly. His leg was broken. Inside the space suit it would be impossible to set the fracture. And outside, the toxic gases of Triton would make short work of human breathing. Even the rents in the suiting were dangerous.

Working quickly, Torry clipped together the rents and sealed them hermetically with compound from the repair kits.

"That's the best I can do," he told the policeman grimly as his eyes searched in vain for a sign of Roper. "You'll have to stand the rest till we can get out of here and back to Mars."

"What are our chances of getting out?"

A man does not shrug in a spacesuit. "Not good," said Torry. "Roper can keep us pinned here as long as he likes."

"How long d'you think that'll be?"

Torry grunted. "Till he gets tired of it and decides to stalk us and kill us. Or till I go out and get him."

"I see. It's like that, eh? Where's the girl?"

"Who knows? She's either hiding out in the rocks, like us, or she's found a way to join Roper. Does it matter?"

"Not to me," mused Grannar. "I just hoped maybe she wasn't as rotten as Roper . . . that she might give us a chance."

"Don't count on it," said Torry spitefully. "She might be as pure as an angel, but Roper's sold her a bill of goods. Feeling as she does about him, she'd kill either of us as quickly as Roper would."

They waited in silence, while mirages came and went around them, as light shifted, or slight currents stirred in the turbid air. If Roper were a mirage salesman, he had certainly made his stand in the wholesale house. Under other circumstances, Torry might have found the displays interesting, even entertaining—but at the moment, his reflections were as poisonous as the air on Triton.

Colors flared and faded like a cross-spectrum of inferno.

Grannar was restless with the pain in his leg. His squirming infected Torry, who leaned out above the barrier of rocks waving his hand violently. As he hoped, he attracted attention. A thin wire of light kissed the rocks of the barrier. Chips pelted like hail, and the force of the blast set up thunderous echoes in his helmet.

"He must have rigged a scanner of some sort. Such shooting is too good for a man with mirages in his eyes. Would something like infra-red help?"

"I don't know," groaned Grannar. "In any case, we haven't the time or the means to work out a scanner."

"I think I'll try crawling out of here. If I keep low, I might be able to work around and come up behind him. Is it all right with you if I give it a try?"

"Why not? Outside of your life, what have you got to lose?"

"I hate to leave you here unless you want it that way. But there's not much future for you, anyhow, if I stay."

"Do whatever you like. I guess I owe you something, and I like to pay my debts. Any other last wishes?"

"Just one. I want him. . . ."

"Roper? You want to kill him?" Granner sounded baffled.

"Kill or cure."

"I don't understand."

"You want him on Mars for murder. He's wanted on Earth for lesser crimes. That gives you priority. You can demand and get extradition for him to Mars, which means quick death in the atomic disintegrators, or slow death in the prison mines. On Earth, they have a clinic for incurables like Roper. It's a free choice for them, euthanasia or voluntary submission to the clinic."

Grannar hesitated. "I know about that. But isn't such a treatment almost as dangerous as being killed outright, and a lot tougher on the subject?"

"It can be," granted Torry flatly. "Sometimes the hypnotic memory-blanking or the shock treatment wrecks the brain. And the

glandular surgery and hormone dosage can turn a man into a freak and monster. If it works, the criminal is rebuilt mentally and morally, re-created with a new personality, and completely new educational background. He's hardly the same man, and often his old friends can't recognize him physically."

Grannar's eyes narrowed. "In Roper's case, that might be an advantage. Of course I'm familiar with the clinic and its work in rehabilitating incorrigibles But do you think any treatment could work the miracle with Roper?"

"I don't know and don't care. People like Roper help make life colorful and interesting. But they're too hard on everyone around them. His adolescent-stasis carries his own damnation for him. He's miserably unhappy, along with everyone who knows him. He imagines he's smarter and superior to other people, and that it's his duty to prey on them. Mentally, he's a rotten-spoiled child. But a dangerous one. Like the one rotten apple, he spreads his rottenness through the whole barrel."

"I'm familiar with that theory of crime but I don't go along with it. I'm not convinced you can unspoil a rotten apple, and I doubt if it's worth while to try."

"No matter," said Torry grimly. "If they fail on him, they'll destroy him. Either way, it will make a better world for everyone. Probably I hate him more than you do. But I'm willing to give him this last chance if you'll let me."

Grannar laughed ironically. "Have it your way, if you can take him. It's out of my hands, actually. Though, as a cop, I'd be better satisfied if you burned him down here, I'll settle for your clinic. It's a nasty enough choice, anyhow. If you can capture or kill him, go ahead. I'll gladly resign my share of the brute to you. And you'll earn it. Do you really think you can crawl out of here and circle him?"

Torry glanced sourly at the flickering mirages. "I can try," he said slowly.

IT WAS a mirage that saved Torry.

Going proved even rougher than he had expected. Squirming over unknown terrain is hard, even in conditions of fair visibility. On Triton, with its constantly varying light, and the ever-present confusion of mirages, it was fantastic. The cumbersome space suit was no help.

Darkness thickened around him, but the mirages grew worse, as he toiled up the slope. Loose stones rattled about him in tiny avalanches, and he went more carefully, lest they betray him to Roper. Sweat bathed him inside his insulated costume, and steam misted the helmet's face plate before he could get the thermal conditioners functioning properly. A bad foothold earned him a nasty fall, and the rough suiting and acid sweat combined to burn painful blisters on hands and knees.

In grim determination approximating madness, he plunged upward and onward. He found an eroded ravine and groped blindly along it, wondering what fearful liquids had gashed such a gully on such a nightmarish world.

Alien dusk gathered, and in the hollow of the ravine writhed coils of living light. At intervals, he avoided the hot glaring flares of radioactive hotspots. Torry followed the barren fissure, and strange sounds and fleeting light-phantoms followed him. And a river of dense, sluggish air funneled upward through the gully, whispering of ugly, forgotten events upon a forgotten world. In the uneasy sky overhead, electrical discharges wove networks of colored lightnings, which crackled and hissed as static in his earphones.

Nearing the upper end of the gully, Torry halted and took stock of his surroundings. He estimated progress, and wondered how he would ever find his quarry. His quest seemed one more mad illusion in the sequence of mirages. He freed his blaster from its magnetic belt clip and examined it for charge. Crawling with the weapon in his hand was awkward, but it would be suicide to be caught reaching for it. Grimly he worked his way to the notch of the ravine and poked out his head.

Ironically, it was the mirage that saved him.

A lateral mirage, distorting both distance and direction, showed him a sharp image, inverted, of Roper aiming carefully in the opposite direction.

Instantly, Torry let go his grasp and dropped. He fell and rolled savagely, while the lance of light stabbed overhead, and the ex-

plosion started small landslides around him. He screamed in momentary panic. Preventing a helpless plunge into an abyss which opened before him was a chore. And the abyss itself proved only illusion. Solid wall blocked his fall and stunned him for a terrible moment. Miraculously, he retained a grip on his gun.

He lay quietly, while rocks continued to rattle upon his helmet and spacesuit. Someone was descending toward him. It could be only—

Roper.

The visible face behind the plate of transparent plastic could have been poured in the same mold as Torry's. It was younger, finer-featured, but it was shrewd, self-indulgent. Roper had enjoyed his life of crime, and it had agreed with him. He looked healthy, humorously handsome and extremely well-fed.

He stared at Torry, and the expression on his face changed as he saw the blaster. He started a movement toward his own clipped weapon.

"Don't try it, Bart," ordered Torry sharply. "I think I'd enjoy killing you."

Bart Roper sighed deeply. "You took unfair advantage of me," he complained. "I thought you were hurt or killed. I was coming to see—"

"To make sure of me, if you'd missed? Maybe not. Maybe you did have a human impulse for once. I'll try to think so. And you can see how much it hurts when someone takes advantage of any human weakness. It hurts, doesn't it?"

Roper nodded slowly. "It does. So you've got me! Don't be so proud of yourself. It wasn't that hard. I was cooked from the moment your police pals got their hands on the transmitter. It was my only way out. You know that, of course. I just wanted the pleasure of taking some of you with me. I'm not going back to Mars. The disintegrators, or life in the prison mines don't appeal to me. So you'd better kill me now."

"I will if you force me," Torry told him wearily. "But I'm not making it that easy for you. There's a choice, but you won't like it. I've made a deal with Grannar. You can die now, or you can go back to Earth to the clinic."

"The clinic!" shrieked Roper. "You know what that means. I wouldn't be the same person. Maybe not even human."

Torry steadied his eyes on his brother. "I'm not sure you ever were human. But you need treatment. They'll knock out your thymus, drug you and shock you and carve you till you'll never know yourself. You won't be an antisocial monster with the emotional stasis of a child. You won't be anything you've ever been. But you may be a man. And you'll stop hurting people, or they'll stop you for good. The choice is yours—right now. So make up both our minds before I decide to shoot."

Roper yielded with a grimace of distaste. "You win, Torry. You always did, sooner or later. I was quicker, but you were smarter. I guess Rose was the last of your toys I'll ever swipe. And it's back to kindergarten for Bart Roper."

Torry relaxed, though he still did not lower his gun.

"You'll be going back on the survey ship, Bart. That way, you'll have a long voyage in the brig to meditate on your sins. But on Earth, you'll have Rose. You're a married man there, with a wife and child. Rose still loves you, Bart. When you steal something, it stays stolen. I'm not going back, so you'll get Rose after all."

Roper laughed coldly. "That's what I meant about your being smarter than I am. You always come out ahead."

Torry's eyes followed a moving mirage to a notch high on the walls of the gully. The glitter of cold metal was not illusion. Tharol Sen held a gun on him, unwaveringly.

"You can come out now," Torry said to her. "It's all over."

Tharol Sen lowered her gun and walked unsteadily toward them.

"Why didn't you shoot?" Roper stormed at her angrily. "You could have killed him before he pulled the trigger."

Inside her face plate, Torry could see her eyes dim with hot tears.

"Yes, I could have," she said brokenly. "But maybe I've seen enough mirages to recognize one. . . ."

MANY Martian hours later, three people watched the survey ship blast off from Triton. Before the ship left, Grannar had

been taken aboard and removed from his spacesuit long enough for drugs to be administered and his legs set and splinted. Now, with painkilling narcotics deadening him, the policeman was scarcely aware of the departing ship with his prisoner aboard, consigned bodily to Earth and its clinic for incurable criminals. Grannar had relaxed into a dope-daydream of a comfortable future on Earth as a plankton farmer, with nothing to do but read minifilm detective stories.

Watching the ship vanish beyond a skyful of mirages, Torry tried vainly to conquer a feeling of depression. Loneliness swept over him, as if with the sudden termination of his obsession about Roper, his life had lost most of its meaning. It occurred to him suddenly that Tharol Sen must be feeling infinitely worse. With a quick glance toward Grannar to make sure that the policeman was all right, Torry climbed slowly to the eyrie in the high rocks where the girl had hidden herself. Like a doll in a space suit, Tharol Sen huddled together, staring upward as if toward some vanishing illusion.

Shared loneliness sometimes loses its sting.

But Tharol Sen ignored Torry's presence, and he felt acutely embarrassed.

"You'll be better off without him," Torry said, consoling her. "And life will be much simpler."

"I know that," she replied sharply. "What else did you want?"

Torry laughed.

"Business, I guess. According to Solar Spaceclaw, we three are sole owners of Triton and its mineral rights, since we were on the spot and in possession when the survey ship arrived. Your people will have the transuranics they need. But the stuff won't work in the transmitter, so it'll have to go in the hard way. High freight charges will cut down the profits, so I don't think any of us will get rich. I'm sure that Grannar will sell his rights cheap. And as far as I'm concerned, I'd rather your people had the stuff at cost, so I'll sign over my rights to them for the forty-one thousand credits I've invested. Also, you can claim salvage rights on the transmitter of a third of the value, and I'm sure the inventor will be happy to have it back at that. I won't ask any part of the salvage claim. Money just weighs me down anyhow."

"That's very generous of you," murmured Tharol Sen. "My people will be very grateful to you."

"And you," he asked. "Just how grateful will you be?"

Her eyes blinked, then stared soberly through the face plate of her helmet. "Ask that again—"

"It's not part of the deal, of course. But you bragged that you could make Roper forget a girl back on Earth. I need some full time forgetting, and I wondered if you'd like to try the same stunt for me."

Tharol Sen studied him for a long moment before answering.

"When we're out of these helmets," she said softly, "you can kiss me. Just once. For gratitude. Afterward, much later, we can think about the rest, and discuss it with dignity. If you're staying on Mars, why not look me up . . . sometime?"

"Why not?" asked Torry, grinning. Then without waiting for the kiss, he made his decision. "And I'm staying on Mars. . . ."