

# FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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# revolt on mercury

by STANLEY MULLEN

The mob stormed into the wealthier section, looting where there was anything to loot, burning, killing.

*THE LAST* thing they did on Mercury was to dismiss guards and unlock all the prisons.

Silence clamped down hard. Men sat around or stood up and shuffled uneasily in the cramped space allotted them. They waited for the doors to unlock and open. They waited for bells to ring, to summon them to breakfast, to the workday.

But silence continued. None of the electric doorlocks clicked. No guards appeared to herd them anywhere. No bells rang. Nothing happened. They grew restless and nervous and oddly afraid. Whispers and rumors went from cell to cell, and it was guessed, mostly, that someone had slipped-up in the control room. But whispers and rumors solve nothing.

In the prison, as on most of Mercury, there was neither night nor morning. Light came on or went off automatically. Time was a matter of atomic clocks, or to astronomers, sidereal clocks. Time for the convict laborers was a schedule of work-period, sleep-period, eat-period, and so-called recreation time when

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*Suddenly they were free. These convicts, these murderers, these thieves, these men and women rejected by Earth, found themselves given one final chance to make something of their lives. Stanley Mullen writes about their struggle to create a new world out of blazing chaos.*

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there was nothing to do but sit around and growl with other convict laborers and decide that life was not worth it.

Then suddenly, without warning, there was this morning that was different from the others. Night sounds merged into waking sounds, and those to restless sounds while you waited for the bells and for the slop-breakfast and the start of the day's work. You woke as usual, stirred around, and nothing happened. Your fellow convicts grumbled as usual, and some sat down to grumble. A few returned to their bunks and stretched out to enjoy the luxury of their first non-scheduled rest-period. At first, nobody noticed the silence. And nobody thought to try the doors.

Not until empty bellies were growling, and relaxing became boredom, and boredom became hunger and thirst, and these two became anger. Then the chant started, low and fierce, and the rhythmic stamp of feet, like a ceremonial war-dance. Then the building of excitement which precedes a riot. But how far can a prison riot get when you are locked in the cellblocks, unarmed, no guards in sight for hostages, and no one to force to unlock the doors?

From there, the logical next step was to try the doors.

In unison, like something in a mechanical ballet, every door in the prison slid open.

It was as simple as that. But the simple things are the most frightening. An open door on Mercury is not as inviting as it might be other places. Doors opened and mouths opened. And with their road to freedom clear, the convicts fell back, too dazed and habit-bound or frightened to take advantage of their liberty.

All but three of them—

Alby and his two cellmates acted on pure reflex and jumped out into the corridor without thinking. Then each stood and stared at the other two and they stared back, frozen. But there was a quick thaw. None of the three was a man to miss an obvious opportunity. They had nothing but their lives to lose and all three were lifers in a place where life was not worth much at best. They went, heading out quickly and with ceremony, before someone, somewhere changed his mind, and schedule caught up with them again.

"Outside the prison quick!" shouted Alby.

They bolted down the corridor between the cellblocks with their banks of yawning doors. Their example inspired others, and men boiled out of the cellbanks onto the metal decking and the stairs like ants from a shattered anthill.

Carfax and Groaner got through the main door of the prison first as might be expected of an agile pair of cat-burglars doing time as habit-

ual criminals. But Alby joined them almost at once, coming through the door like a cork shot from a champagne bottle. There was mounting pressure behind.

"No guards, anywhere!" howled Groaner. "No guards at all!"

"What's going on?" demanded Carfax. "Didn't you birds pay your rent, or something?"

"Anyhow, who cares?" shrieked Groaner.

"Who cares?" Carfax yelled, grinning.

He and Groaner set a stiff pace down the main City Tunnel. Behind them, the heavy doors of the prison crashed outward with the violence of explosion. A tidal wave of men swept toward them along the resounding tunnel. Men wildly and tearfully excited, men hysterical, men pale and sober and mutely dangerous. Men caught up in the unrestrained fury and joy of a taste of sudden, unexpected freedom. Men whose business was making trouble, all ready to go back in business.

A few laggards and worriers had tried to hold back, but the sheer mass of the rest caught them up and whirled them along in a hurricane of emotion and physical force.

Alby caught one of his partners with each craggy fist and dragged them by naked strength into an eddy. Even there, the three had to fight for breathing space.

"Did you notice," he screamed above the hubbub. "Only the automatic machinery is running. Nothing that has to be tended. And there was no traffic when we hit the main tunnel." He stopped and let them digest this important fact, then went on—

"Just slow down a minute, and let's think this over."

Carfax stared at Groaner's coarse, heavy-featured face, and from that to Alby's thin, sharply ascetic face, and saw both of them reflect his own dawning comprehension and horror.

"I'm not sure I'm going to like this," Carfax muttered.

Not much later, that was to be remembered by all three as the understatement of the year for Mercury....

Through main tunnels and side tunnels and connecting tunnels, even through sewers surprisingly empty of matter on its way to the waste converters, up ramps and the elevators which were still working, the floods of men rose to the high levels which housed most of the living quarters of the underground city. In their mass-mind was thought only of riot and revolt, of looting and murder, of rape and pillage, and they headed first to Administration and the wealthier sections of the city which lay beyond. They had to find someone to take out their hatred upon, and the bosses and

their families were target number one.

Here, they found life and movement, such as it was. They found others before them, already looting what little was left to loot. Others as downtrodden and bedraggled and vengeful as themselves. Others as hate-happy and hopeless and desperate.

The chief difference between the various parties bent on loot and violence were that some wore drab prison uniforms and others wore only the rags and shabby uniforms of volunteer indentured workers and immigrants, all lured by the false advertising and the fool's gold of wealth on Mercury.

The Bosses and their families had departed. Officials and their families were gone, bag and baggage. Higher paid workers, technicians, designers, administrators, and their like, all of them had vanished, and their portable belongings with them. Even the guards and the police had gone, and when the latter went, so went law and order.

The scum and sweepings of the city, the beggared tenant farmers in hydroponics, the rough element which had drifted in from heaven know where, the second generation pioneers whose inheritance had been snatched from under their noses, the rank and file of low income workers, dog-robbers and beachcombers, drunks and harlots, the crim-

inal elements, the marginal men of all kinds, like mixed-blood Martians and Venusians, and grubby Diggers from Callisto—all the frothing yeast of society had felt the lifting of police restraints. Like hordes of wild animals, they stormed into the wealthier sections of the city looting where they found anything to loot, burning where they found nothing, killing those few underpaid servants left behind by departing plutocrats, killing each other when other targets for hatred failed.

Before the convict laborers reached the area, savagery reigned. Tunnels were filled with flickering red glare. Atmosphere was foul with heat, smoke, and the deadly gases released by combustion. Weaker members already were suffocating in the press, being trampled underfoot, dying of sheer frustration. Hardly anyone was in a state of mind for clear thinking, and the few that were, had no time for it.

When the convicts drove in among the previous looters, hell was really afoot. Confusion broke into knots of struggling men. No nobody lacked an adversary. Contagion of violence spread through the city. Business blocks were ransacked, stores broken into. Everything breakable was smashed. Anything portable was loot, and whoever had it was your

enemy. Everybody was everybody's enemy. And worst savages of all were the narcotics-crazed addicts. Since the Company had encouraged dope-pushing because conditions were so terrible on Mercury, and also as an additional means of keeping working classes in line, there were so many addicts now—all tortured with the craving, all searching in vain for the dope, and all growing more frantic and vicious as they searched in vain.

Probably half of the poorer people in the city were on the dope. There were so many of them, it was no miracle that Alby, Carfax and Groaner encountered one. It would have been a miracle if they had not—

The three had not joined in the looting. For a while, the crowds had carried them along. But three stout hearts and willing elbows, and three pairs of fists, had won a way out of the pack for them. They holed up after a fashion, scurrying from rathole to rathole, avoiding the clash of mobs, the insane violence, fighting when necessary, running if outumbered, but on the whole staying clear of the uproar.

Obviously, there was nothing worth fighting and being butchered over. The ruling forces of Mercury had taken everything portable along on their exodus.

She came upon them sud-

denly, springing out from some cranny in the tunnel wall. She came at them, screaming, clawing, eyes as colorless and formless as swirling smoke. From her rags of costume, she had already had rough handling. Most women alone in the city were being killed by men fighting over them, but this one had escaped personal violence, though her clothes obviously had not.

Crouched, ready for defense, Alby whirled and struck out at her wildly. In previous encounters, there had been no time to sort out adversaries. Weaponless, you got in the first blows, or you were not there for the second round.

His fist cracked explosively in her face, and she went out cold.

"It's a woman!" Carfax said.

"So what?" demanded Alby irritably. "You've seen one before, haven't you?"

"Not too recently."

Alby nodded glumly. He knelt beside her and picked up the identag with its luminous "LP."

"I guess I haven't been in long enough to get interested in one like this," Alby observed grimly.

"Sure, and a hophead at that. Not bad looking, though, if you like Venusians. I don't. What are you going to do with her?"

Groaner whistled. "Do we

have to do anything with her?"

"We don't have to," Alby spat. "However, we can't leave even one like this lying here unconscious. You know what would happen to her when the first mob comes by."

Groaner shrugged. "I remember what a guy once said about a hunk of expensive stinking cheese."

"Alby's right," agreed Carfax. "And so are you. She's not worth the trouble, but we can't leave her helpless. They'd tear her to pieces, partly because of her association with the Bosses. Even civilized communities shave their heads, I hear, and Mercury is not too civilized just now."

"She's coming round," said Alby, relieved. This was no time to be saddled with a woman, certainly not this one.

The girl's eyes opened. A measure of sanity had returned to them. There was emotion in them, not smoke-filled horror. She blinked up at Alby and smiled.

"You look like a man, not a beast," she said, her voice the dull, simpering whine of a begging addict. "You look like a man who will pay for what he wants. I need a shot. I need it... bad, mister. Just a shot. Even a cut one. I'll do anything for a shot. Anything, mister..."

Alby stared at her without pity.

"If I had one, I wouldn't give it to you. And, sister, you

haven't anything I want. You're just lucky you haven't. And I have some bad news for you. There aren't going to be any more shots. Not for you, or anybody. Not here on Mercury."

She stared wildly around, and saw no hope on any of the three faces.

"But I've got to have it. There must be some. I know the Bosses have gone. But they wouldn't take it all with them. They couldn't do that to us. Not after getting us or the habit. They couldn't..."

"They could. They have. What makes you think they care about any of us? You're on your own, sister. Better find a place to hide and wait for this uproar to settle down. Some place where nobody can find you. Dig a hole and pull the hole in after you. We have things to do. We can't waste any more time on you."

"I can't," she murmured. "I can't take the cure this way. Not 'cold turkey,' no medicines, no reduced doses of drug. I can't stand it. Don't leave me alone. Take me with you. I won't be any trouble. I swear it. When the craving gets too bad, just beat me unconscious. I'll be grateful to you... Kill me if you have to. It would be a favor."

Carfax laughed, not unfeelingly. "Just stick with us and you'll probably get killed quickly enough!"

"You're not like the others. Take me with you," she pleaded.

"Sorry, sister. No dice. We'd only get ourselves killed trying to defend you. Tag along if you want. We can't stop you. But don't expect any favors."

"Come on, Carfax," ordered Alby roughly. "We're wasting time." His eyes fixed grimly on the girl. "I'm afraid we can't take you with us. Don't try to follow us. I'll use force if I have to, and I'd rather not. You'd only bring trouble on us, and we have trouble enough, right now. We'll have more if we don't get going. Everyone will have more."

"Trouble!" she moaned, trying weakly to get to her knees, to stand. "You don't know what trouble is. Wait till the fools start wrecking the power stations and the air converters. We'll all suffocate."

Alby glared at her, his eyes narrowed shrewdly. "How did you know about that?"

"I... heard them talking."

"Where? Who? How many?"

She did not answer. Hands covering her face, she shook as if with a chill.

"There's no time to waste," Alby told his friends. "We'll have to head straight for the power stations and the air-conversion pumps. If we can find weapons, we can make a stand there..."

"Weapons," said Groaner, licking his dry lips.

The girl uncovered her face.

She was smiling thinly, a calculating expression in her eyes.

"I'll bargain with you," she said harshly. "I said I'd do anything for a shot. I know where you can find some weapons. I know..."

Her voice trailed off, her eyes blanked again. Alby grabbed and shook her ruthlessly. He hammered questions at her. She shook her head numbly.

"There aren't any shots. Not anywhere. There aren't going to be any. Understand?"

"Why should I tell you anything?" she burst out in cold fury. "Let them smash the machines. They're crazy and drunk and riding the whirlwind. But they'll be gasping for air soon enough. Who do they think they'll be hurting? It won't matter much anyhow. Only a matter of time for all of us. We've been left behind to die, to kill each other and die. There won't be any more foodships, no dope for people like me, no fuel for anything. Even the machinery will quit sooner or later, automatic or not. Who's left here to die but the scum like us. Who cares?"

"You care," Alby told her sternly. "You care, or you wouldn't be so full of hate and hurt."

"I don't care," she replied dully. "What have I got to live for? Look at me, you know who I am. What I am. Why should I want to go on living. Why should any of us?"



"You have as much and as little as any of us," Alby said. "We're scum, as you say. Maybe we are and maybe we're not. That's just a point of view. But I want to live. I'm going to go on living if only because I don't want to give those so-and-sos the satisfaction of dying. They can desert me on a planet that's not fit to live on, but I won't give them the satisfaction of dying. We figured this might happen someday. We talked about it, and decided what we would do. We think there's a chance we can take over and make a world right here on Mercury, a world where people can live. And we can build spaceships and go away. We think it's worth a try. But we can't do anything to defend the vital machinery against wreckers. Not without guns and ammunition. Won't you help us?"

"You wouldn't help me," she charged, her mood changing. "Will you, now. Will you do what I said—take me with you, and beat me unconscious when the going gets too rough?"

Alby glanced at his partners. Carfax and Groaner nodded.

"It's a deal, Cyanide Mary. Where are those weapons?"

She staggered, but set off down the corridor in stumbling, nervous walk. The three followed her through a mean section of warehouses and rat-nest hovels. They fol-

lowed her zombie-pacing to a maze of office structures carved from the living rock of subsurface Mercury. She led them through concealed panels, down spiraling ramps, into subcellars below subcellars. And at last she led them to a room where racked guns and cases of explosive ammunition lined the rock walls.

Thence, loaded like walking arsenals, they made their way to the airlocks guarding the entrance to the power stations and the air pumps. Alby and the girl stayed there on guard, while Carfax and Groaner made two more trips for supplies.

Then the tidal wave struck. Guns hammered and grew hot, and were abandoned. Men died in rows, screaming, crying out, falling upon one another. They fell back, reformed, came on again. Again the death-chatter of machine-guns blasted away the front ranks, the second ranks. The corridor floors grew slippery with blood and blocked with riddled bodies. But the three determined men held the fort and drove back the onslaught of maddened men. They held firm and worked the guns until the violence of the rioting and the drink and dope madness that followed wore itself out.

At intervals, as agreed, one or another of them left his post long enough to quiet the screams of the girl they had locked in a small room,

stripped of furniture so she could not hurt herself during her ordeal.

At intervals, one or another went in and beat her unconscious to kill the pain and craving and the madness.

It was a curiously symbolic birth in blood and tears and screaming madness for the first republic on Mercury. But then Alby always had been an idealist, after his fashion. A two-fisted, tough-minded idealist. And this was the reason Alby had got himself sent to Mercury....

Some whimsical demon must have designed Mercury as a study in extremes. Sunside is hotter than anything in the system but the Sun itself. Darkside is colder even than Pluto, where buried transuranic elements radiate enough heat to raise temperatures a few degrees warmer than the Eskimo idea of Hell.

Landscape is fantastic, in a manner uniquely Mercurian. One is always conscious of the Sun, visible or not. No one can look directly at such blindingly close magnificence. In size, if one dared look, it would seem to vary between twice and three times as large as the apparent size as seen from Earth. Imagine it as a half-bushel basket of pure dazzle held at arm's length. Or try not to imagine it at all. Try not to think of it.

Light and heat pour upon a naked planet, practically un-

clothed by atmosphere. Unshielded sunlight seems to have mass and density, and sensible pressure. It hammers upon a surface as broken, splintery and unstable as a field of ice-floes. It is stupendous setting for nightmare. Sunside, everything is unrelieved brightness or solid, opaque blackness. Darkside, all is gray with perpetual starlight. Here, savage mountains shine with frost-rime and sparkle with glaciated atmosphere.

Between these prodigies is the narrow, shifting belt of twilights, where a horizon-bound Sun rises and falls slowly, over long periods, creating a conditional world in which men can live, but under grotesque terms. Domed cities offer access to the troubled surface; otherwise life is lived troglodyte-fashion in caverns underground. ... ing goes on, for Mercury is rich in minerals and solar power is freer than water. Some foods are grown in hydroponic farms and gigantic yeast vats. Air is recycled, food is recycled; life itself seems to follow the cyclic patterns.

When the first penal colony was established on Mercury, there was some idea held that all criminals were insane to a greater or less degree. Many sent to Mercury were unfit also on physical or moral grounds. Besides the criminally insane, other unsound

types were herded into ships, or induced by false promises to emigrate to Mercury. Such a planet seemed an ideal dumping ground for habitual criminals, for the mentally disturbed, the physical and moral wreckage, for hopeless drug-addicts, and even for economic failures of various kinds.

Unfortunately for the dreams of psychiatrists of making Mercury a refuge, where care and isolation could mend the mind maimed, and restore the others through hope and hard work, the planets resources proved rich. So government backed promoters took over, using convict labor, and gutted the surface wealth for quick gain. And when profit margins dropped, they simply abandoned their slaves and hirelings with the rest of their worn-out tools, too poor in value to warrant the spacefreight cost.

When the riots damped-out from sheer exhaustion, not more than a third of the abandonees still lived. The weak had died and the more vicious had killed each other, for the most part.

Alby gathered about himself a force of more-intelligent hardheads, chiefly convicts, and established order. Government would have to be on primitive terms for a while, at least until essential living services were re-established and functioning.

Food and water and fuel

were needed desperately. Fuel was almost gone. Water could be obtained from Darkside, though reconstructing the badly neglected piping system would be both difficult and dangerous. Food must be grown in the hydroponics and yeast vats, which would take time. For the moment, remaining stocks must be doled out on savage ration, and belts would have to tighten. Fuel was the most desperate scarcity; without atomic stockpills, most of the machinery was useless, which created a vicious circle, for without atomics it refine atomics.

Power, there was. Solar power, drenching the Sunside surface. But to use it, silicon batteries or mercury-vapor turbines must be set up, and wherever possible, all machinery converted to electrical power. It was a gigantic project, required vast resources of men and technical knowledge. Not to mention the necessity for venturing forth on Sunside in protective armor which had been neglected until little better than junk.

Fortunately, Alby's people were tough, used to hard work, and a few of them chiefly convicts, had technical training.

"And," as Carfax observed, "we are not starting completely from scratch. We have the abandoned machinery, such as it is. We have technical libraries on microfilm. We have the know-how, and the have-

to, both of which are important."

"And we haven't too much time," warned Alby. "Do you think for a moment that they'll leave us alone, if we seem to be making out? The various government of Mars, Earth and Venus will be keeping wary eyes on us. They don't want us to make the thing go. An independent republic born of madness and crime and despair, would be a direct challenge to them. They can't afford to let us exist. And if they think there's a chance of making another quick profit, they won't be able to wait to get their greedy hands back into the gravy boat."

Carfax agreed soberly. "What happens when they come back? We can't fight them. One hydrogen bomb on the dome will destroy this city or any others like it that have managed to survive. We can't fight back, not without spaceships, and I for one won't surrender. I won't go back to prison life."

"We're still in prison," said Alby. "Just a larger prison. It's up to us to make our prison a home. We have that to do first, and we're working on it. When they come back, to destroy us or take over the world we've made here, we'll fight. We have to fight. And if we can't lick 'em, we'll join them."

"They'll love that. How do you propose to manage that?"

"The same way I'm managing this cageful of wild beasts. Force them, if I can, persuade them when I can't force them; and as a last resort, appeal to their intelligence and self-interest. I want them to need us. In the meantime, we'll have to raise ourselves by our shoestrings."

Carfax grinned wearily. "Even that can be done, with a block and tackle. We have to do it without the block and tackle. Rough work."

"Then let's get on with it...."

Sunside was slightly cooler than Hell. Slightly. The light seemed worse than the heat. Even filtered and stepped-down in intensity by helmet faceplates, it was still blind, searing pain. Terrain was split and tortured into deep rift valleys, sometimes thermal-eroded into larger-scale versions of the Grand Canyon. Towering serrated mountains crisscrossed the surface in all directions. So close to the Liberation Zone, with the Sun's rays more or less horizontal, there was shade. Zinc and lead melted in the sunlight and stiffened into treacherous sludge in the shade.

Alby and his partners led out construction and repair crews, repairing water lines, building huge conveyor tubes which would lead superheated mercury from Sunside to Darkside, using the fantastic temperature differences to produce electrical power. In

the obsolete and cranky protective armor, such work was hardly an adventure, it was suicidal. But it had to be done. And, slowly and painfully, it was done.

After nightmares of continuous effort, which seemed to go on and on and on, the city became a functioning unit again. In time, food was being produced in sufficient quantities to increase the rations, the air supply clarified in pace with growing greenery, there was electrical power for the most vital services and some factories began to operate, after a fashion. There were setbacks, such as the constant quake dangers, tectonic stresses which rippled through the underground world, doing damage not immediately found. There were blind alleys, such as mining, which could scarcely be carried on at deep levels without atomics. Which in turn blocked hope of obtaining atomics from that source.

Carfax was more disturbed by the failures than encouraged by the successes.

"With even a small amount of usable atomics, we could start a pile working, creating and refining. But without any, we can't even trigger a reaction in an atomtractor. We can't work the mines without atomic tools and trucks. And we need oil, real oil, not synthetics. Magnetic bearings don't last long enough on heavy machinery."

"That's true," Alby said. "That's one of the reasons we must be ready to make terms with the other planets. We must have trade, establish a balance. We can be almost self-sufficient on Mercury, but not quite. There's not a drop of oil on the planet, for one thing. None except the small stores which were brought in and left behind. And to establish trade, we'll need other things to offer besides old hatreds, and weapons to repel invasion.

"If we had a spaceship, we could turn pirate and raid for supplies," suggested Groaner amiably.

"For a while, yes," agreed Carfax. "But they'd only arm stronger and develop defenses we couldn't break through."

"We do need a spaceship," said Alby. "We'll have to have one."

"Fine. Just wave a wand. How can we build spaceships when we can't build atomic tractors? And how can you power ships with electricity?"

Alby smiled. "There might be a way, but I don't know it. Since we can't build a spaceship, we'll have to steal one. I've been thinking about it."

"Daydreaming?"

"A good daydream is always the beginning of an idea. I think we can implement mine. It won't be easy but—"

Alby broke off.

"Show me a spaceship, and I'll steal it," promised Groaner eagerly.

"I may do just that. There's one place on Mercury we can be sure is not abandoned. The polar observatory, for Solar observations. They keep a small space-cruiser there, just for emergencies. And a supply ship touches down about once every month (Earth-reckoning). With luck, we might even steal two spaceships, and some needed supplies. If we can make it to the South Pole—"

"That's a long walk, following the twilight zone."

"It's shorter directly across Sunside."

"Shorter, and hotter. Nobody ever made it alive. And the few fools who tried it had to be brought back by spacers—well-done on both sides."

"I didn't say it would be easy. I don't like the idea of being broiled in my jacket either. But I'm not asking anyone to take a risk I won't take myself. I'll go."

Groaner groaned. "Somebody always maneuvers me into a false position. I don't want to go, but I can't let you call my bluff. If you can get me there, even soft boiled, I'll steal you your spaceship."

Carfax stood by loyally. "If you can use a second cat burglar for the job, count me in. I don't like it, but since I'll probably spend Eternity in extreme heat, I may as well get used to the climate gradually. But maybe, instead of volunteers, you might want to

pick the men best suited to the work."

Alby snorted. "Can you see me picking men for this and giving the orders? I can't."

There had been trouble controlling the citizenry of the city. Nothing overt or violent, for the most part. In general, everyone went along with Alby's assumed leadership because he was headed in the only direction they could go. No party of open opposition could exist. But freedom, such as it was, had come too closely upon brutal and tyrannical subjection. Resentments stayed and fixed themselves upon even the shadow of authority. There had been outbreaks, though usually confined, there still was muttering, malingering and general unrest. Alby evaded every possible test of power, since he had nothing to gain by force, and everything to lose if his foot slipped.

"Ticklish business trying to run tigers in harness," commented Carfax. "How can we bargain with planets when we can't even work up a good basketball team?"

"Spread the word around," urged Alby. "I think you'll be surprised by the percentage who will offer to help within the limits of sticking their necks out on a creaky limb."

Word went around. Like yeast, it worked through the mass, fermenting. Strangely enough, several malcontents who had given a great deal of

trouble to the brittle administration had a reversal of feeling. They realized that, whatever they thought of Alby, his planning, his knowledge and his determination to make a workable world of their city, would be missed. A petition circulated requesting that Alby withdraw from the expedition.

The first offer of positive assistance came from an ex-engineer and inventor named Gresham.

"I'm shot physically and may not last the course," he said. "But if you can't get volunteers enough, I'll make a try at it."

"In your shape, you shouldn't venture outside the dome," Alby told him. "You need care and medicines. I know there are no medicines, but you'll last longer here than outside. We need good brains more than we need expendable bodies."

"I'll still go if you need me. Let me know."

"Thanks. But I have a job for you right here. Even if we snatch those ships, we're still in trouble. There's a patrol cruiser orbiting Mercury, keeping an eye on us. And stealing the ships may bring trouble right down on our heads, literally. One bomb in the dome that holds in our atmosphere, and we're through."

"If you expect me to rig a defense against that, you're whistling in the wind. As an engineer—"

"I know. There's no defense

in the physical sense. We need a psychological defense. A trick. We need a secret weapon."

"I don't think I can manage that, with the means at hand."

"Neither do I. So we'll try the next best thing. We'll try to convince them that we have a secret weapon. While we're off on this madman's try at stealing spaceships, I want you to daydream until you come up with something. It doesn't have to work. But it has to do something that will bother them, wondering if it might work. We'll need a faked demonstration. Probably something using the ships. Destroy one, if you have to. But make it spectacular. I want fireworks, heat rays, everything in the comic-tape arsenal. Can you do it?"

"As I said before, I can try."

"Good man. Work on it."

As preparations for the expedition went ahead, Carfax and Alby noticed that Groaner was showing signs of strain and depression. They approached him with it.

"Something on your mind, Groaner?" asked Alby.

Groaner shook his head. "Nothing at all. Well, yes, there is. I was thinking about my will. When you haven't got anything, it's harder to spread it around."

Alby laughed, but Carfax probed shrewdly to the heart of the matter.

"How's your sick cat coming along, Groaner?"

With a tenderness surprising in him, Groaner had undertaken the care and responsibility for the girl who provided weapons for their barricade at the only price they could pay.

"Nahli?" The girl was Venussian, and Groaner could not have pronounced her real name if he had known it. "She's all right. Getting along. What's going to happen to her if I leave her here alone?"

"Nothing that hasn't already, I'm sure," Carfax said roughly. Life and virtue were still precarious possessions on Mercury. They were the only things left worth taking, or holding, if they meant enough.

"Don't talk like that about her," warned Groaner. "She has good stuff in her. She had a rotten deal."

"Who hasn't had?" demanded Carfax, grinning. In love, Groaner was quite a spectacle. "Let's leave Groaner behind, chief. A lovesick cat burglar along will be no good to either of us. Have you ever heard a lovesick cat on a fence?"

Violence threatened, but Alby intervened, laughing.

"I think I can arrange for Nahli's safety while we're gone. Know Gresham? He'll look after her."

Groaner frowned. "That's not the problem. She's well now. Pretty strong. But she says she wants a job. Wants

to be needed. She wants to go along with us. Wants a chance to take risks and do something important. Like paying a debt."

"That does it!" bleated Carfax. "Two lovesick kitty burglars. No thanks."

"You're all wrong," said Groaner, glaring. "I haven't a chance with a girl like that, and I know it. She has a crush on Alby. Thinks he's an angel with brass wings."

"Somewhat tarnished, I'm afraid. I had no idea Nahli felt like that. And maybe you're mistaken anyhow."

"Imagine!" said Carfax, still asking for trouble. "I'd think once a girl had lost her amateur standing, she'd give up the sport, as such. You're all three nuts, if you ask me."

"Carfax is probably right," commented Alby sadly. "But I can't turn down volunteers. The girl can be useful. Tell her she can come along. We can use her as bait to lure the staff men outside the observatory. They wouldn't come out for us. For a girl, they might. You don't like the idea, do you, Groaner?"

"It stinks, like everything else around here."

"It does. But we have to be practical. And I'm being practical when I promise you something else. If the girl has a crush on me, I'll find a way to cure her of it."

"That's no favor," stormed Groaner. "It won't help me anyhow. And you simply don't



want her. You'd spit on her, wouldn't you?"

Alby's eyes flashed with anger. "I didn't say that. I said I wouldn't compete with you...."

It was a small caravan which crawled painfully across the broken surface of Sunside. Eight men and one woman. At the last moment, five other reluctant adventurers had been shamed into joining the expedition. Now, barely protected by obsolete and inadequate protective suiting, the nine dared the perilous passage.

Tectonic stresses of various kinds made volcanic outbursts commonplace. Quakes and landslides threatened death by violence every mile. Moving afoot anywhere was a scramble over terrain which jiggled, or roared down at you, without warning. In direct sunlight, some metals of low-liquification point were pools of molten brilliance. Each footstep, even in the shade where lead slush and crusted zinc gave footing as treacherous as quicksand, was a challenge to painful death.

Merciless glare angled across the great expanse of wastelands. Solid sunlight and opaque shadow-patterns seemed to be strewn at random. No depth of atmosphere tempered the killing force of sunlight. Only a shallow layer of heavier gases clung to deep chasms and hollows. Naked

veins of heated copper webbed the surface, conducting heat through even insulated soiling. The landscape was nightmare, and the pilgrims moved across it like a column of insects upon a hot stove.

At first, they had dragged sledloads of equipment and supplies by battery-powered tractors. But makeshift machinery broke down repeatedly, and real repairs were impossible. For a while, they dragged some of the lighter sleds by hand until the skids bogged in pools of bubbling mercury, mired in lead or zinc slush, or heated enough to stick fast to copper veins like skin freezing upon cold metal. Such progress was tragically slow, so eventually all sleds had to be abandoned, along with most of the equipment and supplies.

They went on afoot, carrying only weapons and food, and only the most scanty and optimistic ratios of the latter. Never had Sunside, or any considerable part of it, been crossed by a party on foot. But now it had to be done.

Second by second, minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day, week after week, they pushed on. Determination became despair, then combined into desperate determination. Long past the point of no return, they had no choice but to push on. Out there ahead, somewhere, lay the Polar Observatory Station. Horror had ceased to be comparative.

More dead than alive, they plodded on, and on, and on....

Polar Mercury is not much different from the rest of Mercury. Surroundings seemed less jumbled, possibly because of some variation in tectonic strains, offering less cover. High mountains were still visible, but they ringed the curiously-near horizon. Above their rugged silhouette appeared a segment of the savage Sun, rising and falling slowly according to season, and making a complete circle once each Mercurian year.

Dead-center in a high plateau was the Polar Station, most of its structure deep underground, but the observatory set high upon a natural mound, to make Solar sightings possible. Each building was a citadel planned for defense against the fearful environment, but equally effective against human attack.

Within sight of their first objective, but carefully out of sight of possible watchers, the expedition paused. Alby called a conference, after casing the layout, to discuss possible strategy and plan the attack. Reaching the station was only part of the project; there was still the staff-garrison to be dealt with, and (he hoped) spaceships to be stolen.

Groaner was groaning, as usual. "The inside of this armor of mine smells like a

poorly managed zoo," he complained.

Carfax laughed. "Well, Loverboy, steal us that spaceship you promised, and you can take it off."

Groaner turned to Alby. "Show me the spaceship and I'll steal it."

"They wouldn't be left above ground," said Alby sourly. "Below the airlocks are elevators. The ships will be cradled at the foot of the shafts. Somehow we'll have to get inside and hit the lower levels. As a burglar, you should have ideas about that."

Groaner said nothing, glancing significantly at Nahli. The girl was dead on her feet, as they all were. But inside her face plate, the thin, delicately molded face seemed more drawn and gray and ugly than even drugs had made her before. Only her native courage and high determination had brought her as far as this. And her Venusian heritage had given her deep-strength and heat-endurance, though even the second planet could not compete thermally with Sunside Mercury.

"I can tell you one thing," Carfax broke in. "We can't get through those airlocks unless someone opens them. And we're too small a force to take over the station, so it will have to be a quick job, in and out again, before they get over the first shock of surprise."

Alby studied Nahli sharply. "I guess you're elected," he

told her. "If you think you can do it, walk straight out and let them see you. Stumble a few times, pretend to fall, get up, stagger on, then pretend to faint."

"It may not be pretense," she said weakly.

"I know. Step up your communicators and keep calling for help. They'll know about what happened in the prison-cities, and may be ready for trouble, like us. But it won't occur to them that a woman could cross Sunside, and live. They'll be curious. And, whether they're in a Samaritan mood or not, they will have to investigate. It's a prison offense in interplanetary law not to answer a call for help. So they'll come out. You know what to do then."

The girl nodded. "I know. But I won't kill them. I brought a paralysis gun, so I wouldn't have to kill them. It's short range, and the effects won't last long. So you'll have to rush the airlock fast, before they come out of their daze." She touched the gun concealed in a fold of her bulky suit-armor. "I am ready."

"No time like now," said Alby roughly. "And whether it works or not, thanks. That goes for all of you."

Nahli left concealment, tottering, but moving rapidly toward the airlock. They could hear her voice calling out, weak but startling amplified. Nearing the flattened airlock domes, she faltered, fell, got

up and staggered on. She fell again and her amplified voice pinched off completely. She lay still. The eight men waited and wondered. Had she finally collapsed from strain and hardship? Or was she playing the grim game?

They waited. Slowly, the airlock doors slid back. A dark opening appeared at the head of the shaft. Three figures emerged, heavily-suited, armed and weapons ready. They approached the prostrate girl. They bent over her limp figure, talking.

After that, the scene dissolved into action and sheer violence. There was no time to wait and see if the ruse was effective. Alby gave a crisp command. His tiny force raced toward the airlock. There was staccato firing. Confusion. Savagery.

At the top of the shaft was huddled conflict. Screams amplified through helmet communicators. Hand to hand fighting, since the press was suddenly too great for firearms. Carfax broke free from the melee and busied himself setting charges to blast through from the airlock valve into the inner workings. He stood away, shouting a code word to his friends to retreat.

Machinery erupted in a gigantic geyser, spewing wreckage. In the stunned silence following explosion, Alby's men charged back in to make good their gains.

Pressured atmosphere was

escaping from below in high, whistling scream. The scream echoed and re-echoed as workmen fled through mazed tunnels, trying to escape suffocation as the atmosphere leaked swiftly away. Down the shaft swarmed Carfax and Groaner, their cat-burglar agility and skills serving them in good stead. At the bottom of the shaft, cradled, ready for flight, were the two spaceships. One small, fast cruiser, the other a clumsy but commodious supply craft.

Groaner and Carfax took the cruiser, herding the surprised, spacesuited crew outside with leveled guns.

"I don't know what the Burglars Union will say about my blowing up that airlock valve," observed Carfax. "I was never a soup-man or safe-cracker."

"We'll worry about jurisdiction later" snapped Groaner. "Alby said for us to pick up Nahli, if she's still all right. He and the others are making a try for the supply ship. It's still loaded and the city could use those supplies. Let's get this spacecan out of here. Now."

Carfax pressed a remote-control stud. Riding a cushion of compressed air, the cruiser rose swiftly and smoothly up the shaft. At the top, Carfax switched over to ship's power and the ship shot from the airlock like a slug from an air-gun. The craft lifted, hovered, made a wide swing and set down again. In space, such a

ship is graceful, smooth-working; but for surface working on planets, a spaceship is as awkward and floundering and abrupt in movement as a grounded goose.

The landing jarred both men's teeth. But almost before the ship touched ground, Groaner was through the tiny airlock and slipping money-like to the surface. He landed running, wondering where this last reserve of strength came from, and headed toward the spot where Nahli struggled hopelessly in the grip of aroused and frightened technicians from the station. He went among them, scattering men like tenpins, snatching half-conscious Nahli from their hands. But before he could make a run back to the ship, his enemies had closed in again, surrounding both him and the girl.

Carfax stood clear, firing slowly, carefully, with deadly accuracy. Groaner broke clear, half-carrying Nahli. He made for the ship. Carfax kept up a rear guard action until a hail of missile cut him to shreds. He fell dead, his body partly buried in a bank of lead sludge.

With no time for tears, no time for regrets or revenge, Groaner thrust Nahli through the airlock, and followed her. He slammed the ship upward into a black, reeling, skyfull of stars. At full power, the acceleration shock nearly blacked him out. He set the

controls on automatic-pilot, heading home.

Groaner bent over Nahli, ministering. "Are you all right?"

"I'm alive," she whispered hoarsely. "How about you? You're hurt. Is it bad?" Groaner glowed at the first interest she had shown whether he lived or died.

"I'll make out," he muttered. "Carfax is dead."

"I know. I know," the girl murmured, eyes stinging.

Partway back to the city, Groaner slowed the cruiser, waiting to see if the supply ship would catch up. He had no way of knowing how Alby and the others had come through the conflict. Then a speck of light appeared astern, growing swiftly in the fat, serviceable supply ship. Groaner let it close the gap and worked the signal blinker beams for word from his friends.

Alby answered. They had their ships. There was a price in lives, and it had been paid. Alby and two others had come out alive, and were working the ship, short-handed, Alby received the news about Carfax calmly. But he felt no elation over his victory. They had taken a desperate gamble and won, but good men had died on both sides. It was a waste. But what had to be done had been done. He swallowed hard on his losses.

Nearing the dome of their home city, the two ships al-

most ran head-on into a blockading force of Space Patrol ships.

Evading the warships, by swift maneuvering before the officers commanding the fleet could marshal for action, Alby got his prizes through the blockade down the airlock tunnel, and into the city. Not, however, without getting his outer hull-plates singed by a lucky sweep of the flagship's beam-gun battery.

Home safe, thought Alby. But how safe?...

Gresham was waiting for Alby when he stepped down the ramp from the cradled supply ship. Exhausted, Alby nearly fell into the engineer's arms.

"What are they doing out there now?" asked Alby, his voice dull from weariness.

"Same thing," answered Gresham. "They're just circling, like cats around a mousehole. They've been doing it since shortly after you left on the raid. Congratulations, by the way! You've really pulled their whiskers by stealing those ships. I don't know how much good they'll do us, but they may have bargaining value."

"Maybe, and maybe not. I wonder what they're waiting for out there."

Gresham shrugged. "Want to take us alive, I suppose. We still have value, as convict labor. Also, if they dropped a bomb, it would do a lot of damage. They still

think the city is their property, not ours. I think they're waiting for someone back on Earth or Mars to untangle the red tape and decide what to do about us. Waiting for definite orders."

"They may get impatient now. Stealing the ships might make up their minds for them. Let me know if they show any signs of changing their maneuver. I'm dead for sleep. I could sleep a week, straight through. Let me have an hour, then call me. Did you rig up some kind of fake weapon that will put on a show?"

"Yes, but—"

"Not now. My brain's too fuzzy for details. See that it's installed in the supply ship. Use paper clips, if you have to, but get it installed. Our time's running out fast."

Gresham nodded grimly. Alby was sound asleep before the nod was completed. He tilted forward, and Gresham had to hold him upright until men could carry him away, still sleeping.

When Alby awakened, fully dressed, he was surprised to find Nahli sitting beside his bed, watching him.

"You're going to try something dangerous, aren't you?" the girl demanded.

"Dangerous!" Alby laughed. "After all we've been through?"

"Don't hedge with me. You're going out, alone, trying to talk them into something. You don't have to an-

swer. I know you're going. And it's dangerous. Before you go, I want to say something. It won't take a minute."

"Talk fast," said Alby, "while I'm throwing cold water on my face."

"Groaner thinks I'm in love with you. You promised not to compete with him. You don't have to, Alby. If you want me, that's the way it is. But I don't think you want me. I don't think you'll ever want me."

"Wanting you has nothing to do with it, Nahli. And you don't really love me, or want me. You just think you should, for some fantastic woman's reason. You sense that I'm different."

Her lips twisted bitterly. "I should know all about love. I don't. I'm as scared and confused of it as any green kid. I do feel something about you, more like pain and pity and awe than like love as a girl thinks of it. You are different from any man I've ever known. Not better or worse, just different."

"I'm a humanoid robot. Not clanking machinery, but a hash of synthetic flesh, reclaimed organic matter and salvaged parts. A scientific zombie, an experiment in lab-created humanity, which went haywire and turned on its creators. I escaped, and was nearly enough human to escape detection. As a human being, I was sent here."

"Not human. Then some-

body sent you here. No robot ever does anything but follow orders. Someone, maybe a subversive organization, sent you here to take over the convicts for their purpose. Who sent you, Alby? What do they want?"

Alby laughed, his face harsh. "If you mean God may have wanted to try a new experiment with the dregs and refuse of humanity and sent me to organize it, you may be right. I don't know about that. But if you mean I'm working for some human agency, like politicians, freethinking philosophers or curious scientists—no. It was my own idea."

Nahli looked dubious. "I told you I was different—different from men and from other robots. Back on Earth, after I escaped, I became a sociologist. I was full of ideas, spoke out against corruption and inhumanity. The only way they could shut me up was to frame me, and send me here. They wanted to bury me in the prisons of Mercury and suddenly I wanted to turn corruption into a higher idea of man, of men freethinking and adventurous, but practical, loyal, capable of governing themselves. We can do that, Nahli, if I can buy a little time. And the men can do it without me, if I have to buy their chance with my life. My synthetic life."

"No," she protested.

"Don't worry," said Alby. "I'm not dying unless there

is no other way. I like life, and respect it. Even my own."

Nahli followed Alby into the elevator which was taking him to the ship docks.

"What about you and Groaner?" Alby asked.

"I don't know. I like him. Sometimes it seems more than that. I owe him a lot, and I'm grateful."

"Don't let that blind you to more important emotions. Groaner's a proud man. He'll never settle for less than love. If you can't give him that, give him honesty."

"I will. I've told him how I feel. I hope he understands. Later on, I might find that I've loved him all the time. But if he hurries me, I could hate him. He's afraid, even though you agreed not to compete. It makes him impatient."

"When they made me, Nahli, they left out one factor, sex, and the capacity for having children."

"There are other kinds of love. We could skip that."

"Now, perhaps," said Alby sadly. "But people have to have something to live for. Children give them that. The people of Mercury are my family."

"I know," murmured the girl. "Can I tell Groaner about you, so he'll stop worrying?"

"If I come back, I'll tell him, Nahli."

"Take care of yourself, Alby. We need you. All of us need you. Without you, we're lost and frightened...."

The ships rested in cradles, just inside the airlock.

Men clustered around them, busy at numerous tasks, all working quietly, skillfully. Watching them, Alby felt strangely proud. His people. Good men. Good technicians, especially the ex-prisoners. Criminals are usually good technicians, since they can't afford not to be. Safecrackers are experts with explosives; pickpockets skilled with their hands, delicate and precise of touch. No psychologists anywhere could compete with confidence men. The same, all through the various professions.

Even an amateur murderer like Gresham might have hidden talents beyond the ordinary. Might be a first class engineer, an inventor in various lines. His murder had been ingenious enough, and only unpredictable accident had betrayed him.

"Is the supply ship unloaded?" Alby asked Gresham.

"Unloaded, yes," replied the engineer. "We're still installing the weapon. Paper clips wouldn't do."

"You'll have time. And pick a crew to operate it for me. We're running a bluff, but it has to look convincing."

"It will. I'll operate it myself. I'm going along."

"Can your bad heart stand the excitement?"

"It'll have to. I wouldn't miss the expression on your face when my fireworks start popping."

Alby grinned in sympathy. "It had better work."

"It will, as far as it goes..."

"Signal a parley," instructed Alby. "I'm going out first, alone, in the cruiser. And I don't want them shooting at me. Not yet, anyhow. Tell them I'll speak only to their commander."

Gresham licked his lips. "Just like that? High-handed. You can't talk them out of this, Alby."

"Talk first. Then our bluff. If neither work, we'll fight them through the elevators, through the streets and tunnels and even the ratholes, inch by inch. This is our home."

"We may have to earn it," prophesied Gresham.

The Space Patrol commander was a civilized man. He remembered Alby and grimaced unhappily.

"I might have known you'd have a finger in this pie," he said. "So you're spokesman for that rabble of thieves and cut-throats?"

"No longer a rabble," Alby warned softly. "And I've known worse men. When the Bosses abandoned Mercury, they left behind one valuable commodity—people."

The commander winced. "I know about that. And a great many people back home were incensed when word leaked out. They thought it was a stinking trick."

"People here thought so, too," commented Alby drily.



"We did something about it. We've severed relations."

"Personally, I don't blame you. Officially, you are still considered subject to the various governments of the Allied Planets. Nobody will recognize your claim to autonomy, and you can't make it stick. I've orders to look in, make sure you're all right, and place you back in custody peaceably. Your people seemed ready to dispute the point. I have no direct orders to start bloodshed, but I'm expecting such orders any time."

"Before you start anything," said Alby, "I have some counter terms to offer. Just go away and leave us alone. We're making out. We can do better if Allied Planets will establish trade relations with us. We need oil, some starter atomic fuels, some trickier machinery, medicines—"

"I don't think you're in a position to bargain. No civilized planet will recognize you as a free and independent citizenry with a valid government of your own."

"What's civilized about abandoning us to kill each other or die? We think your governments forfeited jurisdiction by neglect, by endangering our lives, and by the whole planet."

"Only the get-rich-quick promoters. Putting them in charge of the colonies here was a mistake, and there's

talk that they will be punished. None of the governments—"

"I'm not here to argue politics. We now have our own way of life. We like it, and we intend to keep it, whether anyone recognizes us or not."

The commander smiled indulgently. "You never were an armchair sociologist, Alby. But as a sociologist, you know that all governments are born in war, not ideas or dreams. There were eight prison-cities on Mercury. Two wiped themselves out during the riots, possibly through failure of the machinery. None of the others is showing any signs of developing into responsible city-states. We could take them over with feather dusters, not guns. Can you speak for them? Can you implement a war?"

"We can if we have to," grated Alby. "We'd rather trade with you. Mercury has mineral richness to offer. And we can exchange valuable ideas. Even inventions."

The commander waved a contemptuous hand. "I doubt that."

"We already have one which might interest you. A secret weapon. I don't expect you to believe me, but I'm prepared to give a demonstration."

The commander laughed. "Go ahead."

"There's a hitch. I insist on a bloodless demonstration. We need a ship for a target.

Do you want to abandon one of yours, or shall I use the cruiser we took on the Polar Station raid?"

Alby took a deep breath while the commander debated the problem with himself.

"Better use the cruiser. I can't risk a Space Patrol ship on what might be a smooth piece of trickery."

Alby nodded. "Retire your ships out of range. We'll send out the cruiser first on robot-pilot. A zigzag course. The supply ship will follow. You'd better set up space-cameras. I'm sure you'll want to show them back home, as well as tell them."

The commander shrugged. . .

Two hours later, the unmanned cruiser shot from the airlock sally-port of Dome City V. It took off erratically in a series of eerie zigzags and twisting spirals.

The supply ship, weaponed with a fantastic hodgepodge of gadgetry, followed in slow, clumsy pursuit. As a special favor to an old friend, Alby had permitted the Space Patrol commander aboard, giving hostages to the fleet as security for the person and comfort of the commander.

At a safe distance above the city, Alby called the commander close to the weapon.

"No tricks, commander. To prove it, Gresham offered to let you shoot down the cruiser."

The commander stared at

the complicated monstrosity with amusement. He let Gresham instruct him in its operation.

A pencil-thin beam licked out through darkness. Like magic, it fixed itself upon the difficult target.

Coruscating violence of soundless light filled the sky, lighting up a large portion of Mercury's surface brighter than sunlight had ever lighted it. The cruiser had ceased to exist, but the deadly accuracy of the beam, and the utter violence of dissolution, stunned the mind.

Pale, the commander turned from the holocaust.

"I don't know, I just don't know," he muttered. "I have no authority to make deals, or any decisions as important as this."

"A commander in space always has authority to avoid a needless waste of ships and men," Alby reminded soberly.

"I'm impressed," admitted the commander stiffly. "But the best I can offer is armistice. I'll have to report, and the governments of Allied Planets will send out qualified observers. There's always the possibility that you had time-bombs planted in that cruiser—"

"I offered to use one of yours for the demonstration."

"So you did. But I remember playing poker with you—just once, a long time ago."

Alby grinned. "If you can spare one of your ships. . . ."

"No, thanks. Signal my lighter to bring in your hostages and take me back to the fleet. I'll make my report, and ask to be transferred to the Mars-sector. Your poker games are too rough, and I play a low limit game...."

Back in City V, Alby and Gresham watched the fleet turn and depart, heading back for Venus report.

"We've bought a little time, that's all," Alby commented. "We ran our bluff and bought a little time. The show was brilliantly conceived and brilliantly executed, Gresham. Spectacular enough to scare even me. I won't ask how you did it, because I probably wouldn't understand."

"I don't myself. Not for surse." Gresham was grinning, pale with excitement, but strangely excited.

"I don't know what we'll do when they come back for a real demonstration. Your gadget won't work, and then what—"

"Who says it won't work? I nearly blew up the city with it, just on a dry run. Four hundred years ago, a cartoonist named Rube Goldberg specialized in doodling the most complicated and unlikely devices for accomplishing simple tasks. It's been a standing joke among scientists ever since. I started doodling the same way, in three dimensions. That's all I had in mind. But the gadget took over.

Don't worry about that second demonstration. It will work."

"It really works? That thing!"

Gresham grunted. "It's no more unlikely than making Mercury a decent place for decent people to live. If we can do one, we can do the other. And Allied Planets will have to meet our terms. It's a stand-off."

Gresham and Alby stared at each other in silence. The engineer broke it. "Take off that mask, robot. I know you. And you're a better man than I am...."

"How long have you known?"

"From the first. And Carfax knew. We'll miss him. And we'll miss a lot of good men before we're through. We have the other cities to help. And a lot of nasty technical jobs to lick. And maybe some fighting we can't bluff out. But we'll do it, and what then?"

"What do you mean?"

Gresham looked upward through the transparent dome of plastic, at the dark sky and the wide scattering of stars and planets.

"What are you going to do when you've civilized Mercury?"

"I hadn't thought about it," admitted Alby. "But there's always Venus and Mars...and Earth."

"If you need help with them," said Gresham seriously, "call on me...."