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Air currents tossed the sky-sled madly, as Mitch fought the controls. The spaceship had screamed past them...

THREE WORLDS IN SHADOW



Feature Novel Of
Days To Come

By **JOE GIBSON**

Mercury, Venus, Mars—all depended on the Graham air-renewers, for once a man or woman stepped out of the domed cities, an artificial air-supply was vital. The Graham air-renewers had replaced the old, short-lived air-tanks. But now, the renewers were beginning to fail, and James Mitchell, hired to protect Eileen Graham, found that this was much more than one woman's battle against intrigue that was destroying her business. Someone was trying to control the air-supply, and gain life-and-death power over the worlds!



THE SHIP came gliding out of the star-sprinkled heavens, its forward rockets extending beams of blue-hot energy past its sleek nose. The gaunt, crater-scarred surface of the Moon rolled past, ten thousand miles off the portside. Aft and to the starboard, Earth was a bright, blue-green bauble against the jet-blackness of space. Sunlight bathed the smooth, five-hundred-foot hull as the ship jockeyed into an orbit circling the Moon. The forward tubes dimmed

There has been much discussion of sociological backgrounds of the future, and many feel that those science-fiction stories which present the familiar, Western-world economic order, projected into times to come, are unreal. They point out the vast changes that occurred here on Earth, following the opening-up of the far corners of our own planet to large-scale colonization—social and economic revolutions that altered not only the colonies, but also the "mother countries". Surely, such readers have argued, analogous changes should be expected should we reach and colonize the planets. We would not see the familiar social and economic structures we have here, now, although there is no telling whether the changes would be agreeable to our own, present-day viewpoints.

This strikes us as a reasonable enough argument—with one reservation: such changes, we think, would be gradual, and might not show up for a long time. For one thing, it is virtually axiomatic that humans on other planets would be dependent upon Earth for decades—perhaps for a few generations. (Assuming that the interplanetary era begins in our own time, before any major changes have occurred in our own milieu.) It would seem to follow, then, that the existing "order" on Earth would be strengthened by the situation, at first. That is, I think we would see much of planetary colonial life under the control of large Terrestrial corporations—supervised by the government, but still privately-owned. That transportation would be a government monopoly, as Mr. Gibson relates in this novel, also seems likely, for the reasons he states.

The present story, while showing three planets in a fairly advanced state of colonization, still presents the early period of an interplanetary era, and it seems to us that the picture (allowing for liberties in the description of actual conditions on the planets—after all, we won't be sure until we get there) is an intelligent one.

But there's plenty of room for argument on this subject, and the welcome mat is out for anyone who wants to dissent and give battle in "It Says Here".

their blue fire and winked out.

The freighter *Orion Girl* floated majestically in deep space above the Moon, five hundred tons of steel monster shackled to the gravity-pull of a dead world. The intercom blared in the control blister. "Atomics off. Gravitors balanced. All clear, engine room."

Pilot-Astrogator James Mitchell threw a harried glance at the intercom 'speaker, then fastened his gaze back

on the wide console of instrument-dials, gauges, buttons, switches, levers, knobs, and signal-lights that curved around the front of his acceleration chair. He had the manual control column pulled from its recess, gripping it firmly in his hands with a thumb curled over the *Release Automatics* switch.

"I think we've got her," he commented brusquely. "Stand by graviters. Rouchak, how's the servos?"

"*Servos check, Mitch,*" the intercom reported.

It was no problem any man could work out in his head, and it allowed no leeway for guesswork. It had to be computed mathematically, before the ship approached its orbit, then fed into the control automatics. The automatics guided the ship into the computed angle-and-velocity pattern. If the computations were wrong, the ship wouldn't hold its orbit—it would either break free and slide off into space or stagger and start plummeting toward the planet. Either result would demand swift action, with no time to fool with mathematical formulae or key-punch control board. It would demand the action of the pilot's two hands on the manual-control column.

But it had been done before, this business of swinging into an orbit around a planet. The computations were perfected to a fair degree of accuracy. Mitch watched the grav-indicator reading coincide with the chronometer sweep-hand and breathed a sigh of relief. "All clear controls," he said. "Steady on orbit."

"*Engine room on final check,*" the intercom acknowledged; then added, as if an afterthought, "*Servos on final check!*"

"Clear board," Mitch said, signing off. He flipped the intercom switch and pulled the ship's log from its slot in his chair arm, folding the control column back into the console by depressing the foot-pedal on the locking-lever. He jerked loose the buckle on his seat-belt, slumped down in his chair, and opened the log. Plucking the stylus from its niche in the metal cover, he casually jotted down the orbit entry.

With a second glance at the chronometer, he slipped the log back into its chair-arm slot; pushed himself erect, and climbed over the chair-arm to the deck. He stepped behind his metal-backed chair and leaned on it, his back to the myriad, glittering instruments, his brown hand fishing a

pack of cigarettes out of the breast-pocket of his space-jacket.

He was a tall, lean figure in space-man's gray, standing in the starlit gloom beneath the transparent control blister. As he poked a cigarette between his lips, and pulled its tip to a glowing spark, the orange glow reflected from his hand to the thin, hard planes of his face. His gray eyes scrutinized the shadowy chamber around him, carelessly, and turned to the bone-white globe of the Moon floating out to his right. Mountains and craters were dim markings of gray, forming a familiar topography that guided his eye to a certain spot. There, ten thousand miles away, harsh sunlight struck a giant crystal dome on a Lunar plain, reflecting from it in a tiny, steadily burning splinter of flame.

That tiny splinter on the vast, dead surface was Man's dominance of the Moon. A city stood beneath that crystal dome, the first city men had built on another world; to Mitch, it was home, civilization, the end of loneliness and the weeks of drifting across the star-strewn blackness of space.

KARL ROUCHAK came up the ladderway from the lower lounge-deck. The faint glow of light from below illuminated his gray-clad, stocky figure, the neatly curled blond hair and the chill blue gaze. He stepped onto the starlit deck and stared at the Moon. "Contacted the shuttle, yet?"

"Uh-uh—not time yet," Mitch replied; "they'll be along."

"It's Handley's turn to stay aboard this trip," Rouchak observed quietly, still gazing at the Moon—at that tiny splinter of reflected sunlight on the gray patch of a Lunar plain.

"It's Handley's turn," Mitch agreed. He studied the cigarette glowing between his fingers. "You going to look up that little dancer again?"

Rouchak turned and flashed Mitch a white-toothed grin in the dim light. "If she's still around; if she isn't,

there are other fish—warm-blooded, of course.”

It was a ticklish proposition, nudging five hundred tons of space freighter around a world at just the precise velocity to keep it on orbit. Even the pull of distant Earth had to be included with the pull of the Moon, and the orbit set in just the right angle, at just the right velocity to counteract that pull with centrifugal force.

Mitch grinned. “While you’re at it,” he suggested, “you might look up a new pilot; I won’t be going out with you two, the next trip.”

Rouchak stiffened. “What? You’re quitting?”

Mitch nodded, took a pull on his cigarette, and blew a streamer of smoke against the foamflex deck. “Didn’t want to say anything ’til we got back, Karl, but my share of this last cargo will set me up nicely.” He paused, reluctant, then added, “I’m not anxious to be a millionaire, like you two.”

Rouchak, too, was hesitant. Then he grinned and nodded understandingly. “You never did show much of the prospector’s fever, Mitch. Handley and I have wondered about that.”

Mitch peered at him, querulously. “No hard feelings?”

Rouchak laughed. “Me? No, Mitch; you don’t belong out on the rings of Saturn, scooping radioactives up in a bucket-scooter, anyway!”

“Thanks, Karl.” Mitch glanced at his wrist-dial, then twisted and looked at the ship’s chronometer. “Time I contacted the shuttle,” he said, and moved over to the communications screen.



The shuttle-freighter from Earth was a massive vessel of big drive rockets and voluminous fuel-tanks. It was designed to blast off a planet’s surface with a heavy cargo in its hold. It came gliding out of space and snuggled up to the side of the giant *Orion*

Girl, different from her in that she was designed to load and discharge her cargo on an orbit, and land on a planet only with empty holds. Her rockets were set for long interplanetary runs, not for blasting her hull off a planet’s surface.

As the shuttle snicked alongside, grappling with magnetic plates, the shuttle’s crew emerged in spacesuits and entered the *Orion Girl’s* airlock. Loading record and bill of sale were checked, and the crew began transferring the *Orion Girl’s* precious cargo to the shuttle for shipment down to Earth. It was standard procedure for interplanetary shipping; the ships always met in orbits off the Moon. An orbit around Earth was never used, since orbits were too ticklish. A five-hundred-ton space freighter could demolish a city.

HANDLEY’S short, bulky figure was framed in the doorway as Mitch hustled about his stateroom, packing his duffel. A spaceman’s duffel was a seven-foot-long, rigid plastic shell; it accommodated his spacesuit, his personal belongings, his wardrobe, and—when there were accidents in space—his corpse.

“Going to buy yourself that little house in the North American Rockies and settle down, Mitch?” Handley drawled plaintively.

“Yeah,” Mitch agreed. “Going to relax and let the world go by, Handley—and the other worlds, too.” He folded his spare uniform neatly and stowed it in the cylinder. “No more riding the scope and gauges, dreaming about some beautiful dame I only wish I’d met; no more wallowing around in Saturn’s rings, spacesuited and strapped to the saddle of a bucket-scooter.”

Handley shifted his weight, uncomfortably. “Rouchak and I plan to build our fortune and start a passenger spaceline,” he said dully. “Guess we’ll be lucky to live through it,

though—old Saturn's sure to gobble one of us!"

"Just scoop up a little too much in a scooter's hamper, that's all it needs," Mitch confirmed busily. "Just a little too much mass to jockey on your rockets, and Saturn'll pull you right out of the rings." He finished his packing, slid the cover closed on his duffel, and straightened up.

"Well—so long, Mitch." Handley shuffled forward, sticking out his hand. "It's been good knowin' you."

Mitch returned his firm grip. "Good luck, Handley."

The shuttle, under Rouchak's supervision, finished transferring the cargo and broke free, curving off among the stars on a tongue of flame. Then Rouchak joined Mitch and they climbed through an escape-hatch into the cramped compartment of the *Orion Girl's* single spaceboat. Handley shoved in Mitch's duffel and sealed the hatch. They strapped themselves into the cushions and, as the leaves of the hull parted ahead of the boat, Mitch hit the starter-button and they went hurtling off in a shallow curve. He swung the little craft back over the looming, bone-white globe of the Moon, heading toward the splinter of light that was Port Luna.



They entered the Registrar's office wearing robes and sandals; their spaceman's gray had been left behind in the Port Hospital for analysis, brown monk's robes issued to them after their medical examination.

The Registrar clerk was a shapely young girl with short-cropped red hair. She looked up with a smile as they shuffled over to her desk.

"Mitchell and Rouchak from the *Orion Girl*," Mitch told her. "Franchised and issued for prospecting on Saturn's rings. I'm Mitchell, Pilot-Astrogator; this is Rouchak, Servo Engineer."

"You're on Port Leave via spaceboat?" she asked.

Mitch nodded. "Our pay voucher is registered by Radioactives, Inc., of Toronto N.A., Earth."

"Check," she said crisply, turning to the bank of controls and viewscreen on the side of her desk. She punched keys and watched the screen. It flashed on, illuminating her attractive, pug-nosed features with its glow. "*Orion Girl*, franchised and issued to spacemen Mitchell, Rouchak, and Handley for prospecting radioactives, vicinity of Saturn?"

"Handley's aboard, standing orbit watch," Mitch confirmed.

"Uh huh. Medical has registered your identification," she informed him. "Radioactives of Toronto has acknowledged your cargo and—" She punched more keys. "—Yes! Here's your pay voucher: seventy-five thousand credits. Want it in cash?"

"Transferred to our accounts," Mitch replied. "Twenty-five thousand each."

She scribbled a notation on her desk pad. "It'll be transferred by tomorrow morning, chronolog time. Your duffel has been cleared by Decontamination, Mr. Mitchell—pick it up as you leave."

"There's one other thing," Mitch said. "I want to resign from the *Orion Girl's* franchise."

The girl looked up quickly. "You're resigning?"

"That's right."

Frowning, she glanced at Rouchak. "What about you?"

"I'll remain in Port Luna until another Pilot-Astrogator is available," Rouchak replied gruffly.

"You realize, of course, that the *Orion Girl's* release is cancelled until you have a complete crew—"

Rouchak nodded. "I'm aware of it."

She avoided their gaze with embarrassment. "Mr. Mitchell, have you any reason to state for resigning from the franchise?"

"I've accumulated a saving of two hundred thousand credits," Mitch replied easily. "I'm retiring from space."

She jerked her eyes up, staring at him in surprise. "Retiring? But—you're only thirty years old! Isn't that—well, it seems rather early—"

"I'm my own boss," Mitch said. "Starting now."

She stared at him a moment longer, then turned back to her screen with a shrug of indifference. "All right," she muttered half to herself. "They ought to have assigned you to Explorations!"

Mitch grinned tightly as she punched keys with defiant fingers. The girl stared at her screen, her brow creased prettily in thought, then she looked up again, coldly critical. "You aren't available for further employment?"

Mitch started to shake his head; then hesitated, curious. "What sort of employment?"

She gestured at the screen. "Your psycho-data says you have good moral conscience, if uninhibited. There's a Miss Eileen Graham of Venus who's been issued a Commercial Agent franchise on a space-cruiser—she needs an experienced spaceman as crew—"

"On a space-cruiser?" Mitch asked dubiously. "She wants a female crew, doesn't she? Those boats accommodate only two people with any comfort—"

"She wants a man, because there's some sort of personal danger involved. Her business is Molecular Transmutors, manufacturers of air renewers—they have Commercial charter for Mars, Venus, and Mercury. I understand her father pioneered air renewers."

Mitch raised critical brows. "What's the personal danger in that?"

"You'll have to ask her," the clerk replied coolly. "Are you interested in the job?"

"Not particularly." Mitch returned her stare.

The girl sighed her resignation and flicked the screen off. "Very well, then; that's all."

MITCH CALLED a hotel, made a reservation, and arranged to have his duffel delivered there. Then he and Rouchak, dressed in their ship-worn spaceman's gray, departed from the long, circular buildings of Port Authority which curved around the base of the dome facing the spaceport field. They strode along the walkways into the maze of tall, glass-walled buildings that rose like slabs to the huge, crystal dome overhead. The walkways curved and swirled among the buildings, tunneled through them, rose and fell on countless escalators to more than a dozen floor-levels.

Port Luna was the first domed city to be built on another world by Man. As such, it was somewhat outdated by the great, domed metropoli which had since been built on Mars, Venus, Mercury, and the Jovian and Saturnian Moons. In Port Luna, there were no swirling trafficways with the bright motes of little cars whisking along them; in Port Luna, if you went anywhere, you walked.

It was easy walking. In the Moon's light gravity, a 180-lb. man weighed only 35-lbs.—you could skip lightly along the walkways, if it weren't for the crowds of pedestrians you'd pile into!

Mitch and Rouchak wandered leisurely through the crowds, their eyes drinking in the sights with a hunger that sprang from the loneliness of spaceship life. There was plenty of color to stir adventure in a man's blood; as the interplanetary trade-center for Earth, Port Luna was the crossroads of nearly a dozen other planets.

The group of seven-foot-tall, bulgingly muscular men who strode past wearing loose, drab green coveralls with strong hands and features having a skin like white milk—hunters and trappers of Venus, they! Come from the deep wilderness and backwoods of the planet that lay dark and wet beneath an eternal blanket of writhing mists.

And there, the plump, little man with his beautiful wife, both with the milk-white skin, but dressed in loose, silken garments of gaudy hues—they, too, were from Venus. He was a well-to-do merchant, or executive, or plantation-owner who lived in one of the luxurious, domed cities.

Here came a group of medium-height, bone-slender women with skin the color of dark mahogany, their firm-fleshed bodies almost completely naked save for the bits of clothing worn here and there. Light bands on their skin about the waist showed where tool-belts had been worn—they were a vacationing group of girl engineers from the sprawling factories of Mars, here to forget glowing screens and signal-lights and long catwalks over massive rows of humming machines serviced by gangs of robots. On Mars, you wore more than a mere helmet when you ventured out on the cold, windy surface beyond the domed cities; you wore furs, from neck to foot, and you *didn't* wear any garment under them that would become absorbed with perspiration and chafe the skin. In Mars' thin, dry air, that was certain invitation to painful skin rash and boils. The Martian settlers had long become accustomed to scant costumes for casual indoor wear.

Yonder was a trio of husky, proud men in snug fur garments unzipped and thrown open over hairy chests—they were from either the Jovian or Saturnian Moons, where you had to wear a heated, insulated suit if you left the domed cities to venture out on the chill, freezing surface.

All around were the quiet, sophisticated people from Earth, men in skin-tight breeches and loose blouses, the women in tight bodices and short, flared skirts, all immaculate and fashionable. The life-long citizens of Port Luna could be discerned by their darker, bronzed skin—burned dark by the sunlight blazing down through the dome.

And there were stores and shops

and gay display windows, theaters and restaurants and hotel marquees, apartment buildings and office buildings—all that made up a trade metropolis. It was civilization; it was people; it was home to the young men and women in spaceman's gray, on Port Leave from giant space freighters orbiting about the Moon or sleek, powerful spaceliners standing out on the spaceport field.

Crossroads of the Solar System.

And there was the glowing, glass-brick front of the *Spacemen's Bar*. Inside, was the congenial, shadowy taproom, the pile of glass and bottles behind the bar where a model of the *Earth Queen*, first ship to reach Mars, stood on its tail-fins... and the mustachioed bartender would have you know that expedition was planned in this very bar, right over there in that corner booth! Ah, there were *men* in those days—Earth overpopulated and living in squalor, mankind needing to spread to the other worlds or starve—

A gang of squat, husky miners from Mercury lined the bar, their hair slicked down, wizened features scrubbed, their bearlike figures garbed in Earth costume. Two attractive girls in spaceman's gray shared the bar with them, sang a ribald song in chorus.

MITCH AND Rouchak deposited themselves in a wall booth and dialed their drinks, which were promptly ejected through little panels at their elbow. They fingered tall, cool glasses, listened to the song, and grinned at one another. Without a word, they raised their glasses in silent toast.

"Think you can sit back and retire while Handley and I are out making our fortunes?" Rouchak asked half-jokingly.

Mitch frowned and shook his head. "My retirement isn't going to be just to sit back and do nothing, Rouchak. Blazes, man—that's all I've been doing for seven years, barring emer-

gencies! Sitting back, watching 'scope and gauges, and letting a steel can run itself across space— I'm just bone-weary *tired* of it!" He grimaced at the thought. "When I get me a little bungalow on Earth, I'm going to spend the rest of my time seeing all the pageants and festivals, the tourist spots and historical sites of old mother Earth."

"So *that's* why you read so many of those Earth travel-folders!" Rouchak laughed.

"Earth history's my pet subject, damn it!" Mitch growled protestingly. "And d'you know that's the basis for most of the tourist trade on Earth?"

"Oh-oh! Here we go again—"

"Well, it's true! You live anywhere on Earth, you put on a pageant and show how people lived in your neck of the woods in its heyday. Tourists come from all over Earth and from the other worlds to see it! Now, every Indian Summer—fall, that is—there's an outdoor festival in North America where they dress like the early Amer-Indians and go archery hunting in the forests, on foot and horseback, and camp out in wigwams—"

"I'd rather take a tour through one of the Arctic industrial centers and watch the robots handle those big factories!"

"You'll see more around Antarctic Spaceport. Robots handling all the shuttle-freighter shipping that comes in from space—" Mitch snorted. "I'll take the European spring pageants, where you see people wearing those medieval costumes and riding in coaches around in those old fortress cities, and kings holding court in their castles, and knights in armor enacting famous battles—"

"What about the yearly outdoor caravans put on in the Middle East? I've *heard* about them!" Rouchak grinned. "Arab horsemen raiding villages for captive girls; camping in tents under the desert stars; old walled cities with their bazaars and slave markets; Caliphs holding court

in their big palaces with harem girls dancing—"

"If you want a sexy show, they know how to give one!" Mitch conceded. "But what about the winter festivals in the African villages and the lion hunts? Or the summer pageants in the famous old Chinese merchant cities?"

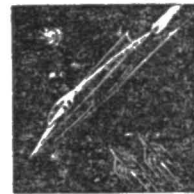
"I'll take the strip-teasers in the Persian slave-markets!" Rouchak laughed. "Do they actually buy those girls, though?"

Mitch shook his head, grinning. "If you outbid the local crowd and win a girl, you get to take her to dinner afterward in one of those little Oriental restaurants—she'll hold your hand while you smoke a water-pipe and watch a bevy of other strip-teasers go through their routine, I understand. After that, you're on your own."

"Now, *there* is an evening!"

"Yeah," Mitch laughed. "Why d'you think I'm *retiring*?"

Rouchak gazed at him through a moment of musing silence, then gave a faint head-shake. "You won't stay long, Mitch. You'll come back—space doesn't give up her children that easily!"



"And then, in South America—" Rouchak threw up his hands in defeat.

●

MITCH ARRIVED at his hotel feeling somewhat dispirited and lonely. The liquor inside him had served to give warmth and good nature to his parting with Rouchak. But now that the goodbyes and well-wishes had been said, and the tall blond spaceman had gone his way, Mitch felt the loss of companionship; liquor didn't lull the feeling.

He confirmed his reservation at the desk, went up to his suite, and unpacked his duffel. He laid out a clean, fresh suit of spaceman's gray, slipped out of his shipworn suit, and took a brisk shower. He was standing before the bathroom mirror, a towel wrapped about his thighs, shaving the faint beard-stubble from his face, when the door chimes rang softly.

Grunting dourly, he snapped the electric razor back into its niche and strode in through the living room. He pressed the stud and the door slid into the wall.

She was startled, at first, then her dark gaze narrowed and she surveyed his slender, brown figure slowly, from head to foot. Her lips pouted appreciatively and she gave a soft, low whistle.

Mitch returned her gaze with a casualness that amounted to indifference. She was small, graceful, firm-fleshed, with curly black hair that framed her oval features in an ebony halo. Her skin was a milky white transparency—the stamp of Venus. She wore a filmy blue tunic that reached to her thighs, with silver embroidery over the right places. Her small feet were poised in tiny silver-lacework sandals.

"You—are Pilot-Astrogator James Mitchell?" she inquired musically.

"Well-l-l—I hope that towel doesn't slip! But your psycho-chart said you have a good moral conscience, with just a little inhibition; so I suppose you could ask me in—offer me a drink! So why don't you?"

Mitch arched a brow, incredulously. *What sort of come-on was this?* Then he shrugged, stepped back, and waved her to enter the room. "Come in," he said mockingly. "Have a drink."

"Thanks." She moved past him, smiling faintly. "Don't mind if I do—and don't let me interfere with anything *you're* doing!"

Mitch thumbed the door shut and turned to watch her slide into a chair, crossing her shapely knees. "I'm shaving

at the moment," he said. "Be right with you." His thumb hooked toward the dispenser against the wall. "Liquor's there," he added, then padded on back to the bathroom.

AS HE EMERGED, shaved and dressed, a few minutes later, his visitor was standing over at the window-wall, drink in hand, admiring the view of towering glass-walled buildings, the stark crater rims of the Moon beyond the dome, the black sky pierced with burning stars and the glowing, blue-green bauble of Earth.

"Quite a view!" she remarked forcibly. "You must pay a nice chunk of rent for this lay-out!"

"I can afford it," he retorted in a dry tone that dismissed the inconsequential. "Why were you checking my psycho-chart at Port Authority?" he asked bluntly.

"For the same reason I wish you couldn't afford this view," she replied; then she turned to face him. "My name's Eileen Graham, Mr. Mitchell."

"Umm?" He frowned. "Oh—you're the Eileen Graham who wants to hire a spaceman!"

"Exactly." She looked down at the drink in her hand. "I must visit Earth, Mars, Venus, and Mercury on business, Mr. Mitchell, and it won't wait. I must find a pilot for my cruiser as quickly as possible, and it must be a man."

"Why?" Mitch crossed to the dispenser and dialed himself a drink.

"Because someone might try to kill me." She lifted her gaze and looked at him, levelly. "I think they've tried to, already."

The frosted glass slid from the dispenser and Mitch picked it up, taking a long, cool sip of the mellow concoction—Venusian rum, Titan water, Earth pineapple juice. He returned her look, quizzically. "You're from Venus, Miss Graham; you know every man who goes to the other worlds is automatically granted a gun permit."

"This isn't some drunken *plegh-*

hunter trying to settle a grudge," she retorted. "Besides, women don't end their quarrels by shooting it out on the street—most of them don't, anyway. This is more in the nature of a stab in the back in a dark alley, Mr. Mitchell."

Mitch strolled over and settled himself in a chair. He produced cigarettes and offered them to her. She accepted one, gracefully, and he took another. "You aren't exactly giving me any good reason to consider the job," he said critically.

"I'd want you to understand what you're up against," she replied frankly. "Also, you asked me why I need a man instead of a woman."

Mitch blew smoke at the window-wall and scowled. "Well, you shouldn't have too much trouble hiring someone here in Port Luna," he refuted her, irritably. "Why bother me? I'm retired and not even looking for employment!"

"I've tried to hire several spacemen," she answered quietly. "And I'm offering five thousand credits for the job—more than the commercial space-lines are offering! But they've either turned me down or—well, in the last case, I'd hardly gotten out on the walkways with him when he started pawing me." She turned and went back to the window-wall. "I told Port Authority about it. That's why they let me see the psycho-charts on any spaceman who might be available; that's why I came to you."

Mitch scrutinized her firm, rounded little posterior with interest. "You've got the stuff for pawing; I'll say that much!" he muttered wryly. "So you think you could spend a few months cooped up in a space cruiser with me and not regret it afterward, do you?"

"I think I could handle you."

He winced, and wondered how he could get rid of her—there'd be plenty of other lovely-looking gals on Earth. Then, vaguely, he wondered if he wanted to get rid of her! A bird in hand. . . .

HE GAVE A slight start as she began turning around the second time. She was leaning against the transparent wallplate, pressing her flesh to it and rolling herself around. She faced him with tilted chin, looking down at him through lowered lashes. She moved her palms up her thighs, looking at him. "I could handle you," she repeated, whispering. "I could make you want me—"

"Is that how you got the guy who pawed you?"

She stiffened, then relaxed again. "No, I haven't done this before. But I need you—a man like you—I need you with me. I want you with me." She pushed away from the wallplate and moved toward him.

Mitch set his drink aside, placed his cigarette in an ashtray, and rose. In a smooth, deft motion, he stepped forward, embraced her, and pressed his lips against hers.

Then he released her and stepped back. "Is that what you wanted?"

She teetered before him, her features slack. Then she whirled back to the window-wall, picked up her cigarette and drink from the hand-rail where she'd left them. "I guess I can't vamp you into it, either," she murmured huskily. "You aren't to be fooled by an amateur."

"Maybe you quit trying too soon," he reproved, moving up behind her. He grasped her arms at her sides, standing close to her. "Try me some more," he said softly.

She stood perfectly still for a moment, then twisted from his grasp and away. "That was a mistake," she said. "You don't believe me, now. You think I'm—well, never mind—"

"If you were," he said, turning to follow her with his gaze, "I wouldn't be standing here empty-handed. You're doing all right, baby; I know you're in trouble, now."

She stopped, giving him her wide-eyed stare. "I can't wait much longer to find someone—I've got to get out

there and find out what's wrong! I do need your help—"

"Why not the Colonial Police?"

She shook her head. "There isn't any proof. I—I'm not *sure* there's really any danger! But I've got to *find out*—"

He peered at her narrowly. "It can wait long enough to have dinner with me, can't it? Then you can tell me about it."

"You mean—that's on the level?"

"It's on the level," he said, thinking, *If you are!*



"I NEVER quite realized that Colonial Control was so tremendous!" Eileen Graham exclaimed in awed tones.

Dinner was finished, the dishes cleared away. They relaxed over coffee and cigarettes at a small, secluded table against the balcony rail, in a little open-air restaurant perched on an observation ledge, high up on the sheer side of a glass-walled building. It was commonly called a garden restaurant, with potted plants, bushes, and flowers scattered about and the soft, tinkling of music of an electronic string console flowing through the murmur of conversation. Patrons were clustered about the small tables set in neat rows and little three-wheeled robots with four mechanical arms rolled silently about, serving the customers and pausing when the waitress-operator switched on the tiny viewscreens to take orders.

"They're certainly particular about who has a spaceship, aren't they!" Eileen remarked quietly, gazing out over the rail.

Mitch followed her gaze and grinned complacently. "They've good reason to be particular," he said. "A single gang of cut-throats in one spaceship with a few contraband atomic weapons

could destroy the major cities of any world in the Solar System. Just by threatening it, they could demand and get practically anything they wanted."

"They have a Space Fleet, haven't they?"

"Oh, naturally—but space is big, and I hope we never see the day they have to use the Space Fleet. They have it only in case someone should manage to hijack a ship from some spaceport." Mitch shook his head, disconsolately. "But if there's ever any interplanetary piracy, it'll be murder!"

Eileen stared down from their observation-ledge with rapt fascination. Below them, the giant dome curved down to its base; outside, the gray Lunar plain was clustered with giant gleaming spaceships—bulky Earth-Moon shuttles, bullet-shaped spaceboats, slender cruisers and long, sleek space-liners.

All spaceships were the property of Colonial Control, under the Interplanetary Laws of the United Nations. Ships were franchised only to those commercial interests which had the official approval of the government: corporations, freight companies, space-line agencies, and groups of private individuals such as explorers, scientists prospectors and independent traders. Everything had to be on the line, for government inspection at any time, before anyone could buy a franchise on any spaceship.

Even then, no company or group of individuals were issued a spaceship to run as they pleased. They had to hire spacemen and women who had been carefully screened, selected, and trained at the U.N. Space Academy—no one else was permitted to handle the controls of a spaceship. As a result, individuals who bought franchises on spaceships for independent purposes had to be spacemen, or had to have the capital to hire spacemen for their ship's crew; otherwise, it was no dice.

"Do you think there'll ever be free trade among the planets?" Eileen

asked absently, after a sip of her coffee.

"It's very doubtful until all the other worlds become thoroughly self-sufficient and more completely settled," Mitch replied. He took a leisurely drag on his cigarette, then added, "Some big corporations don't like it."

Eileen looked perplexed. "What do you mean?"



"They'd like a free hand to develop commercial interests on other planets—run their own spacecraft, handle their own business without government control. They have a legitimate gripe, too—government control can often be snarled with red-tape, especially on large business deals," Mitch grimaced wryly. "The fact remains, though, that the settlers on Mars and Venus and the Jovian Moons aren't self-sufficient; they need things from Earth. Without some of those things, they wouldn't remain alive very long. So these spaceships are a life-line, millions of lives depend on their use. You can't turn a thing like that loose for the private ambitions of individuals; too many lives depend on those spaceships."

"By and large, I think private industry respects that responsibility," she argued dubiously.

Mitch gave a grim nod. "By and large—but not entirely! There are a few bad lemons in the lot—there always are—and the mismanagement of one, single cargo of provisions for another world could easily cost the lives of a few thousand settlers." He scowled in faint boredom, sipped his coffee, and said, "Suppose we talk about you, now? What's all this trouble you're having?"

His gaze was direct and inquiring. Eileen met it squarely. "I am a representative of private industry, Mr.

Mitchell—and something's wrong with my company. I don't know what it is or how it got started, and I think someone's trying to keep me from finding out, but—well, suppose I start at the beginning—"

SHE GAVE him the complete story, starting with her father. Old John Howard Graham had been one of the early settlers on Venus, a biochemist with a smattering of experience in applied physics.

He had studied the work being done by Earth scientists on a mechanism which could transmute carbon dioxide back into oxygen and nitrogen, as plant-life did, at such a rate that a man who exhaled a breath inside a sealed helmet would have that breath converted back into breathable air—thus making it possible for him to venture forth on the other planets without carrying tanked air to breathe, or worrying about how long he was out and how much air supply he had left.

Graham had succeeded in developing a workable molecular transmutor—or, as it was more commonly called, an air-renewer. He had patented it with the Colonial Authority on Venus and, with government supervision, succeeded in forming a corporation on Earth for the manufacture of air-renewers. The corporation, *Molecular Transmutors, Inc.* had to be on Earth to have supplementary technical and research companies it could sub-contract for the various parts of the highly intricate air-renewers. Such technical and research companies simply didn't exist on Venus or other planets.

Naturally, *Molecular Transmutors* won the commercial franchise to sell air-renewers on Mars, Venus, and Mercury—the planets then being colonized. Several other corporations had since developed modified versions of the air-renewers to fit the special conditions of Jovian and Saturnian Moons, thus winning those franchises.

Graham, himself, had remained on Venus, running his corporation through

the Board of Trustees on Earth, until the contraction of a Venusian virus infection forced him to return to Earth for medical treatment. His wife and daughter remained on Venus, where Eileen was studying Venusian economics.

Graham had intended to return to Venus, but the virus kept him under medical care for several years—and then, it finally won out. When he died, Eileen—whose mother had died the year before—was sole heir to the corporation.

She knew quite a bit about it, since her father had continued to send her the quarterly reports from Earth for his personal files at home. She had noticed that the business had gone into a gradual slump shortly after her father's illness. In the one last report she had received shortly before her father died, she saw that the gradual slump had become a nose-dive; stockholders had begun selling out corporation in droves.

George Kimball was head of the Board of Trustees on Earth; George was the son of one of her father's old friends—long-since deceased—which had considerable bearing on the fact that her father had hired George. The slump had begun a few months after Kimball joined the corporation.

Eileen had contacted Kimball from Venus, saying that she was coming to Earth to take over her father's position. Kimball had written back that she needn't bother, that the corporation was in good hands, that she needn't come to Earth—in short, that her meddling wasn't wanted. She immediately applied for a passage visa and wired Mr. Kimball that she was on her way.

Then the trouble started. She was shopping for the trip when someone broke into her home and burglarized it—taking along her passage visa with the silverware, oddly enough; the visa was abruptly cancelled and was therefore worthless as soon as she reported the theft. She had to wait two weeks to get a second visa.

Finally, she was on her way to the spaceport. Three men dressed as hunters caught up with her on a street, molested her, and forced her into an alleyway. Holding her, they ripped open the small luggage she was allowed on the space trip and took her visa. Then they began beating her. Fortunately, her screams had already attracted attention—a gang of spacemen came storming to the rescue and thoroughly punished the three hoodlums. Her visa was restored, she was hustled to the spaceport, and she just barely managed to catch the space-liner before it took off.

Then, on the long trip to Port Luna, someone planted an incendiary bomb in her stateroom. She just happened to be away from it when it exploded, though two passengers in the adjoining stateroom were severely burned. The captain put it down as the trick of burglars intent upon destroying all evidence of their theft; Port Authority, when they had arrived at Port Luna, had concurred—and no one could be arrested because there simply wasn't any proof.

Eileen was stranded—her visa was destroyed in the blast, but she was entered on the ship's voucher—alone in Port Luna without clothes, without money, without friends. Port Authority had contacted Kimball for her. Kimball had forwarded money and a blunt order that she return to Venus. Using the money, she hired an attorney and started court action to make Kimball give her access to the corporation funds. Kimball had to comply.

THAT WAS the whole situation. She had no idea why the corporation's business had fallen off—the reports her father sent her had mentioned no traceable cause—and she had no proof that the criminal attacks upon her had anything to do with the corporation.

"But I intend to find out!" she concluded grimly. "Kimball is going to discover that he isn't dealing with any lamebrained, pampered female before I'm through with him."

"It smells," Mitch muttered comprehensively. "It smells to high heaven! Those criminal attacks could have been coincidence, and the corporation troubles could have a legitimate reason—but why would this Kimball refuse to tell you about it?"

"That's what has me puzzled," Eileen agreed. "But now you know why I've bought a commercial agent franchise on a space cruiser and why I want a spaceman to go with me."

Mitch gazed at her, critically. "You realize I must check all this with Port Authority," he said mildly.

She arched a brow, then gave a nod of indifference. "The Port Police will confirm what happened on the space-liner—the *Stellar Queen*—and Port Authority will confirm the rest. The Colonial Police have the complete facts, too, but there's nothing they can do. There just isn't anything you could pin on anybody!"

"I'll make a few calls and check on it," Mitch decided curtly, and reached for the check. "Let's go."

"Will you take me home, first?" she asked, rising. "You can call from my apartment, if you like. I'm rather tired—"

"All right."



SHE LED him across the city to a tall, modern apartment building and up to a blue-walled corridor on the thirtieth floor. They passed the white doors at the foyer and went back along the corridor to a secluded door. "Have you ever tasted a Venus Milk-cream?" she asked, taking a tiny electrokroy from the purse at her waist.

"A sort've milky fruit cocktail, isn't it?" he replied; "I've heard of it."

"Delicious!" she said, smiling tiredly. She opened the door and led him inside. "I'll fix you one."

They entered a compact, gleaming kitchenette with an adjoining, glass-walled breakfast nook. Mitch strolled over and gazed out the thin, adjustable glass windowpanes. There was a deep

recess in the side of the building, with the slick blue tinted-glass walls extending in a sheer drop to the bottom of the recess, five floors below, where a ledge jutted outward holding a kidney-shaped swimming pool and a green strip of a park along its outer edge. There were several people swimming.

Eileen had opened the refrigerator and was taking out several weird, colorful Venusian fruits. "It'll take a few minutes," she said apologetically.

"Then I may as well get those calls done with," he surmised.



"All right, the 'phone is in the living room—go right through," she agreed readily.

He passed through a circular opening and strolled down a short hallway past a rose-and-green bedroom. The living-room was gray and mirror-chrome and glass trimmed with scarlet. He crossed over to the videophone, which had its screen in a small, glassed-in alcove seat recessed into one wall. He slid in and closed the glass portal, then fingered the screen's keyboard.

Both the Port Police and the Registrar's office at Port Authority confirmed Eileen's story, though they had no details to add. Mitch put a call through to the Colonial Police and talked with a blue-uniformed captain for a while; no, there wasn't a thing they could do unless there was definite proof pointing to the interplanetary conspiracy. The Venus Police had uncovered no evidence to that effect. Miss Graham had merely been the victim of known criminals—it could have been anybody.

Mitch thanked the captain and broke connection. He opened the portal and climbed out the alcove before he noticed that it was peculiarly quiet

in the apartment. No sound whatever came from the direction of the kitchenette.

Frowning querulously, he strode back along the short hallway and stepped through to the glassed-in breakfast nook.

The first thing he saw was the gun.

IT WAS a .257mm Bennington sealed-beam atomic blaster, a shiny, streamlined tube that snuggled along the top of a man's fist and could burn a needle-sized hole through you that released enough heat to cook your intestines to a thin soup. Recommended for the Venusian swamp-jungles, where something big as a house and all teeth might come thundering out of the dark mists to gobble you up; also for Io, where a particularly large and vicious species of spider roamed the darkness.

But outlawed as a weapon in any domed city—particularly in Port Luna, where you weren't even permitted to carry a weapon.

The fist that held it was rock-steady, the skin alabaster white. The man behind it was from Venus—a husky, tough-looking character with close-cropped brown hair and cold, black little eyes set wide apart in a square chunk of face. He stood braced in the center of the kitchenette, pointing the blaster at Mitch's chest.

Another Venusian, a tall, skinny character with a long face and, thin, delicate hands, sat on the stool in the corner. A fat, muscular companion stood beside him; neither was armed.

Near the door, a Venusian seven feet tall and half as wide had his thick arms wrapped firmly around Eileen's figure, holding her in a vise-like grip that didn't allow the least bit of a struggle. His broad hand was clamped over her mouth. She stared at Mitch, her eyes wide, dark pools glistening with terror.

Well, she'd warned him!

All four Venusians wore the gaudy, thin silken costume of well-to-do Venus merchants—as if they had dropped in for a business chat.

There was a moment of complete silence as Mitch stood frozen in the doorway, then the man with the gun spoke. "I think you should raise your hands," he said.

Mitch raised them slowly to shoulder-height. You don't argue with a Bennington blaster.

"Frist him," the man said.

Skinny climbed off the stool and sidled around the room, keeping well out of the line of fire. His sensitive hands slithered down Mitch's body. "He's clean," Skinny said.

"Excellent." Bennington boy nodded. "Now, spaceman, what is your name?"

"Mitchell," Mitch answered. Skinny went sidling away from him.

"Very well, Mitchell," said Bennington boy. "It pains me to do this, but I'm sure you will understand—let me explain. Miss Graham and I were really very good friends on Venus—very, very good friends. I am deeply concerned with her personal welfare, you see; it's sort of as if she were my own, personal property."

He paused, his little eyes glittering. "You are beginning to understand, Mr. Mitchell? It embarrasses me deeply to come here to Miss Graham's apartment and find you alone with her; I'm afraid I must take certain steps to rectify this situation."

He looked Mitch over very thoroughly, from head to toe. Mitch stiffened, but kept his arms raised, saying nothing.

Bennington boy gave a barely perceptible nod. "Finish it," he said.

SKINNY'S bony fist came whistling out of nowhere and cracked Mitch behind the ear. He stumbled forward, and Skinny's partner rushed him, fists pumping. A fine set of steel knuckledusters slammed against Mitch's mouth, splitting his lip; blood gushed from his nose.

He cut loose with a neat roundhouse that sent Skinny's partner back where he came from, then jerked erect as a foot thudded into his kidney. Long,

slender fingers clamped about his throat from behind; then Skinny's partner came back, his foot lashing out. The kick landed in Mitch's stomach, and air whistled up his throat as the room exploded in pinwheel fireworks.

He slumped to the floor, tore loose from Skinny's choking grasp, grabbed an arm, and pivoted. Skinny rose and fell into his partner's lap and they tumbled back across the kitchenette to collide with Bennington boy. There was some confusion for a moment.

Mitch took advantage of it. He whirled and hurled himself straight at the glass panes of the breakfast nook. He went through with a splintering crash, fell outward into the empty nothingness, and turned over and over as he plunged toward the ledge below.

The swimming-pool rose up and water struck him with an impact that jolted every bone and muscle. Waves of stinging pain tore through him. When his battered, bleeding face broke the surface, he caught a glimpse of frightened faces peering out at him from the edge of the pool. A husky, brown body arched outward in a graceful dive. Voices were shouting excitedly. Mitch caught the word "spaceman" and grinned through his cracked lips before the water closed over him again.

Bennington boy was in for trouble!

It wasn't simply that such a disturbance would bring the Port Police on the run—it might be several minutes before they got there. It was the spaceman's gray Mitch wore.

There was respect for that gray from one end of the Solar System to the other. The settlers of the other worlds knew their lives depended on the giant spaceships that brought their supplies from Earth—and on the gray-clad men who ran those spaceships. It was a general custom that spaceman on Port Leave were never molested. When a man wore that gray, he was to be treated with appreciation.

If any criminal did make a space-

man is victim, the reaction of the settlers was immediate: that criminal was mobbed. Whether it was Marsport or Venus City or no farther from Earth than Port Luna, the code of space was maintained—attack a spaceman and you should be killed! No official protection was necessary for the men and women in gray.

But Mitch was getting official protection, whether he liked it or not, an hour later as he sat in the office of the Commissioner of the Port Police, with a grizzled, old doctor patching his face back together with strips of adhesive.

"There you are," the doc said. "Be good as new in a week. Just take it easy for a few days—you'll stop aching sooner."

"Thanks," Mitch growled laconically.

Commissioner McKeever gave him a stoic grin from behind the big, broad desk. "And that's the story this gunman gave you?" he asked conclusively.

"That's it," Mitch conceded, rising. He winced as the doc helped him back into his blouse. "You caught the guy, didn't you?"

McKeever snorted. "We caught a dead corpse with its skull caved in and a howling Mercurian miner waving a bloody lamp-base over it. The big Venus-boy is dead, too; the other two are beaten so badly they aren't able to talk yet."

Mitch grinned. "Guess they had 'em a ball!"

"Whole gang of these Mercury boys busted into the place before we got there," McKeever explained bitterly. "Miss Graham was slapped around a couple of times until they got wise that she was a prisoner, too." He peered narrowly at Mitch. "How do you feel about this claim that our gunner-pal was chummy with Miss Graham back on Venus?"

Mitch crinkled his taped brow in a scowl. "I don't know, Commish, what has Miss Graham to say?"



"Says she never saw the character before, naturally." McKeever was sarcastic. "Of course, there's no proof either way; you can take it or leave it alone."

"Thanks for the tip." Mitch zipped up his blouse and turned to leave.

"She's waiting outside," McKeever called after him. "Have fun."

Mitch walked carefully through the door, with the old doc's assistance, as if he were trodding on eggs. Each movement sent a twinge of pain through his bruised muscles. They entered the outer anteroom and Eileen came forward to meet him with quick uncertain steps. "Are you all right?" she asked tensely.

"I'm fine," he drawled harshly. "C'mon, let's get out of here."

She took his arm and walked him to the door. The doc stood back and watched them leave.

They emerged into the hurrying bustle of the crowded walkways, and paused, Mitch looking down at her. "You want to get down to Earth and talk to that Kilroy character, don't you?"

"You mean George Kimball?"

"I mean George Kimball. Can you get packed and arrange clearance for that space cruiser? I'll be down to sign on as spaceman as soon as I pack my duffel."

She stared up at him, wide-eyed, for a moment. Then she rose on tip-toe and kissed his cheek, quickly. "All right!" she whispered. "I'll be waiting—"

Then she turned and ran.



THE LOADING tunnels extended underground, long caverns of flat

metal walls and massive laceworks of steel girders with the bright blobs of white lights marching along the ceiling, in a vast subterranean web out from the domed city, under the soft pumice of the Lunar plain. Powerful lifts rose and settled from squat block-houses on the surface, from which curved metal tubes telescoped to the airlock openings in the hulls of giant spaceships. Conveyer-belts rolled cargo through the tubes, dropped it on the lifts which lowered and deposited it on conveyer belts which carried it back along the vast tunnels to huge warehouses beneath the domed city.

There was the throbbing of huge turbines here, the deep-throated hum of machinery, the clatter-and-bang of cargo crates, the scream of generators. Giant robots worked with mechanical precision; naked human bodies glistened with sweat, muscles rippling in the harsh light. Control panel-lights blinked red, green, yellow, and blue, signal gongs clangored shrilly.

Mitch strolled along the walkway with the plastic shell of his duffel balanced across his shoulder. His gaze flickered up at the signs mounted at each lift-shaft, where the name of the spaceship on the field above was scrawled. He moved on past the thunderous roar, on into the still, echoing extremities of the tunnels. He finally spotted Eileen's shapely figure standing with a trim, blue-uniformed Customs official at the foot of a lift shaft ahead. The sign said *Trinket*.

Mitch grinned as he strode forward; he'd recognized the smooth curve of Miss Graham's hips immediately, though she changed from her short costume to a filmy green pajama suit—travelling clothes, he supposed. It fit like a glove over her hips and was loose everywhere else.

She blushed and laughed silently before his direct gaze. The Customs official turned with raised, quizzical brows. "Mister Mitchell, is it?" he asked. "Signed aboard yet?"

"Mitchell it is," Mitch answered, swinging his duffel to the floor. He fished his credentials from his pocket and handed them over. "Signed on the *Trinket*, engineer and Pilot-Astro-gator."

The official flipped the pages of the little book, nodded and handed it back. "I'll have her open in a jiff." He turned to Eileen. "Want a stevedore robot to get your luggage aboard?"

"All I have is that trunk there," she said, pointing to the lift.

"Umm," the official nodded. "Mr. Mitchell and I can handle it. Well, come on."

They stepped on the lift and rose to the blockhouse above. The official took a heavy electrokey from his belt, set it, and led the way up a sealed metal tube to the *Trinket's* airlock. Mitch noted the electrokey with a feeling of relief: he wouldn't have to worry about the *Trinket* being sabotaged. An electronic seal couldn't be broken without destroying the pendulum-lock system.

The official pressed his electrokey to the center plate in the thick airlock portal and it rotated and swung inward, silently. "All right," he said. "*Trinket's* officially issued; you know the regulations, Miss Graham. Good luck." He stepped past them and clapped Mitch on the shoulder. "I'll help you with that trunk."

They wrestled the trunk aboard and stored it in Eileen's stateroom. When the Customs man was gone, Mitch proceeded to give the craft a thorough preflight inspection from stem to stern. She was a modern, powerful ship fully equipped for space flight as well as having guide-jets and atmospheric fins for airborne planetary flights. Her generators poured on the juice smoothly; her fuel gauges registered full and her bunker rods confirmed it. The reactor drive popping its shields to a nice, bright blue glow; the smooth corridor and blue-and-silver staterooms and blondewood-and-rose forward deck salon and shimmering; chrome-trimmed control cockpit top-

side under a curved crystal blister were all streamlined, luxurious. The galley was a cook's mechanical dream-world.

Eileen was unpacking her trunk in her stateroom. Mitch paused in the open doorway. "This is home for the next few months—if we hit Mars, Venus, and Mercury," he remarked lightly. "Hope you can stand the company."

She flashed a smile over her shoulder. "Did you get your duffel?"

"Brought it in with your trunk," he said. "Ready to clear for Earth?"

"Okay!" She left things as they were and came to the doorway. "I'll ride up in the control room with you."

"Cockpit," he corrected. "This little boat couldn't spare a control room." He grinned and led the way forward to the ladderway.

STRAPPED INTO the acceleration chairs behind the broad, curved instrument bank, he contacted Lunar Control and got clearance on a Moon-Earth trajectory, feeding its components into the ship's automatics. The automatics orientated the components and flashed a blue *correct*, then switched to a soft amber glow.

"Stand by," Mitch spoke from long habit. Eileen looked at him and smiled. He kept his gaze fastened on the dials and naviradar scope.

The light changed to red. A faint murmur came from within the ship; slowly, the sleek hull lifted from the spaceport field. Fire blazed silently from her tail, the gravitors compensated for the push, and she hurtled outward into the starry blackness.

"On course, *Trinket*," the communications screen reported. "*Lunar Control clear and out.*"

Mitch relaxed with a sigh and took out his cigarettes.

Eileen looked incredulously from the black communication screen to him. "Is that all there is to it?"

He puffed a cigarette alight and wriggled a finger at the live, shivering needles on the dials before him.

"That's all if the automatics lift us clear. Have to watch 'em to see that all goes well; otherwise the ship runs itself."

"What a *soft job!*" she murmured teasingly.

"What a monotonous job, you mean! Unless some little things busts loose somewhere and you have to fix it—" He made a face at the jiggling, nervous dials. "If you're a little crazy, it helps."

Eileen reached over, took the cigarettes from his hand and accepted one for herself. Mitch swiveled his gaze, looked at her for a moment, then jerked his eyes back to the dials. "You may as well go below and turn in," he said. "We'll raise Antarctic Spaceport in eleven hours."



The *Trinket* floated motionless in black space while the Moon rolled away in the distance and the Earth became a swollen globe, brilliant blue on the sunward side and dark on the night side, except for the bright, tiny sparks of cities.

Mitch slid back the door to Eileen's stateroom with his toe, crossed the room, and clamped the breakfast tray into the wall fastening under the wide oval quartzite window. He uncovered the breakfast dishes, standing silhouetted against the burning constellations which flowed across black space, then reached for the bulkhead switch and turned the room's soft, violet glow to a rich, bright amber.

The bunk erupted in a wild upheaval of blankets and Eileen's disheveled head appeared above them. "Wha—what is it?"

"Breakfast." Mitch slid into the seat behind the breakfast tray, his back to her, and poured himself a cup of coffee. "Come and get it."

"Oh?"

The inquiry in her tone made him look around. She was sitting up in bed, clutching the covers to her bosom with bare, white arms. There was a smoothly-tapered line of creamy thigh. Mitch

turned back to his breakfast, commenced buttering his toast. "Up, grab a shower," he instructed, "get dressed, and come sit down. We're scheduled for a council of war this morning, then a course in space engineering in the cockpit—you're going to have to watch the gauges when I sleep!"

"I see. But couldn't you wait 'til I got dressed?" Her tone was coldly impersonal.

"Get dressed in the bathroom—that's the 'head' in space lingo," he instructed, indicating the chamber referred to with a wave of his knife. "Go on, now—jump up, grab some clothes, run in there and get a good, cold shower!"

"I'd rather you waited outside."

Mitch grunted. "You've been sawing logs for nine hours, kid! I've been riding the controls topside. I'm too blasted tired to argue, and I'm not going to lug this breakfast tray around—get up from there or I'll get you up!"

"Oh!" she murmured, surprised. "Yes, sir!"

There were whispery sounds of cloth and bare feet pattering across the deck. Mitch calmly backed up his Martian *yarbs* and commenced eating.

SHE PUSHED open the door to the head and emerged, wearing a short pull-over that molded to her figure, her skin a radiant pink from the shower. Crossing the room, she scrutinized the breakfast tray and slipped into the seat across from him. "You've taken care of everything, haven't you!" she exclaimed, her tones warmly complimentary. "Martian *yarbs*. Aren't they?" She looked up, smiling. "I've never tasted them. Are they good?"

"A root vegetable with a taste like a chicken's egg," he informed her. "Try that sausage, too—it's both Earth and Venus in origin—"

She tackled her food and made complimentary sounds over it. Mitch finished, covered his dishes, and light-

ed a cigarette. Eileen looked across the tray at him, studying his bruised, discolored, tape-patched features. "How do you feel, Mr. Mitchell?"

"A little sore in spots, yet," he admitted blandly. "Incidentally, we may as well dispose of formality—"

She broke into a soft laugh. "After this morning, I certainly think we should!" Her dark eyes were mocking him. "What shall I call you? Jimmy?"

"Last names are standard in space lingo, Graham." He grinned at her. "Call me Mitch."

"All right—but I am *not* a space girl, so don't you dare call me 'Graham' like that!" she retorted haughtily. "My name's Eileen."

Mitch shrugged indifferently and flipped his cigarette ash into his coffee cup. "Now that we're acquainted, suppose we reach an understanding on what plans you have for the future," he suggested, his voice casual. "The first thing you're going to do is go see this George Kimball, right?"

She nodded. "I'm going to look over the records, too. Home offices are in Cleveland, N. A.—will you come with me or stay at Antarctic Spaceport?"

"After what's happened, I'd better come with you."

"Thanks." She paused in her eating, then, and studied him. "Did you believe that—what that gunman said about me?"

"No," he replied gently.

"Your actions this morning—they had nothing to do with that, did they?" Her expression was hurt, accusing.

"I seem to remember that when the character with the gun was talking, his oversized pal was holding you very skillfully, so you could neither move nor make a sound," Mitch told her, firmly. "I noticed at the time just how skillful that big ape was, how determined he was to keep you from talking. When the gunman made his spiel about your love affairs, I noticed that he did it without any danger of having you upset his applectart. That didn't

exactly look as if he were telling the truth."

Eileen looked surprised and pleased. "I guess I've underestimated you, Mitch! And the way you dived straight through that window-wall—" She shivered excitedly. "I hadn't even *thought* of the swimming pool down there!"

Mitch grimaced and looked out the ship's window at the stars. "Getting back to the subject," he said, "what happens after you've seen Kimball and checked the corporation records?"

She sobered reflectively. "Then I think I'll know more just what to look for—what's causing the trouble," she explained. "I'll go on from there to check our branch offices and dealers on Mars, Venus, and Mercury, getting their direct views of the situation. I'm fairly sure that will have to be done to trace down the exact cause of the trouble. It must have been well covered-up on Earth or the stockholders would've protested—and there's where the trouble must be, basically, since we've lost business on all the planets under our franchise. If it were just one planet, I'd know the trouble was there and not on Earth."

Mitch blew smoke at the window and gave a slow nod of agreement. "Okay, we'll give it a whirl."



AS THE big stratowing thrummed northward from Antarctic Spaceport, Mitch and Eileen entered the bar on the lower lounge-deck and parked themselves in a low, cushioned booth next to the curved observation-window. They sipped their drinks and watched the night-shrouded terrain of South America sweeping past forty thousand feet below. Tiny needles of light appeared where commercial centers stood and ribbons of moving sparks revealed the airway traffic of small

private craft. Mitch started the conversation by asking Eileen if she'd ever seen Earth before. . . .

She had seen it several times in her childhood, when her parents made trips to Earth, but she'd grown up on Venus. Her father had started out as a biochemical expert for the government experimental stations scattered around the planet, spending some time traveling around the backwoods and swamp-jungles on inspection tours. Her home was in Jungalia, a small domed city on the edge of the swamp jungles; she grew up among the children of the rough, hardy settlers, the families of hunters and trappers. She remembered the saloons; the drunken brawls; the gun-fights in the streets; the brothels and the prostitutes who lived in the shacks scattered around the domed city, and the raids of the local Venus Police squad when all the criminal element faded mysteriously into the swamp jungles and everything would be quiet for a few weeks. She remembered the stern, uncompromising attitude of her early education, and the consternation of her parents when she was caught playing with some of the children from Outside. She was, she said, a regular tom-boy; her parents would've been shocked at how much she really knew about Outside.

Then, when she began attending Venus University, she'd taken Venus economics for a major—because she already knew something of the causes of poverty on Venus—

"The University straightened me out on a number of things, though," she admitted frankly, giving Mitch her direct gaze. "The kids from Outside didn't have much regard for moral values, and I was an experienced girl before I reached the University. Then I got wise, thanks to some of the other girls." She fingered her glass nervously. "I'm not a thoroughly nice girl, Mitch, but at least I've learned something."

Mitch heaved a sigh and gave her a nod of comprehension. He understood, now, that she wasn't the sweet, inno-

cent young lady she tried to be—that she honestly wanted to be. Eileen Graham had been around. Thugs slapping her around and danger threatening her weren't too unexpected or terrifying to her; she'd seen such things happen—she'd grown up on the interplanetary frontier.



The stratowing chased darkness westward and came down at Denver. They disembarked and hired a private airsled, continuing on to Cleveland after breakfast. Eileen took the sleek, transparent little craft up into the pale dawn while Mitch curled up on the seat and dozed off.

The commercial center of Cleveland was a group of mighty towers that rose like shafts of solid cream two miles into the blue afternoon sky. Mitch awoke as the airsled settled on softly humming gravitors to the broad landing stage at the foot of the towers. They registered the little ship and had a quick luncheon in a nearby restaurant. Then they stood together on the broad, dark band of a moving walkway that carried them into the cavernous entrance of the towers.

They stepped off at an information desk and got directions to the offices of *Molecular Transmutors, Inc.*

EILEEN'S shoulders slumped dejectedly as they strolled along a deep-carpeted corridor toward the transparent portals encribed with *Molecular Transmutors* in chrome lettering. She paused and turned to him, and Mitch noticed the shadows of fatigue around her eyes, the travel-worn look of her wrinkled costume.

"I guess this is it," she said huskily,

referring not so much to the portals ahead of them but what waited beyond those portals.

"Do you want any help with this Kimball guy?" Mitch asked with quiet speculation in his tone. "Or do you want to handle him alone?"

"Come in with me," she said tensely; "let me talk to him, though."

"Okay." He slipped his arm around her waist and hugged her, gently. "I'm just the chauffeur. Get in there and pitch, honey."

She tilted her small chin, defiantly, then faced the portals, squared her shoulders, and marched forward. Mitch followed her, grinning,

A smooth, blonde receptionist gave them a cool appraisal as they entered. "May I help you?" her cultured tones inquired, clearly implying that she wouldn't try too hard. She took a second appraisal of Mitch's grayclad figure.

"I'm Miss Graham," Eileen said sharply. "Tell Mr. Kimball I'm here, please."

The blonde froze. "Very well, Miss Graham," she complied icily. Ignoring the viewscreen on her desk, she rose and melted through the inner door labeled *Private*.

"Such a warm reception!" Eileen murmured sarcastically, staring after her.

George Kimball exploded out of the door almost immediately. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man in pearl gray blouse and dark blue breeches, neat and pretty, with distinguished gray temples and black, wavy hair. He pumped Eileen's hand with enthusiasm, his handsome, tanned face wreathed with smiles.

"Well, well, well—Eileen Graham. My, how you've grown. Come in, come right in—my office is this way—" He pulled her toward the door, then started as he noticed Mitch. "Oh," he said. "Is this gentleman with you?"

"Pilot-Astrogator James Mitchell, Mr. George Kimball," Eileen murmured coolly. "Now suppose we get

down to business, Mr. Kimball? Lead the way to that office of yours."

Kimball frowned. "Look here," he protested. "I hope you aren't angry—"

"Your office, Mr. Kimball." Eileen's voice was firm.

Kimball scowled, started to protest again, then shrugged and led the way. They strode down a glass-walled corridor past offices labeled with Vice-Presidents' monograms and entered a sumptuous suite behind a thick portal labeled *President*. Eileen stared at it as she passed, exchanged glances with Mitch, and then gave her attention to another svelte blonde girl busily rattling a recorder keyboard across the room.

"I must compliment you on your taste, Mr. Kimball," she remarked as they entered the luxurious inner sanctum beyond another door.

Kimball ignored her statement, pretending he didn't hear it as he crossed the deep carpet and eased himself in behind a large, curving desk. He gestured them to chairs before him with a languid wave of his hand. "Sit down, Miss Graham, Mr.—ah—Mitchell." He leaned back, resting his elbows on the arms of his chair and forming a pyramid with the tips of his fingers. "Now, let me say first of all that I hope you had a pleasant journey—"

EILEEN stalked forward and leaned her knuckles on the desk. "Perhaps there are a few things you haven't heard about, Mr. Kimball," she snapped angrily. "One: I've been pushed around on four separate occasions by gangs of criminals since I started here, which hardly made it a 'pleasant' journey! Two: my father was president of this corporation, and I doubt if he condoned the effrontery you have in occupying his office. Three: I'm the president of this corporation *now* and you can crawl right out from behind that desk!"

Kimball made a careful examination of his manicured fingernails, then looked up, coldly. "Are you quite through, Miss Graham?"

Eileen's mouth fell open; she stepped back from the desk, stunned.

"I had hoped we could go over this without any unpleasantness," Kimball went on, calmly. "If you will sit down, Miss Graham, I shall endeavor to explain the situation as clearly as I can."

Eileen did a slow turn and stared at Mitch, her features blank, expressionless.

Mitch moved before she could take another step from the desk. He advanced to the side of the desk, standing over Kimball. "Miss Graham requested that you vacate that chair," he said quietly; "I think you ought to do it."

Kimball's features convulsed, darkening with rage. Mitch waited tensely, watching him, then relaxed as he made a fluttery motion with his hands. Kimball was licked and he knew it; he rose from the chair and walked around the desk. "It's all yours, Miss Graham," he said in smooth, mocking tones, then bowed and gestured for her to take his place.

Eileen moved past him, stiffly, and inched her way into the chair. Kimball retreated to one of the chairs facing the desk and sat down. Mitch re-



mained standing at Eileen's side.

Eileen took a deep breath, moistened her lips, and began. "Now, Mr. Kimball, suppose we hear whatever explanation you wanted to offer?"

Kimball nodded, smiling as if nothing had happened. "I presume you're referring to the present condition of the corporation, Miss Graham. The production reports are quite clear: we have been cutting corners in the manufacture of the transmutors and turning out an inferior product—"

"For what reason?" Eileen cut in, sharply.

"For the simple reason that your father didn't like the people whom we were formerly subcontracting for conductive alloys," Kimball replied, not the least perturbed. "*Korbelasco Limited* of Bucharest was our former source of conductive alloys, but it was your father's contention that we were paying entirely too much on that subcontract. On his orders, we broke with *Korbelasco* and turned to other sources. We've been plagued with inferior alloys ever since; they get past the government inspectors, but the results are quite apparent—we're losing customers right and left! A transmutor should have a life of ten years; our present product breaks down after only a few years. Our customers have lost faith in us—they refuse to buy new transmutors so long as they can patch up and make-shift with their old ones—and when they won't have any more transmutors and must go back to tanked air, we'll lose our franchise. Sales are already falling off; stockholders are abandoning us—"

"I gather, then, that the entire fault lies with my father?" Eileen glared at him with open hatred.

Kimball permitted himself to look discomfited for a moment. "I'm terribly sorry, Miss Graham," he murmured apologetically. "Your father wasn't a well man—"

"He was sick," she snapped back, "but not too sick to see that someone was milking the corporation through a rigged deal with this *Korbelasco* outfit in Bucharest! Who was getting the kickback on that subcontract, Mr. Kimball?"

"Well, now, look here!" Kimball straightened up, haughtily. "Such a case is hardly supported by the evidence, Miss Graham—the simple fact being that as soon as we quit *Korbelasco*, our alloys became inferior. *Korbelasco* happens to be one of the leading metallurgical firms on Earth—"

"All I know is something my father mentioned in one of his letters," Eileen retorted. "He said '*something stinks in*

Bucharest and you've just succeeded in reminding me of it. Thank you. Now, who was getting the kickback?"

KIMBALL'S expression became sullen. "It would be rather difficult to prove such an assertion, Miss Graham. As it is, Korbelasco has refused to renew our subcontract due to the bad feeling your father created. Unless our production improves, I'm afraid the corporation is finished."

"Well!" Eileen sank back in her chair, peering at him narrowly. "That's an interesting statement, Mr. Kimball. Since you've been serving as head of the Board of Trustees and acting-president of the corporation, I presume you've made some attempts to improve production?"

"I've tried every way in the world," Kimball replied. "I'm still trying—and I may as well tell you now that the Board of Trustees is solidly behind me." There was a smug amusement in his gaze.

Eileen fingered her chin, thoughtfully. "I see," she murmured, half to herself. "Of course, I still hold the controlling interest in this corporation, Mr. Kimball."

"I'm well aware of that," Kimball acknowledged. "I'm also aware of the fact that our Board of Trustees hardly welcomes the idea of a young, inexperienced woman taking over the reins. That, Miss Graham, was precisely the reason I tried to dissuade you from coming here; it would be better for both you and the corporation if you had remained on Venus."

She stared at him in amazement. "You're quite sure of yourself, aren't you!"

"I'm sure of one thing," Kimball remarked calmly. "If our Board of Trustees walks out, the government will cancel our franchise tomorrow."

Eileen shook her head, slowly. "And I was almost killed by that incendiary bomb—"

Kimball's eyes blazed with swift rage. "Be careful, young lady," he

said gently; "there are defamation laws on this world."

"I thought you knew nothing about it!"

"Oh, I found out about it, naturally—and I'm seriously sorry about your misfortune." Kimball grinned crookedly, flicking his gaze toward Mitch. "I'm relieved to see that Mr.—ah—What's-his-name here is now your—travelling companion? No offense, of course."

"Of course," Mitch answered him, "as you say, there are defamation laws—"

"Mitch, be quiet," Eileen spoke quickly. "I think that will be all for now; you may leave, Mr. Kimball."

"Very well. Don't hesitate to call on me if you want anything." Kimball rose, smiling, and started for the door.

"Just one more thing," she halted him. "Tell your Board of Trustees you're still with the corporation—for the present time, at least."

"Should I say 'thank you'?" Kimball grinned broadly. "Yes? Thank you, Miss Graham." Then he turned and left.

Eileen watched the door close behind him with a scowl of disgust. "I feel as if I'd just woke up in bed with a snake!" she said bitterly. Then she glanced up at Mitch and smiled. "Thanks for holding me up, Mitch."

Mitch pursed his lips, critically. "He almost had you there, for a moment. Well, what now?"

"I'll see if that blonde is still outside." She turned to the viewscreen on the desk, pressed the stud, and waited. There was no answer. She dialed a number at random, got a pert brunette. "Please bring me the files on Korbelasco," she said; "this is Miss Graham."



THE SLEEK, little airsled rose silently into the moonlit night. Puffs of silvery cloud drifted past, bright against the black earth below. Stars twinkled sleepily overhead and

lights sparkled warmly from small, widely-scattered homes beneath. Eileen stifled a yawn, snuggled in the curve of Mitch's arm. Mitch flicked on the robot-pilot and let the airsled fly itself. It would land itself when they reached the destination typed out on its control-keyboard. Mitch settled deeper in the cushions; Eileen stirred and snuggled closer, and they glided onward through the night.

He couldn't go to sleep; he tried, but he couldn't.

Eileen slept like a baby.

He was quietly smoking the last of his cigarettes when the airsled dipped and slid effortlessly toward the black earth. The moon was near the horizon, and as they descended out of its milky glow Mitch blinked and squinted downward. The vague shapes of trees and shadowy hills became discernible. He spotted the light outline of a house ahead, swirling contours and terraced roof, then glanced below again—and jerked forward, sprawling Eileen onto the floor of the cabin as he grabbed the control wheel.

He hauled it back, pulling the airsled up in a tight, climbing turn.

The black shape that rose from beneath them glinted dully as it pointed its nose to the sky, then there was a brilliant, searing glare. The spaceship screamed up past them, into the black sky, bathing the airsled in the glare of its flaming tail. Eileen crouched on the floor and screamed as a loud thunderclap split the night.

Air currents tore at the sled, tumbling it roughly. Mitch fought the controls until it had quieted down, then swung back toward the vague, light splotch of the house. He eased the sled down to the landing ramp beside the house.

Eileen clutched at his legs, sobbing hysterically; he reached down and pulled her into his lap.

She stifled her sobs and struggled weakly against him. He eased her over into the seat, pulled out his handkerchief, and wiped her tear-streaked face. "What—what happened?" she stammered.

"Somebody took off in a black spaceship," he said; "they almost hit us."

She tensed, staring up at him. "A black spaceship!"

"Yeah." He folded his handkerchief and returned it to his pocket. "And Colonial Control doesn't paint their spaceships black."

She sat up, looking around wildly. "We're—we're at Posovski's?"

"We're at Posovski's," he confirmed grimly. "I think you'd better let me go in, first, and look around."

"And leave me out here?" She clutched his arm, tightly. "I'm staying with you!"

"All right." He slid open the panel on his side and swung his feet out. "Come on."

They walked slowly across the ramp toward the dark, silent house.

MITCH SHIVERED as the cool night breeze trickled into his spaceman's gray, chilling the sweat on his body. He was tired, his nerves jumpy. He'd spent the evening sitting in the office, doing nothing, while Eileen thumbed through stacks of files. The search had turned up one peculiar fact: *Molecular Transmutors* had hired a new production manager. Posovski, who had been production manager under her father, was listed as having been retired on pension. They had gone out to dinner, then, and come to see Posovski.

They saw him sprawled in the faint, blue glow of a floorlamp in his living room, the front of his face blown away.

When they returned to the airsled, Eileen sat perfectly still on the wide seat and gazed ahead at nothingness.

"He knew!" she whispered faintly. "He knew what they were doing—so they had to kill him!"



Mitch reached for his cigarettes, pulled out the empty pack, crumpled it and threw it away. "Why should they kill him just to keep you from finding out anything from him?"

"Yes—they tried to kill us too, didn't they!"

"No, that wasn't intentional. They were rising on manual and when we came swooping over them, their pilot got scared and poured on the juice. But that ship had no atmospheric fins or flight controls—it came from outer space and it went back to outer space. The only way to do that would be to maintain a complete radio silence and just hope that no other spaceship spots you on its radarscope."

"You mean they came down from space to kill Posovski? But—"

"That means they didn't expect us," Mitch explained. "If we had taken a little less time with dinner tonight, we'd have got here in time to talk to Posovski—and probably meet the same fate he did. The killers had no way of knowing we were coming here; Kimball couldn't tell them—not without breaking radio silence."

"I see." She produced a pack of cigarettes from her purse and passed one to him. "Then Posovski was killed for some other reason—not just to keep us from talking to him."

"Maybe we're next," Mitch surmised drily. "Maybe Posovski was dangerous because he knew too much and might have talked if he learned you had been killed. Some criminals can't stomach murder—"

"But he wasn't a criminal."

"You sure?"

"Positive. But he knew something, and they had to keep him from talking. Suppose they have to kill me and—and you—and suppose Posovski knew something that wasn't bad in itself, but would tell him exactly who had killed us, and why?"

"Such as what, for instance?"

"Such as who was getting the kick-back on that Korbalesco subcontract, and who would want us killed. They knew he'd go straight to the Police."

"They had to shut him up, all right—but I don't think it was because they planned to kill us; not entirely, anyway. That black spaceship is an outlaw and must have a hidden base of its own somewhere—it can't land at any of the spaceports unless its a franchised ship—"

"Could it be?"

"Yes—I've thought of that, but I doubt it. The guy who was piloting it hadn't got dry behind the ears yet; he was never turned out by the Space Academy! But the point is, this is a lot bigger than murder. It's interplanetary conspiracy, and somehow it's tied up with the present efforts to destroy your corporation and break its commercial franchise. Somebody doesn't want you to sell air renewers on the other worlds!"

"But this is murder!" Eileen gestured toward the house, protestingly. "Aren't we going to call the Earth Police?"

"Not on the house videophone," Mitch retorted grimly. "Somebody blew the screen to bits, or didn't you notice?"

"All I noticed was—him, lying there."

"This isn't a case for the Earth Police anyway. Interplanetary conspiracy's Colonial jurisdiction, and we ought to get the Space Fleet after that black ship—" Mitch broke off, frowning worriedly. "There's just one difficulty," he added in a dull voice. "We have no proof that any black spaceship was ever here; there isn't a shred of evidence to prove that we didn't kill Posovski ourselves!"

"But we aren't armed—"

"Weapons can be gotten rid of."

SHE TURNED to him, her eyes wide and dark. "What shall we do, Mitch?"

"You didn't tell anyone we were coming out here?"

"No."

"Then we leave." He switched on the power and lifted the little airslid into the darkness. Typing out

C-l-e-v-e-l-a-n-d on the control-keyboard, he left the ship to fly itself.

"Now," he said, "tell me this: who would want to break your corporation?"

"I—I don't know—"

"Who's your competitor?"

She hesitated pensively, then shrugged. "Seven other companies share the Jovian and Saturnian Moons on their franchises, but none of them would be big enough to handle our Mercury-Venus-Mars franchise. Of course, we were a government-sponsored corporation to start with; if the government breaks our franchise, they'll sponsor one of the other companies until it can supply air renewers to our planets."

"So you haven't any direct competitors—the government would decide who got your franchise?"

"That's right; if another company tried to run us out of business, they'd have no way of knowing whether the government would grant them the franchise after we lost it. There'd be no point in trying it."

"Then what about shennigans in the government? Could some bureaucrat be selling out to another company?"

"I doubt it. The U.N.O. puts Colonial Control through some rather tough inspections—and if the bureaucrat were caught, there'd be some tough penalties."

"Then who would want to break up your corporation?"

"I don't know!"

"You checked *Molecular Transmutors'* stock—"

"Yes. It's depreciating fast and flooding the market."

"And nobody's buying it up, trying to get a controlling interest at a cheap price?"

"My father had the controlling stock and I'm not selling; I can outvote the rest of the stock no matter who owns it."

"Nobody's tried to get you to sell?"

"That would be rather obvious,

wouldn't it? I'd know who ordered Posovski killed, then."

"Yeah." Mitch slumped back in the seat, scowling darkly. "That leaves us just one sure thing—the black spaceship! Coming in a spaceship, to commit a murder on Earth, means the murderers' headquarters are on some other planet; that may mean the real trouble isn't here, either!"

"You mean someone on another planet wants to break the corporation? But that doesn't make sense! They're the ones who're suffering!"

"Well, maybe it doesn't and maybe it does, but we aren't likely to find out much more here on Earth. Mr. George Kimball has everything sewed up tight—"

"Including the Board of Trustees!"

"And if there were anything, it's been carefully covered up so that Board of Trustees won't find it. We haven't much of a chance. By the way, did you check the branch office on Venus before you left?"

"No! I—I had no idea what to look for! This Korbelsasco thing—"

"They don't usually pass out such information to branch offices," he agreed comprehensively. "We'll check that Korbelsasco deal."



MITCH CHECKED it via long-distance videophone from the Cleveland center. He emerged from a public 'phone booth and joined Eileen at a lunch counter, showing her a hastily scribbled list of notations:

- 1) Korbelsasco of Budapest is one of Earth's leading metallurgical firms (as Kimball claimed).
- 2) Three other firms *could* have duplicated Korbelsasco's work on *Molecular Transmutor* parts (Kimball said none could).
- 3) Korbelsasco had refused to renew *Molecular Transmutor's* subcontract; in fact, *they had cancelled it* (not Eileen's father) because M-T production had started mass-rejection of Korbelsasco parts which were perfectly good.

4) Posovski had not been M-T production manager at the time the subcontract was cancelled.

5) M-T was now paying more for the same parts than they had paid Korbelasco.

Eileen tapped the last notation with an indignant fingernail. "There it is," she said. "Our files show we paid Korbelasco three times as much as they say we paid them. Now, who pocketed the difference? Find that out and we'll find the murderer!"

Mitch ordered coffee and sipped it reflectively. "I doubt it," he argued mildly. "That was a swindle that took place three years ago—"

"When George Kimball became head of the Board of Trustees!"

"—And it doesn't fit in with hiring gangs of thugs to prevent you from reaching Earth or running in a gang of killers in a black spaceship. If it was a swindle, it can't be proved; there's no reason to murder anybody over it."

"But what else is there?"

"There's the fact that Kimball is very obviously running the corporation to ruin, and covering his tracks so well nobody suspects it. There's the fact that apparently he has nothing to gain by it, so he must be doing it for someone else—"

"But his whole career's tied up in *Molecular Transmutors!*"

"Which means someone else must have a hold over him, blackmailing him into doing their dirty work for them. Maybe they know about this Korbelasco swindle—maybe they're threatening him with that. No, what we should do is find this 'someone else'."

"Someone on another planet?"

"Who wants *Molecular Transmutors* broken. They must have something to gain by it—which means they must be either on Mercury, Venus, or Mars, since that's where you sell air renewers. They must have something to gain by making you stop selling air renewers."

"But which planet is it?"

"Venus is our best bet; that's where the trouble started."

"What about Posovski?"

"Somebody will find him."

"Shouldn't we tell the Police something?"

Mitch shook his head. "We'd be sticking our necks in a noose. Anyone who's managed to hijack a spaceship and get away with it would jump at the chance to frame us for Posovski's murder."

She pursed her lips indecisively. "What would you do about Kimball?"

"Nothing, until I had some definite proof that could be laid before the Board of Trustees."

"Then we may as well go to Venus."



THE TRINKET had an Earth-Venus trajectory for nineteen chronological days. Mitch split the days in half and established a twelve-hour routine of three four-hour watches: first watch, they both stood together; second watch, he stood while Eileen slept; third watch, she stood while he slept. One meal only, during first watch.

He taught her to watch the gauges and scope until she had it down pat; if anything went wrong, of course, she would sound the alarm to wake him up. During first watch, he took her on a few of his inspection tours of the little space-cruiser until she knew what it involved; then he left her in the cockpit and made the inspections alone. It was never wise to leave the instruments unwatched; they gave the first tell-tale flicker of warning when any mechanism was beginning to break down—that was the time to catch it, not after the breakdown had occurred. A finicky transformer could be cut off and repaired; a burned-out transformer was a complete loss. And their lives depended on the ship's mechanisms.

So, for nineteen chronological days—thirty-eight twelve-hour periods—they were alone, marooned inside a

tiny steel splinter floating in the middle of the black heavens.

Mitch was concerned for her mental and emotional stability, so he tried to be friendly and respectful toward Eileen. He probably should have given more thought to his own emotions.

He felt no prejudice toward her for having involved him in a situation of intrigue, murder and violence. The danger only served to intensify his curiosity: someone was trying to stop Eileen from selling air-renewers to the other planets. Why? People needed air-renewers for their homes, for the helmets they must wear in the alien, unbreathable atmosphere of the other planets, for the domed cities. They had to have air they could breathe! Without air-renewers they'd have to go back to carrying tanked air, supplied to them by their planetary governments.

Because he was a spaceman, trained and dedicated to help the settlers of the other worlds, Mitch felt that anything which threatened their survival was an equal threat to himself. This wasn't just a girl's battle to save her father's business; it was bigger than that. It was a shadow of death by suffocation that lay across three worlds!

His feeling for Eileen Graham had nothing to do with that.

She affected the loose, filmy, cover-all garments of her home-world, Venus, for ship's wear. These thin, pajama-like costumes left little of her smooth, ivory-white body to speculation, though they were commendable for Venus where the dense, misty atmosphere would weigh any garb heavily—too heavily for comfort, unless it was thin—with moisture. With the gradual lethargy of spaceflight routine dulling her senses, and the way she slouched about the ship with her hair tumbling loosely to her shoulders, her face blank and sulky, and her clothing fastened only haphazardly at the waist, the effect was sometimes rather breathtaking from Mitch's point of view.

Her casual acceptance of him was

almost childlike; it was perfectly obvious that she trusted him completely. That, itself, was foolish. Mitch couldn't have trusted himself that completely. It took a good deal of effort to remain merely cordial and respectful toward her, at times.

IT REACHED a climax during a first watch when they were sprawled together in the seat before the instrument panel. The cockpit was lighted only by the soft glow of starlight coming through the transparent blister. Eileen rested lazily against him on the cushions and their conversation had died of its own boredom; then, in a fit of mischievousness, she began tickling him.

Mitch wasn't especially ticklish, so the feeling was somewhat different. He pulled her close and kissed her, taking his time about it, caressing her quite thoroughly and enjoyably. She lay still and submissive against him for a few minutes of it, then struggled and pushed away. She moved over to the corner of the seat and pushed her hair back from her face with a nervous, trembling gesture.

"Don't do that again, Mitch," she said. "I didn't tell you about me because I thought it would give you ideas."

Mitch scowled at the instrument dials. "Nothing you said gave me that idea."

She was silent for a moment; then she spoke softly, in a voice quavering on the verge of tears. "Don't say it was love, Mitch; you aren't the type."

Quickly, she rose and left the cockpit, her bare feet pattering down the ladderway.

Thereafter, she was cool and distant; she did up her hair and was more fastidious about fastening her garments. The trip to Venus settled down to just another spaceflight.



Mitch contacted Venus Control and received clearance for their approach

trajectory. The planet was a huge, bloated globe of silvery mist on their viewscreen as the little *Trinket* chuckled and clacked her automatics and went curving down toward the planet. They plunged into the swirling mists and went boring down through grayness—and the grayness deepened to inky blackness with swirling masses of gray, then to a wet, twinkling blackness with an eerie glow seeping through it to reveal thin curtains of mist and blurred sheets of rain curling and rippling over a rugged, wet landscape. The *Trinket* slipped through a wide gorge between two gigantic mountain-peaks and whined down on her sleek fins toward a broad spaceport field beside the looming, wet dome of Venus City. She glided to a halt beside a gleaming spaceliner, poised on her gravitons above the deep mud, then settled down with a gurgling splash.

Eileen broke out helmets from the ship's stores and they donned them before clamboring out the airlock. Spaceport crewmen had rolled a metal-mesh walkway across the mud to their cruiser and a Customs official stood waiting to register them. The wet atmosphere closed over them as they stepped down to meet him, plastering their clothes to their bodies. The official noted the holstered blasters on their hips with a grim smile.



AN HOUR later, they were registered and passed through Decontamination. They left the Port Hospital and took a taxi across town to the Venus City offices of *Molecular Transmutors*.

Michael Semanichek, Venus City manager for M-T, was a squat, barrel-chested man with red hair and features chipped out of white marble with a crude chisel. He hit them with the piercing, blue gaze of a sharp promotor and ushered them to chairs before his scarred, battered desk. Then he sat down and hit them with his

forceful, gravelly voice. "I must ask you to leave Venus immediately. If you don't, your lives won't be worth a tinker's damn!"

Eileen sat up and rested her hand on the blaster at her hip. "I think we're prepared for that, Mr. Semanichek."

That won a grin. "Call me Mike," the manager growled gently. "I kinda figured it'd be that way with you, Miss Grahm, if you was anything like your Old Man. Now, you want to know the deal here?"

"Exactly!" she asserted firmly.

Mike nodded. "Hang onto your britches, then. In the first place, we're losing customers right and left because our air-renewers don't work any more. Now, this would seem like the home office was sending us cheap transmutors from Earth; fact is, when I reported the breakdowns of our air-renewers to Earth, they sent a letter apologizing for the inferior product and said they had trouble in production—"

"From George Kimball?"

"Yeah, from Kimball. I went down to shipping to get an air-renewer and give it my own inspection, only they didn't happen to have any stock right then. So when the next shipment came in, I went right over to the spaceport and got me one before Port Inspection even had a chance at it." Mike paused his eyes narrowing. "Ever since then, I been wishing I had eyes in back of my head!"

"Why?" Eileen prompted.

"Because I happen to be a metallurgist by training," Mike explained quietly. "There wasn't a thing wrong with that air-renewer when I examined it. So I put in a few scratches for identification, then checked it again after Port Inspection had passed it—"

"Port Inspection sees that incoming cargo hasn't been damaged in shipment and still meets its franchise specifications, doesn't it?" Mitch put in.

Mike nodded. "That's Port Inspection. Imported products must meet the franchise specs set down by the gov-

ernment and Colonial Control. So Port Inspection passed this cargo of air-renewers as okay, but I checked that air-renewer again just for curiosity's sake; the renewer had been sabotaged!"

"You mean—by Port Inspection?" Eileen stammered incredulously.

"By somebody in Port Inspection," Mike affirmed. "They'd given it a sonic burst. The crystalline structure of some of the conductive alloy parts had been broken down and the mechanism would've failed in just a few years' service. The whole shipment was like that."

"Didn't you report this to Colonial Control?"

"Sure! Colonial Control referred it to the Venus Police and I was dragged into court, charged with tampering with the cargo before it was cleared by Port Inspection! The charge was dropped for lack of evidence." Mike snorted derisively. "They just didn't find out who did it in Port Inspection, that's all!"

"They probably thought you were going to file suit against the government." Mitch surmised. "That charge was merely legal action to destroy any grounds you could claim for a suit—"

"I know that," Mike cut him short. "But air-renewers are still being tampered with; and Port Inspection is under the Venus government, not Colonial Control. The funny part is that the Venus government has even refused Police protection for our dealers and agents!"

"Do they need protection?" Eileen asked.

Mike grimaced. "Two of our agents were killed, and three more have disappeared on sales trips in the past six months. Four dealers' establishments have been broken into and ransacked. The air-renewers we've been selling have begun to break down—twenty-seven people have been caught Outside and died of suffocation when their renewers cut out. There's bad feeling against us all over the planet; Venus Police says that explains the attacks

on our men. And there's a bill pending in the legislature to cancel our commercial franchise and put everybody back on tanked air."

"But why would Port Inspection sabotage our product?"

"Uh huh! Or why would *somebody* in Port Inspection do it? Wouldn't be because certain political bosses in certain domed cities were behind this bill to switch back to tanked air, would it?"

Eileen shook her head, perplexedly. "Just what are you trying to tell me, Mike?"

"I'm merely saying that if Venus goes back to tanked air, the people will have to depend on the government for that air—and these city-bosses will have the job of handing it out!"

"You mean the people will have to depend on these political bosses for their air?"

"Uh huh. And if a guy don't get air, he dies."

THEY WALKED out on the parking ramp, a tall, young man in spaceman's gray and a slender, lovely girl in silken red, with helmets swung back from their shoulder harness and guns buckled about their hips.

"What do we do now, Mitch?" she asked him, as if it were natural and proper to follow his decisions.

Mitch shook his head, frowning bitterly. "From political corruption to dictatorship in one easy step," he muttered. "And *Molecular Transmutors* are the ones who get stepped on."

"We can't prove it," she reminded him. "You heard what Mike said—no one even knows who's the head of those city-bosses!"

"Yeah. I think we ought to check Mike's story a little, though."

"Where? Port Authority?"

"That's good as any."

Eileen stepped up to the short call-column nearby and depressed the button for a taxi. One of the sleek, open, three-wheeled vehicles rolled up almost

immediately. They climbed over the low side and settled back in the soft cushions. Mitch typed Port Authority on the tiny control-keyboard and the taxi swung off the ramp into the broad ribbon of the trafficway. They went gliding swiftly along curving spans, speeding among towering slabs of giant buildings with the wind rippling at their hair. Other taxis sped along ahead and behind them, and flashed past on other trafficways curving above and below theirs. The buildings rose sheer and smooth to the gleaming dome overhead, and terraced rooftops swept past below, bright with gardens and shrubbery and tinkling fountains. Colored spotlights played about in a rainbow symphony, swinging over buildings and trafficways and gardens.

They descended a wide spiral and swung in to the parking ramp before the curved buildings of Port Authority. The slick surface of the dome curved down from above, showing the eternal, swirling darkness of Venus' cloud-blanket, through a wavering deluge of rain. Purple lightning streaked the black vaults of the clouds. Their taxi nosed up the parking ramp and stopped.

Dismounting, they strode in through the cavernous concourse that led to the spaceport. The walls were lined with the display windows of shops, restaurants, bars, ticket agencies, theaters and travel bureaus. The people were for the most part tall and slender, with creamy white skin, wearing silken garments similar to Eileen's. Many of them, just in from the spaceport field, wore their shoulder harness with helmets thrown back. And many of them wore holstered guns: Venus was still a frontier world, in many respects.

They stopped in a small restaurant-bar and Eileen ordered lunch for both while Mitch occupied himself in a public videophone booth. Spaceport Information noted his spaceman's gray and readily provided the facts he asked for: Mike Semanichek had been

charged with tampering with cargo not cleared by Port Inspection, and the charge dismissed in court; a political group from the smaller domed cities had introduced a bill in the Venus legislature to go back to tanked air; there was bad feeling among Venusian settlers for *Molecular Transmutors*, and there had been some killings. Mitch rejoined Eileen at their table and told her Mike's information was correct.

"But I think it's bigger than a plot to establish dictatorship on Venus," he said grimly. "Colonial Control would clamp down on such a dictatorship as soon as it got started, so the plot by itself doesn't make sense. But your corporation has been having trouble on Mars and Mercury as well—"

"I've been wondering about that!" Eileen exclaimed. "Do you think the same thing could be happening on those planets?"

"That black spaceship makes me think it's a three-planet deal! There may be one gang behind the political bosses on all three worlds!"

"But how can we find out?"

"We might start with the political bosses here."

"Once we leave Venus City, anything could happen—not that I'm any more afraid than you are." She gazed at him levelly.

"I'm plenty afraid!" he retorted, grinning. "But there's one other thing that'll make them hesitate to harm us. That's the gray I'm wearing; if they kill a spaceman, Colonial Police will be swarming all over this planet!"



THE VENUS Control officer was adamant. "I cannot accept your flight plan to cruise around this planet," he told Mitch emphatically. "Venus Police says it would be dangerous for you to land anywhere else, in view of the present situation."

"Then we'll travel without a flight plan!" Mitch retorted angrily.

The officer shrugged. "In that case,

you're risking your own neck; Venus Control cannot be held responsible."

Mitch flicked off the communications screen and whirled back to the controls with a curse. "Get out the Venus topographical charts," he snapped. "We'll have to fly on manual."

Eileen spread the charts before her and Mitch lifted the cruiser into the swirling blackness. A sheet of rain swept past, drumming on the cockpit blister, and was gone. "Twenty-four degrees northeast," she called to him. "Altitude four thousand, speed three hundred miles an hour."

Mitch swung the *Trinket* on course.

There were tall, steep mountains of wet rock hidden in the black cloak of the mists; hundreds of volcanoes belched hot gasses upward from their flaming mouths; vast slopes covered with gigantic trees rolled upward from below. Giant carnivores arched their massive necks and gnashed jagged teeth as the *Trinket* screamed past unseen, high in the dark mists.

Mitch rode the 'scope and gauges; Eileen timed their flight and read off their course from the charts. The little cruiser bucked and skittered away as a wet, gleaming black cliff loomed out of the mists...



Jungalia was a small dome snuggled against a muddy slope between a steep wall of rock and the thick tangle of the swamp-jungles. Mitch set the cruiser down on the metal ramp beside the dome, tucking her neatly between a squat jet-cargo plane and a row of mud-splattered jungle tanks. They closed their helmets and swung down from the airlock, striding purposefully toward the city's dark, gleaming dome.

"Looks like a reception committee," Mitch observed, his voice creating a faint echo inside his helmet.

A crowd of helmeted figures stood outside the city's big locks. The crowd was growing, Mitch noticed, as they strode toward it. He saw atomic ri-

fles hanging from the crooks of arms, holstered blasters and long, curved jungle knives.

"Not a woman in the bunch!" Eileen commented cryptically. "I don't think they like us here!"

"Nobody's aiming anything at us—yet," Mitch replied. He hooked his thumb over the hard butt of his blaster.

THEY WERE hardly more than twenty feet from the silent, staring men when a shout went up from the rear, and a platoon of green-uniformed Venus Police pushed their way through the crowd. They formed ranks in front of the crowd, facing Mitch and Eileen, and grounded their rifles. A husky, tough-looking Police Lieutenant stepped forward, addressing the two solitary figures as if they were inanimate statues.

"It is the duty of the Venus Police to inform Miss Eileen Graham that she is hereby under arrest for suspicion of murder. Kindly surrender your weapon, Miss Graham, and come along—this cancels the contract you have with this spaceman, of course; he may leave."

"Murder!" Eileen gasped. "Whose murder?"

"The murder of one Michael Semanichek, of Venus City," the Lieutenant answered readily. "You are known to be the last to see him alive. Come along, now—"

"Hold it!" Mitch snapped. "If she was the last to see him alive—and if he is dead—then I was there, too; how come you're not arresting me?"

"All I'm doing is following orders, spaceman," the Lieutenant retorted curtly. "If you're in any trouble, the Colonial Police will handle it. I'm placing Miss Graham under arrest, which ends any business you may have with her, so get back to your ship—"

"You couldn't be overlooking me because you don't want the Colonial Police nosing around here, could you?"

"My orders concern only Miss Graham—"

"All right, so your *bosses* don't want any Colonial Police around!"

The Lieutenant sneered. "My advice to you, spaceman, is to keep your nose clean." He whirled to his platoon. "Valotti, Ching—take charge of the prisoner, Miss Graham—"

"Careful, boy!"

Something in the soft, quiet way Mitch said it made the Lieutenant look back, startled. He grew even more startled when he saw Mitch's blaster aimed at him. "I'm calling your bluff, boy," Mitch told him gently. "I don't think you want to have any trouble with a spaceman, do you? A guy wears gray, folks don't like cops or anybody else pushing him around—"

"You're aiding a criminal—" the Lieutenant raged.

"Suppose you just take the matter up with the Colonial Police?" Mitch cut him short. "If I'm in any trouble, they'll handle it."

The Lieutenant gave him a long, hard stare. "This is none of your business, spaceman! I'm taking Miss Graham prisoner and—"

"And I'm blowing you right in half if you try any such thing!" Mitch spoke earnestly. "You don't look as if you want to go back into the dome in pieces, Lieutenant. In fact, you don't look as if you've been a Lieutenant long enough to appreciate it yet."

That hit home. The Lieutenant stiffened, his features blushing under his helmet; there were a few scared grins in the platoon behind him. Then he whirled, snapped an order to his men, and marched them back through the crowd, on into the city's big airlocks.

"Whew!" Eileen clutched at Mitch's arm as he holstered his blaster. "Mitch, do you actually think they killed Mike?"

"Maybe," he replied grimly. "It's certain that we've come down in enemy territory, though. I can pick three men out of this crowd in front of us now who've had more experience than those so-called Venus Police.

Looks like a force loaded down with political small-fry."

"Politics, hmm?" Eileen's eyes narrowed. "If there's anyone here in Jungalia who'd know about politics, it's Sawtooth McKane. He runs the local newspaper, Mitch—I went to school with his four grandsons—"

"Then let's go see him."

"If this crowd will let us through—"

"Just stick behind me and don't start shooting 'til I do."

"That's what I *was* doing!" She grinned nervously.

THEY STRODE forward, and the crowd parted as if a wedge were being shoved through it. Nobody said anything; they just watched. *They haven't decided yet!* Mitch thought. And then he knew Mike's travelling agents hadn't been killed by angry settlers—

Passing through the airlocks was like walking into another world. The mud, the mists, the rust-streaked ships and the armed, grizzled crowd were left behind. Before them stood a city of luxurious splendor. Broad, terraced gardens stretched away in flat planes of brilliant Venusian green, dotted with palatial mansions and criss-crossed with trafficways. The buildings were set airily apart in the center of the city, great slabs of pastel colors, glowing with inner light, that rose to support the dark, gleaming dome above.

"Jungalia is a city of plantation owners," Eileen remarked, noticing Mitch's stunned expression. "Almost every family is filthy rich. Most of the planet's wealth is tied up in plantations, you know."

But Mitch was looking at something else. There were people swarming about on the broad ramp, dressed in the gaudy, silken trappings of the elite of Venus. People were turning to stare at Eileen and whisper to each other, and their eyes were filled with cold hatred. *These people had decided!*

He led Eileen to a taxi and they went skimming across the city. She

started to point out the single, tall building that was Venus University, when she froze in astonishment. Huge banners were hung from the building—**AIR-RENEWERS ARE DEATH-BOXES!—DOWN WITH MOLECULAR TRANSMUTORS—EILEEN GRAHAM: THE WITCH WHO KILLED VENUS!—MEN MUST BREATHE!—DOWN WITH THE DEATH-BOXES—**



Sawtooth McKane was a thin, little man with fading hair and a pinched face. His archaic spectacles gave him the look of a half-starved owl. He sat behind a roll-top desk that was probably as old as Man's first footprint in the soil of Venus, and threw one leg over the arm of his swivel-chair.

"They're running a smear-campaign against *Molecular Transmutors* that's the hottest thing on Venus!" he exclaimed nasally. "Rumor has it the virus disease your father picked up twisted his mind, and he gave orders before he died that would cause the death of the people here on Venus if they continued to use his air-renewers."

"Why, that's absurd!" Eileen protested.

"Sure it is!" McKane grinned mirthlessly. "It's damned good propaganda, too! These so-called 'decent folks' inside here lap that stuff up! The folks Outside aren't that easily convinced, I'm proud to say—y'can't turn their heads with any such dirty gossip. Hardly a one of 'em that couldn't top any story you made up out of his own experience."

"But the fact remains that our air-renewers are failing," Eileen summarized, "and some people have been caught away from their homes—too far away to get back safely before they suffocated—"

"That's what'll arouse the folks Outside, if it keeps up," McKane confirmed, nodding. "And once that happens, we go back to tanked air and the city-bosses are God. I'll be out

of business, then, my presses smashed. They've been trying to scare me out with threats; I've lost most of my city subscribers. But as long as anybody Outside reads my paper, I'll print it!"

Jungalia isn't the only city under a political boss' rule," Mitch interjected querulously. "Who do you think is behind all this?"

McKANE spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness. "Who knows? This political machine has been building up for years. I can remember when Venus was hardly settled, and the cities were no more than frontier outposts; if any gang of crooks had tried this then, they'd have been blasted in the wink of an eye! But the cities have gone soft since then, got civilized, and corruption has crept in—you gotta go Outside to find the frontier. Far as I can see, the bunch running this political machine had criminal records when they left Earth!"

"They're immigrants from Earth?" Mitch asked.

"Most of 'em are, higher up," McKane affirmed. "They've got most of the riffraff around here working for 'em. The situation stinks to high heaven, but you can't tell these city-dwellers anything; they won't soil their lily-white hands on anything as degrading as politics."

"That soft, huh?"

"Soft as hell!" McKane nodded emphatically.

"Have you heard anything about Mike Semanichek being murdered in Venus City?"

McKane gave Mitch a grim smile. "Somebody got killed, all right—but it wasn't Semanichek! Venus Police sent out a general alarm just a few minutes ago—'a dead man found in Semanichek's offices' and 'further investigation being made' was the gist of it. If they'd killed Mike, they'd have said so!"

Eileen leaned forward with sudden intentness. "If we give you Mike's story, will you print it?"

"What is the story?" McKane replied shrewdly.

"That the air-renewers have been sabotaged by Post Inspection in Venus City!"

"Proof?"

"It's what Mike told us. Ask him!"

McKane peered at her for a moment, then chuckled drily. "All right, I'll print it that way. Besides, I kinda like you, honey—you belonged to Outside. I haven't forgotten how these snooty city kids looked down on you 'til your daddy got rich."

Eileen rose and held out her hand. "Thanks a lot, Sawtooth."

MITCH followed her out and they walked along the ramp to the trafficway. "I almost wish I'd never come back!" Eileen said abruptly, gazing out over the city.

"I'm beginning to see what you mean," Mitch said, reaching for his blaster.

But the dapper, grinning man who stepped up beside them already had a gun centered on Eileen. "Don't do it, spaceman," he warned, "or I'll blast her!"

Others came from behind shrubbery and pillars, guns in their hands. Mitch submitted sullenly as his weapon was torn from its holster. Eileen gave a yelp of indignation as one man grabbed her while another took her gun.

The dapper gang-leader waved his blaster toward a long, low official car. "Climb in, people," he said breezily; "the Commish wants to see you."

They entered the car and gunmen piled in beside them. The car started up smoothly and whisked them over the terraced roof-gardens.

The Commissioner's office was a high-domed vault with pearl walls and a massive desk at the end of twenty majestic yards of deep carpet. He wore a pearl, silken uniform trimmed in green and clamped a long, black cigar in his fleshy jowls.

Commissioner Walden made a languid gesture to his dapper lieutenant. "Place Miss Graham in custody, Kor-

liss, and get her out of here. I'll have a word alone with Mr. Mitchell."

Korliss saluted and motioned to his men. Eileen was led from the room.

Walden wriggled a fat finger at the chair before his desk. "Sit down, Mitchell, sit down; hope my boys weren't rough with you."

"I just know you do," Mitch sneered. He sprawled into the chair. "What happens if I come across that desk and throttle your fat neck?"

"A friend of mine behind the wall will cut you down before you're within a foot of me," Walden answered mildly. "It's no bluff, either; you don't bluff easily, Mitchell."

Mitch took out his cigarettes and puffed one alight. "So what did you want to see me about?"

"Don't you know? I want to ask what your interest is in this business?"

"Then ask me!" Mitch gazed pensively at the cold, sagging white features across the desk. Walden wasn't the kind of man to have heard about the responsibilities of spacemen to the settlers of other worlds; or if he had, he didn't believe it. *And he wouldn't believe me!* Mitch thought.

"I wouldn't be difficult if I were you," Walden spoke softly; "it won't do you any harm to be frank, now, will it?"

"I'll give you as much as you give me," Mitch retorted. "Who's behind the city-bosses on this planet? And what's he doing on Mars and Mercury?"

For a moment, Commissioner Walden looked as if he'd been kicked between the eyes. He recoiled into the depths of his chair, glaring at Mitch. "How much do you know, exactly?" he demanded harshly.

"I know that if you keep Miss Graham, the Colonial Police aren't going to like it," Mitch told him, bluntly. "This matter is entirely beyond the jurisdiction of the Venus Police, or you; there's a black spaceship being traced—"

"You're an agent of the Colonial Police?"

The direct question was supposed

to catch Mitch off-guard. He merely shrugged and lifted an eyebrow. "All spacemen are under the direct jurisdiction of Colonial Control. You've already done enough to get yourself shipped back to Penal Correction on Earth, Walden—it's time some psycho's had a look at that head of yours!"

Walden's lips had a faintly greenish tinge. "Just what are you driving at?"

Mitch grinned; the bluff was working. "Release Miss Graham in my custody at once. Return our weapons and allow us to leave Jungalia peacefully. You're small fry, Walden—we have no interest in you! If you want to save your fat neck, I'd advise you to get out of this deal fast!"

"And if I don't?"

"Then you'll have to kill me to keep my mouth shut. And if you kill me, someone will get word back to the Colonial Police. We won't get your ring-leader, Walden, but we'll get you—and nothing in Heaven or Hell will save you!"

Walden snorted. "You scare me, spaceman; you scare me to death." He reached over and pressed a button on his desk.

Mitch tensed. The door was opening behind him; heavy footsteps were thudding across the deep carpet. Had the bluff failed?

"Have you anything further to add, Mr. Mitchell?" Walden was watching him with a cold, hostile gaze.

"I've told you the score," Mitch replied evenly.

Walden kept watching him. Mitch kept his face expressionless, Walden's fingers drummed on the desk. The faint, pattering sound echoed through the room....

Then Walden sighed softly. "Bring Miss Graham in," he ordered in a dull, resigned voice. "She and Mr. Mitchell are to be escorted immediately to the landing field."

Mitch's stiff features gave no indication of the elated feeling swelling inside him. He rose and turned, casually, ignoring the half dozen armed men standing behind his chair.

Walden was afraid of Colonial Control! His crowd had no control over the Colonial Police—not as they had over the Venus Police!

He strode calmly past the armed men, paying no attention as they fell in behind him, following him to the door.



AS THEY entered the *Trinket* and closed the airlock portal behind them, Eileen threw back her helmet and stumbled into his arms. Mitch held her close, feeling her body tremble against him. He freed a hand and reached up, swinging back his own helmet.

"I was scared!" Eileen gasped timorously.

"It was close," he admitted. His voice was drawn with fatigue. "If Walden had thought a minute, he might have suspected I was bluffing him. The law prevents the Colonial Police from meddling in planetary affairs unless interplanetary conspiracy has definitely been proven—"

"Don't quote Space Regulations at me now!" she protested, pushing away from him. "Let's get out of here before they change their minds!"

They lifted the *Trinket* into the enveloping, black mists and flew back to Venus City. Mitch arranged with Spaceport Maintenance for the cruiser's refueling, then joined Eileen in the ship's salon.

"Well, what have we gained by going to Jungalia?" she asked wearily.

Mitch sprawled into the seat beside her. "We've learned that the headquarters for this criminal bunch isn't on Venus," he replied, unfastening his shoulder harness.

She looked up, puzzled. "Have we?"

"I mentioned the black spaceship to Walden," he explained. "It hit pay-dirt—Walden wasn't surprised at all!"

"Doesn't that mean it's hidden somewhere on Venus?"

Mitch shook his head, grinning. "M

the big boss was on Venus, Walden would've consulted him before turning us loose. Also, a small-fry like Walden probably wouldn't have known about the black spaceship unless he'd been seeing it come down on some hidden landing field when the big boss came visiting. Wherever that ship's based they aren't likely to let minor tools like Walden know about it."

"Then where is the—" Eileen broke off as a dull thumping sound came from outside.

Mitch went to the airlock, blaster in hand, and opened the portals for a tall, gray-haired man in gray uniform. "Colonial Inspector Grimes, of Venus City," he introduced himself as he entered, then swung back his helmet. "I understand you had some trouble in Jungalia, Mr. Mitchell."

"Who told you?" Mitch asked in surprise.

Grimes smiled. "Couple of people—fellow named McKane sent in a call, and a mutual friend of ours named Mike Semanichek had some things to say."

"Mike's with you?" Eileen exclaimed, coming to meet him.

"He's safe under cover," Grimes replied congenially. He unzipped his jacket and handed Mitch his credentials. "I'd like to hear your end of the story, if you don't mind—"



THE *TRINKET* curved away from the misty globe of Venus and hurled herself toward the Sun. Days passed, and the Sun swelled to a bloated sphere of flame; the tiny steel splinter curved past it and plunged onward until the planet Mercury became a small, solid pebble in the black space ahead.

It was a tough trip for the *Trinket*. It kept her running for twenty-nine

days, left her fuel bunkers almost empty, taxed her air-conditioning and refrigeration units to their utmost.

Twenty-nine days were a long time for a man and woman to be shut up together in a steel shell, too. Especially when the temperature rose to 125° and the sweat poured off their bodies as they checked and rechecked and checked again to be absolutely sure the ship was on her course—that she wasn't drifting into the deadly grip of the Sun, to go plunging to a fiery doom—

There were five straight days of that. Mitch stood it for exactly four hours, then stripped. When Eileen came on watch and saw him, she didn't say a word—they were both too exhausted to say much of anything. She merely stripped off her own garments and collapsed beside him, her body glistening wet with sweat. They took turns scampering down the hot ladderway to plunge under the showers in their staterooms; it was the only respite. They couldn't eat; they couldn't sleep. It went on for five days.

Then the *Trinket* was past the Sun, floating serenely out into the starry blackness. Eileen put her clothes back on; Mitch took the hint and redonned his own.

She looked cute, anyway, in her uniform. It molded to her figure, a gray skirt and blouse with the scarlet trim of Colonial Customs. The credentials in her purse proclaimed her to be a Colonial agent, now. Being a space-man, Mitch needed no such trappings; he was automatically in Colonial service. Eileen strutted in her uniform as proudly as a drum-majorette.

But a worked-on ship was a working ship. Mitch was up to his elbows in the greasy mess of molten insulation, sprung bearings, and heat-cracked tubes. And a clean ship was a healthy ship—Eileen soon learned the age-old tradition of swabbing the deck. When they stood their separate watches on the 'scope and gauges, they were so tired they could hardly read the instruments, and when they tum-

bled into their bunks they were asleep in an instant.

Mitch could only hope that he remembered this trip well enough later, when he had time to enjoy it; he didn't have time now.

And Mercury grew to a brilliant globe ahead of them. They were coming in at an angle which showed most of the crimson-streaked, orange surface of molten rock that Mercury kept eternally faced toward the Sun's blazing ball. A band of green, red, and brown belted the little planet at the edge of its sunward face, and that faded into the bleak, frozen face that was kept eternally away from the Sun's heat.

MITCH CONTACTED the two Space Fleet destroyers orbiting around the planet and curved the *Trinket* in to join them. A spaceboat nuzzled up to the flank of the cruiser and gripped it with magnetic grapples. Then a sturdy, muscular figure swung across in bulky spacesuit. Mitch admitted him into the airlock and Eileen helped him out of the cumbersome suit.

"Now then, Mitchell," Commander Eckels began, as they sat smoking leisurely in the cruiser's small salon, "Just how does this situation stack up?"

"Well, from what we and Colonial Control have been able to dig up," Mitch replied, "It goes like this:

"Criminal corruption has been creeping into the planetary governments for decades. In the past few years, however, somebody has gone to the trouble to organize this political corruption into an organization which covers three planets: Mars, Venus, and Mercury.

"It can't be proved, but we believe this mysterious 'someone' has been blackmailing a top official in *Molecular Transmutors, Inc.*, of Earth, who supply air-renewers for the three planets. This 'someone' forced the top official to alter the corporation records in such a way that it covered up sub-

otage of shipments of air-renewers after they had reached the three planets.

"As the air-renewers began breaking down, after they'd been sold to the settlers, this 'someone' had his political hirelings on the three planets start a campaign to remove the franchise on air-renewers and put each planet back on tanked-air supplies—which would be controlled and distributed by the political hirelings, as city-bosses—

"In this way, the political organization would hold the lives of all the settlers on Mars, Venus, and Mercury in the palm of their hand. They'd have complete dictatorial control, and this 'someone,' being the head of the organization, would naturally become dictator.

"By controlling the three planets, he would actually control most interplanetary commerce. If Colonial Control gave him any trouble, he could cut off shipments to Earth until Earth was ready to capitulate; in short, he would virtually rule the Solar System.

"So far, we believe that his headquarters are neither on Earth nor Venus. That leaves Mercury as the likeliest prospect, in view of the trouble they're having—"

"And we can't do a damned thing against him," Eckels concluded grimly, "until we have something definite to go on. The U.N.O. would rake us over the coals if we meddled in the affairs of any planetary government!"

"We'll need evidence to support our action," Mitch agreed; "that's why Miss Graham and I are here as Colonial agents."

"We have absolutely no trace on that black spaceship," Eckels muttered worriedly. "All franchised ships are accounted for, so it was either built illegally for them or they salvaged it as a derelict in space. D'you know if it's armed?"

"I only know it exists," Mitch said gravely.

"Well, we've two destroyers orbiting off Mercury, here—and two off Venus

and two off Mars—so we'll be ready for it if it turns up."

"Be ready to drag us out, too, if we get into a tight spot."

"Oh, we'll keep an eye on you!" Eckels chuckled disarmingly. "The Government of Mercury will no doubt want you to prevent their revolt for them, but just go in and get what evidence you can find and come out."



NEITHER Mitch nor Eileen were quite so sure it could be done that easily. They were silent with apprehension as Mitch sent the *Trinket* streaking into Mercury's thin atmosphere and brought her down in the long, deep valley where the domed city of Twilight Terminal glowed blood-red in the eternal sunset. The hull rasped gently on the gritty soil, and they wriggled themselves into their spacesuits—the planet's atmosphere was too thin for the human body.

They frog-leaped across the gray, level spaceport field, detouring around the giant hulls of spaceliners and shuttle-freighters, heading toward the domed city. On either side of the valley, steep walls rose beneath blankets of verdant, green moss streaked with scarlet veins.

Twilight Terminal was a steel-and-plastic beehive under its dome. Constructed specifically to Mercurian conditions, the dome was a silvery, mirror-bright shield on the sunward side and transparent only on the opposite side. The buildings within were built up, down, cross-wise and sideways in an insane catacombs that was perfectly logical, considering the planet's light gravity. Sunlamps blazed down from the high-vaulted roofs of immense corridors, and down into deep airshafts. Colored lights glowed everywhere through translucent plastic walls, behind stores' display windows and the glass walls of apartment dwellings. There were neither walkways nor trafficways, but shiny loops and whirls of metal handrails that in-

terlaced the maze like swirling smoke, constantly moving on magnetic fields. People merely grabbed a handrail when they wanted to get anywhere: it pulled them off their feet and carried them along comfortably in the light gravity, hanging by one hand. All floor-surfaces were covered with a three-foot-thick layer of foamflex, sufficient to break a fall from the greatest height.

The people were, for the most part, small of stature, coming only to Mitch's shoulder. He stood at the glass wall of an office, looking down through a giant air-shaft at the people gliding along, one hand clutched to a handrail, like swarms of ants in a tremendous anthill. A few were dressed in fashionable garb, but most wore the rough coveralls of the mining industry. A very few carried weapons of any sort—the prospectors who worked the frozen night-side alone and responsible to no man. Not many could stomach that life.



"The situation is rapidly becoming worse," Mr. Yosuto Okihara, manager of *Molecular Transmutors'* offices in Twilight Terminal, was saying. "The city office-workers and executives and the ore-grader operators of the upper levels want tanked air, the robot-operators of the lower levels want air-renewers. The City Commissioners naturally side with the city people, and they're trying to cram tanked air down the robot-operators' throats. The robot-operators are ready to revolt!"

"The entire mining industry depends on them, doesn't it?" Eileen asked.

"Of course!" Okihara confirmed. "Without ore, the planet's entire major industry would grind to a halt. The robots must be kept working in the lower levels, digging ore."

Mitch turned slowly toward the gentle, singsong voice. Okihara was a small man with somewhat the same Oriental slant to his eyes that Mitch

had. His hair was powdery gray, his eyes dark and quietly thoughtful—not a man moved to hasty action. He sat relaxed behind his solid black desk, facing Eileen. She was perched on the edge of her chair before the desk, her hands folded tensely in her lap.

"It's the ore-grader gangs who've had trouble with their air-renewers, isn't it?" Mitch asked.

Okihara nodded. "Those are the large B-109 models we install to supply the air in the chambers of the upper levels—they're about the same size as the ones used to supply the city domes, but with different humidifiers; the temperature beneath Mercury's surface is tremendous, this near the sunward side."

"You've checked those B-109's for possible sabotage?"

"Port Inspection has cooperated with us thoroughly. We've checked them as they arrived from Earth and after they were installed—no faults. When one breaks down, we find it has been sabotaged."

"Then it's not the fault of the air-renewers?"

Okihara pursed his lips cautiously before answering. "I don't think it is! Others disagree."

"Who?"

"Port Inspection, the mining syndicates, the government—almost everybody." Okihara smiled sadly. "It's a rather questionable detail."

He rose with a rustle of black silk and, striding over to a wall, threw a switch that projected a diagram on it. "Here and here," he said, tracing parts of the diagram with a long thin finger. "These are parts of special conductive alloys. Somehow, their crystalline structure is disrupted." He switched off the diagram and returned to his desk. "They think it's because the alloys are poor quality, and break down after short use; I think they have somehow been sabotaged."

"What about ultra-sonic vibrations?" Mitch wondered.

Okihara thought a moment, then nodded. "That might do it. But I am

not familiar with that sort of mechanism that would produce such vibrations outside the research laboratory."

"Have you had any other breakdowns besides the B-109's?" Eileen asked vaguely.

"No, but perhaps we shall. The robot-operators wear insulated suits on the lower levels, you know. If their refrigeration-units quit on them, they would be killed almost instantly; each suit also has its own air-renewer, of course, and it would be difficult to sabotage one of them without the wearer's knowledge. That's another reason I believe in the sabotage theory." Okihara grinned slyly. "If the air-renewers were being manufactured with poor alloys, why do only the B-109's break down? Why don't all of them break down?"

"Do the robot-operators think the B-109's were faulty?"

"I believe some of them suspect sabotage. You'd have to ask them—their union leaders would undoubtedly be willing to discuss it with two Colonial agents!"



"**WE** BEEN fightin' this tanked-air legislation every step of the way!" exclaimed Jack Brody. "And it ain't been without a little blood-lettin', either!"

He was a short, wide man with brown hair that stuck straight up and a powerful body shaped on the general specifications of a fortress. He hunkered forward in his chair, gazing up at them with the intent expression of a man who enjoys telling his troubles. His rough, oiled coveralls were a sharp contrast to their neat, snug grays.

"What do you mean, 'blood-letting'?" Eileen prompted him.

"I mean people gettin' beat up on their way home or to work," Brody said. "And the cops just grin at you when you make a complaint. They's a lotta punks roamin' the streets and shafts now, too, that useta be kept in their holes. Man or woman doesn't

know when they'll get jumped in a dark passage—especially if they're a robot-operator!"

Mitch dropped his cigarette on the floor and ground it under his heel. They were standing in the middle of a gloomy, dust-laden union meeting-hall—the letters on the grimy window said *Robot Operator's Local 982*—where Brody served as a director, in addition to being a superintendent in one of the local mines.

"This criminal element is allowed to make trouble for you people, then?" Mitch surmised grimly.

"They ain't the only ones!" Brody retorted. "It's the Mercury Police stoppin' us and askin' us questions, like *we* was the criminals! It's the city councils makin' speeches against us to the ore-graders an' white-collar workers, an' gettin' feelin's stirred up against us topside. I even know folks that took their kids outta school 'cause the other folks' kids was pickin' on 'em, and my own boy Timmy got sent home 'cause he licked the pants off a merchant's boy like I told him to!"

"And all because you people won't vote for the tanked-air legislation?"

"Ain't nothin' else!"

"Mr. Brody—" Mitch frowned. "Is there any indication that the ore-graders' air renewers were sabotaged?"

A crafty look stole over Brody's rugged features. "So *that's* what you're after! Can't say I can help you, Mitchell."

"Why not?" Eileen demanded sharply.

"'Cause if it is, you can't prove it!" Brody shifted uneasily. "I'll admit some of us has wondered about that. But it's always the new B-109's that break down—the old ones are still lastin' eight or ten years, like they ought to—"

"Only the B-109's break down?" Eileen persisted.

"Only the *new* B-109's," Brody corrected her. "The ones they install when a new ore-grader level is set up. They had one installed just a week ago that's still runnin'—"

"Could you take us down to have a look at it?" Mitch asked.

"Sure, I can get you down there." Brody rose and lumbered toward the door. "C'mon!"

THEY DESCENDED to a wide subterranean chamber with a transparent wall extending along one end. Tall double-portals were mounted in the wall, forming the gates to the mine entrance.

There was trouble at the gates. An angry mob was gathered before the gates. Between them and the gates were two rows of men. The first row carried atomic rifles and wore the mustard-colored uniforms of the Mercury Police; the second row carried placards and signs and walked back and forth in front of the gates.

"What's them pickets doin' there?" Brody wanted to know, and waded into the mob. As people made way before this charging figure, they noticed the gray-clad figures following him and a quiet hush settled over them.

Brody had collared another grim-faced man and was firing questions at him as Mitch and Eileen caught up. "What goes on?" Mitch asked.

Brody released the man and turned back, scowling. "The damn' ore-graders are picketin' the mines, keepin' the robot-operators out. They ain't gonna let us work 'til we vote like they want, damn 'em."

"What's the Police have to do with it?"

"Ask *them*!" Brody raged. "Them damned pickets already beat up three men. Willie there says they beat up a woman, too, which was why the crowd got mad; them cops moved in to protect the damn' pickets, now!"

"Easy boy," Mitch spoke soothingly. "I'll have a word with those cops." He shoved past Brody and reached the front of the crowd facing the Police line. Brody and Eileen moved up behind him.

The Police stood with their rifles held ready, facing the crowd. Their expressions were grim, wary—ready to

kill. Behind them, the shuffling pickets didn't look too happy; they kept eyeing the crowd half-fearfully.

Brody gave a snort of derision. "Lookit that picket line, would yah! There ain't a single ore-grader operator in that bunch of pug-uglies!"

Mitch dropped his hand to his blaster as he strode toward the watchful Police line. The troopers' rifles wavered uncertainly as they saw his spaceman's gray. He noticed it with a grim smile. "Who's in charge here?" he bellowed at them.

A slim, handsome Police Lieutenant came briskly forward. "What can I do for you, sir?"

"You're protecting those pickets, there?" Mitch demanded.

The Lieutenant's smile half-appeared and then vanished. "They have a right to picket without molestation," he replied sullenly.

"They have no right to keep these people from their work," Mitch retorted. "Clear your men out of here!"

"I have explicit orders—"

Mitch drew his blaster. "Either let these people through," he said flatly, "or I'm *taking* them through!"

A ragged cheer broke out from the crowd. The Lieutenant's face darkened with anger. "You can't bluff me!" he snapped.

"Who's bluffing?" Eileen spoke up, brightly. She moved past Mitch, walking straight toward the Police line with her blaster levelled in her fist.

Mitch grinned and followed suit. He was walking straight toward the Lieutenant. There was a deep, grumbling sound from behind him—and the crowd was moving forward with them.

The Lieutenant's eyes widened; his jaw went slack. Then he spun and took to his heels, shouting orders to his men. The Police line whirled and jog-trotted smartly off to the sidelines. The pickets stared wildly after them, then dropped placards and signs—and clubs, Mitch noted—and bolted for safety.

Mitch and Eileen led the crowd through the gates and were immediately surrounded by shouting, laughing men and women. Brody pounded Mitch on the back and hugged Eileen. "You can own this damn' mine from now on, if you want it!" he bellowed gleefully. "We just won the war!"

"War?" Mitch yelled back. "What war?"

"The *union* war!" Brody howled. "Between us and the ore-graders! That was *their* damn' union's pickets you chased off!"

A CIRCULAR platform whistled down a transparent tube, past level after level of humming machinery and ant-sized human figures. Brody stood at the platform's control panel, half-turned and waving his arms at the passing panorama as they slid downward.

First came the technical levels, crammed with the machinery and power turbines which served the mine levels below; then came the ore-grading levels, where the ore itself appeared and was processed for shipment. The ore-graders were monstrous machines moving great bins of ore, sifting and sorting it. Ore-grader operators sat on saddles swung high on long booms, hovering over the machines and directing them with manual controls mounted before the saddles. Then came the loading-shafts, where the ore was lifted in bucket-chains from the diggings below. The platform eased to a halt in the midst of these shafts and Brody led them out into a large, barren chamber.

"This will be a new ore-grader level," he said gruffly. "The B-109's over behind that stack of pilings."

There were only a few lamps in the high ceiling, throwing bright shafts of light down into the dim, gloomy chamber. Mitch and Eileen followed Brody across the littered floor, around a black shadow of steel pilings. Suddenly,

Brody stiffened and lunged forward. "Who's there?" he bellowed. "Who the devil—"

A bright orange rectangle flamed in the far wall, then snuffed out with the metallic clang of a heavy door. Mitch caught a dim vision of a bulky figure silhouetted against the flames, then engulfed by them, before the door clanged shut—then he was stumbling forward in the darkness after Brody.

Brody cursed fluently, stomping around a large, square bulk of machinery. "Whoever he was, he had the cover open on this B-109!"

"Let's get him!" Mitch snapped, plunging on toward the door.

Brody grasped him in a steely grip, spinning him around. "You go through that door without armor and you'll burn to a crisp! That's digger country!"

"Then where do we get armor?" Eileen yelped excitedly. "Hurry! *That was the saboteur!*"

"Back to the lift," Brody growled, his teeth flashing in a grin. "That passage comes out in the robot-country below—maybe we can pick up the guy's tracks down there."

The platform slid downward again. Loading-shafts gave way to more chambers, brightly lighted, where mechanics checked over big, nine-foot robot-diggers. Brody stopped the lift and led them into a locker room, where they pulled on suits of mirror-bright armor. Brody had them check their air and thermal controls, then led them back to the lift. It slid downward again. Huge tunnels appeared, burrowing away into the darkness. Armored figures sat at control-panels, looking into viewscreens that seemed to show nothing but curtains of orange flame. The big robot-diggers rolled in and out of the tunnels on their steel caterpillar treads. Heavy ore-cars snaked in and out on narrow-gauge tracks. The lift stopped.

"We'll ride a robot down to the digger country," Brody said, his voice

sounding flat and metallic in their helmet 'phones. They clumped over to a row of control panels and he bent over a seated figure in armor. The figure turned as he spoke, and Mitch saw an attractive feminine face give Brody a smile through her thick helmet plate. A big robot came thundering up beside them and Brody swung easily up on its flat, protruding backside. He reached out and gave Eileen a hand up and Mitch jumped on beside them. The robot whirled and lurched down a tunnel. Mitch suddenly noticed that the rock walls of the tunnel were smoking.

MINUTES later, those rock walls were spewing sheets of flame from razor-thin fissures. The flame hissed and roared around them, engulfing them, bathing their armored suits. "Now you can see why we don't want no tanked-air," Brody's voice crackled in their 'phones. "With tanked-air, we could stay down here just 'til our air supply gave out—not long enough to work a full shift. We'd starve on the amount we'd earn on tanked air! With air-renewers, we can stay down long enough to earn a decent living."

The robot lurched to a stop and Brody leaped off. "That passage comes out about here and—" He broke off with a startled gasp as the robot suddenly extended a telescoping arm and laid a heavy, metal claw on his shoulder. He ducked out from under it and leaped away, deftly. A merry feminine laughter issued from the robot. Brody stood braced in front of it and cursed it and its remote operator with a through enthusiasm.

"Some of these operators gotta touch like velvet," he commented, turning to Mitch. "Only they just might slip a little, someday." He proceeded to ignore the robot, which was trundling back up the slanting, flame-lashed tunnel. He took Mitch by the arm and pointed toward an opening in the tunnel wall. "There's where the

passage comes out—the one that saboteur took. Now—”

He bent over, peering at the tunnel floor. “Been a lotta traffic through here. Maybe we can see his tracks—”

They advanced to the opening and studied the tunnel floor. “Nope. Other tracks has already covered his. See, there’s his tracks up and down the passage, but none here in the tunnel.”

“What’s that dark hole up ahead?” Eileen asked.

Brody straightened up. “Oh, that’s the old Martindale cut-off. Leads to an abandoned digging out on the night-side; frozen ground, no good for mining. Most mines got connecting tunnels like that, all around the Twilight Zone between day-side and night-side; that’s where all the mines are, and the domed cities of course. Now, this saboteur—” He broke off, contemplatively. “A hundred yards ahead, there’s a siding up off to the right with a cross-cut back to the Wilkes mine, west of here. He knows we’re after him, he might’ve taken that siding—there’s nobody in there now.”

“Lead on!” Mitch prompted.

They plodded onward through hissing, swirling sheets of orange flame. Sometimes the glare was so blinding through Mitch’s face-plate that he had to feel his way forward. Brody’s figure was a dim, flickering shadow ahead of him.

He wondered what they would do if they caught the saboteur...

THEY CLUMPED onward seemingly for hours. “See any tracks?” Mitch asked.

“Some,” Brody affirmed. “Dunno if they’re his, though. Wait’ll we get up to the cross-cut; they’s a bulkhead door there; if that’s been opened—”

They plodded onward. Flame hissed and bellowed around them. Blinding them, engulfing their grotesque, armored figures.

Suddenly, a deep gong rang in their ‘phones.

Brody stopped abruptly. Mitch stumbled into him.

“Wait!” Brody snapped huskily. There was no mistaking the sudden tension in his voice.

Then a snarling roar of static came into their ‘phones. And with it, a voice. Swelling, fading, trickling through the snarl. “*All robot-operators—emergency call, emergency call, emergency call! Attention, all robot-operators! Bandit-robots in the tunnels! There’s a gang busted into robot control topside and taken over thirty robots. They’re roaming around down there somewhere. Danger! Bandit-robots!*”

“Bandit robots?” Mitch exclaimed perplexedly.

“Robots bein’ run by somebody ain’t supposed to run ‘em!” Brody explained drily. “Listen, we want to get out of this alive, we better get back topside!”

“Alive? Why—”

“Look, Mitchell— I said you won the union war; now I ain’t so sure you did!”

“But—”

“But nothin’! *Them bandit robots is down here to kill!*”

“Okay, chum, that’s all I wanted to know.” Mitch whirled and scrambled back along the tunnel.

Then he froze, staring ahead. Back the way they had come. Brody bumped into him and cursed. “Get goin’!”

“Wait a minute!” Mitch gasped. “*Where’s Eileen?*”

Brody stared past him and muttered another curse. Then he squeezed past and grabbed Mitch’s gloved hand. “Hang onto my belt; I can move faster than you.”

They came out of the siding into the main tunnel just in time to see three robot-diggers coming up from one end and a larger, wider robot coming down from the other end. “A blaster!” Brody yelled, dragging Mitch back into the siding. “Down!”

But before he could pull Mitch to

the floor, the four robots met. The larger robot shot out a piston-like arm intended to blast the face of mine-tunnels and one of the robot-diggers exploded with a thunderous roar. The second digger hurtled forward, knocking the piston arm aside. Searing energy bit into the wall of the tunnel.

The whole front of the siding collapsed. Tons of flaming rock piled across the main tunnel. Mitch was caught behind the shoulders and thrown forward into a crack between two boulders. He rolled over on his back and stared upward, just in time to see Brody rise and reel drunkenly out from the siding. Brody clawed up onto the pile of rubble and collapsed.

Then the third digger came growling over the rubble, its steel threads spinning. The treads bridged the crack over Mitch and crossed above him.

And they caught Brody's helmet and crushed it flat.

Mitch clawed his way out of the crack and stared around the tunnel. The two vanquished diggers and the big blaster-robot were buried under the rock pile. The third digger was nowhere in sight.

He stumbled up the tunnel the way they had come, trying to remember twists, turns, forks and branches they had passed riding the robot. He couldn't remember. *He had to!*

He had to get help. Eileen—wandering in the flaming tunnels...

A dark opening stood before him. Three sets of tracks showed plainly in the soft muck of its floor. A man's, coming and going. A girl's going.

He followed them.



THE LONG, sleek Space Fleet destroyer came gently to rest beside the dull gray dome of

the abandoned mine. Spacesuited figures poured from the destroyer's airlock and skipped lightly over the frozen surface to the dome.

Mitch sat hunched over on the low cot with his head in his hands. Commander Eckels stood over him, sadly.

"They were here," Mitch said flatly; "Eileen found them. And they've got her. I got here too late."

"I was too late, too," Eckels said softly. "Did you find anything?" He didn't mean the corpse sprawled in the next room with its chest blown open. One less criminal to worry about.

Mitch shoved something from under the cot with his foot.

Eckels stared down at it. Then he stooped and picked it up. It looked something like a hand-gun of some sort. On its plate was stamped *Industrial Vibrators—Mars*.

"So it's Mars," Eckels said.



The stars burned still and bright in the black heavens. The destroyer floated serenely among them. Only on the control bridge was there any sign of movement; the Sun shrank to a burning, thumb-sized splotch behind the glowing jets; ahead, a faint, ruddy spark swung slowly into the destroyer's path, growing to a bright red orb crisscrossed with the dark lines of canals—the planet Mars.

Forty-two chronological days slipped past as the long, gun-studded steel hull floated in starry blackness.

Mitch prowled the ship's corridors, a dull, hot hatred burning inside him. Forty-two days—and the outlaw spaceship was only hours ahead of them; they couldn't overtake it and attack, not with Eileen a prisoner aboard it.

Forty-two days for a girl trapped in a steel shell with a gang of killers. Mitch knew perfectly well what that meant. For an innocent, decent girl, it would be enough to drive her insane—Eileen might stand it; Mitch didn't

know. But he knew what it meant.

He knew, too, that strange frame of mind when a man's impulsive urge to kill became a coldly logical part of him. He could kill, now, without the least compassion...

And he knew the man he was going to kill.

Eckels had almost caught them—Eckels and the young Colonial Inspector at Twilight Terminal, who lay sprawled in the gritty dust of the Mercurian spaceport field with his head blown off; it had been that close.

THE BLACK spaceship was no longer black when it came gliding toward Mercury. A man in spaceman's gray contacted Mercury Control and received clearance to land, identifying his ship as the *Zodiac* and himself as Keith Hugenaut, Pilot-Astrogator.

It seemed a normal clearance, but the Colonial Inspector at Twilight Terminal happened to be checking the traffic lists at Mercury Control. He also happened to remember that the *Zodiac* was supposed to have disappeared on an expeditionary flight to Uranus seven years ago; she was finally assumed lost with all hands.

Obviously, she wasn't lost. Also, one man of the entire former expedition was still alive. What had happened to the other members? It wasn't too hard to guess; strange things happened, sometimes, to a group of men entombed for months in a steel shell. Especially if one of them went mad.

Especially if it was the madness that would prompt a man to think he should be dictator of the Solar System.

The human mind was an intricate, delicate mechanism. They could psycho-test a man and determine whether he was sane and therefore eligible to ride a spaceship. But no psycho-test could reveal how, when, or what could shatter that sane human mind; there was no positive way to determine when any one man would go insane.

A ship vanished on an expedition.

Seven years later, she reappeared, commanded by a man who had been Pilot-Astrogator on that expedition. The Colonial Inspector went out to where the ship was being refueled and asked some questions.

His head was blown off.

When Commander Eckels learned of the murder, he had to send his junior officers down to Twilight Terminal to investigate the Inspector's past movements before he learned the facts about the *Zodiac*. By then, she had the spaceport field, cleared unsuspectingly—the Inspector's body wasn't found until later—for a short flight to the abandoned Martindale mine. Eckels arrived there too late; just in time to meet Mitch.

But Keith Hugenaut was their man.

The Space Fleet destroyer blazed its jets across space toward Mars. Its communications screens were humming with activity. Colonial Control at Marsport informed them that *Industrial Vibrators* manufactured ultrasonic vibrators used in testing light-alloy metals for tensile strength. Production of light-alloy machinery was the major industry of Mars, since the planet's surface abounded in the lighter minerals. The vibrators were perfectly good for checking the tensile strength of these alloys, showing in a few seconds just how long they would stand up under so much computed stress.

Eckels' Atomic Engineer reported that if such vibrators were used on highly conductive alloys, as in the air-renewers, such vibrations would disrupt the crystalline structure of the alloys and damage their conductivity, so that such alloy parts would finally break down and fail to function properly. One man with a small hand-vibrator could do the job, and it would never be suspected unless you knew exactly what to look for.

MEANWHILE, situations which Colonial Control had stirred up to flush the black spaceship from hid-

ing were rapidly reaching a climax. On Mercury, newspapers and telecasts were referring to "*The War of the Robots*" and lambasting both the ore-grader operators' union and the politicians and city-bosses who controlled it. Public sentiment was changing in favor of the robot-operators—and the graft-ridden Mercury Police couldn't stop it. The thugs and killers in the ore-graders' union had overstepped themselves; the city-bosses were in hot water.

On Venus, a newspaper publisher named Sawtooth McKane had launched a campaign against the city-bosses and their tanked-air legislation, with the complete aid of Mike Semanichuk. And when certain trumped-up charges were proffered and the Venus Police closed in to arrest the two men, they found themselves looking into the gun-muzzles of the Colonial Police; there, too, the city bosses were in hot water.

The corrupt political organization which had spread itself across three planets was rapidly breaking apart. Small-fry were confessing to save their own hides; the evidence was piling up.

On Mars, the tanked-air air-renewers controversy had revolved around the one major class-distinction of the planet's society. There were the people who lived in the major domed cities surrounded by great humming factories; then there were the people who roamed the deserted wastes prospecting for surface ores and minerals for those factories, living an isolated, nomadic existence with only occasional contact with civilization when they returned for supplies to the smaller domed cities along the cultivated canals. These stubbornly independent wanderers needed only air-renewers to subsist; they processed Martian vegetation for food, lived in inflated balloon tents and travelled across the chill desert sands on foot. Mars had been the first planet colonized by Earthmen, and there were several hundred

millions of these nomadic families and tribes, scattered thinly over the whole planet.

They needed only air-renewers, then the air-renewers began to fail. A stirring of hatred, of revolt, moaned through the cold Martian winds. These wanderers felt only disgust for the people who lived the soft, comfortable life in the domed cities. That disgust was beginning to turn to hatred. The air-renewers failed. The city dwellers were blamed; didn't they get their air-renewers from the cities?

Colonial agents had been sent across the cold sands into the wind-swept wastelands. A new rumor went trickling among the nomadic tribes. There was conspiracy reaching to Venus and Mercury; air-renewers were being sabotaged before they were sold; a political machine was deliberately stirring the wanderers to revolt against the politicians' enemies. The wanderers decided to let any politicians kill their own enemies, and settled down to wait; hatred faded back to mere disgust.

The organization crumbled, the plan failed. And destroyers waited off three planets for the black spaceship to appear.

It had. And Eckels had missed it.

Keith Hugenaut was their man, and Mars was the planet. Mars, where Hugenaut had learned about hand-vibrators and hatched his devilish scheme. There was plenty of evidence to prove interplanetary conspiracy, now; the Colonial Police swung into action. On Earth, George Kimball broke down under questioning—he had known Keith Hugenaut personally, years before the ill-fated Uranus expedition; he had embezzled *Molecular Transmutor* funds, juggling the records to make it appear that Korbelasco had overcharged them; Hugenaut had found it out and blackmailed him into backing the conspiracy; Posovski, the production manager, had become suspicious, learned too much,

and Hugonaut had killed him. The whole sordid scheme became clear.

So it was Mars—and Eileen Graham.

●

THE DESTROYER swung into an orbit and a spaceboat curved away to plunge into Mars' thin atmosphere. It came screaming down to the spaceport field outside Marsport and slammed its fins into the rippling sands.

"Hugonaut and his gang could have their hideout anywhere in that lawless wasteland," Commander Eckels said dourly, turning his spacesuited figure to survey the bleak, red hills beyond the field. "Our agents may have found something out there by now, though."

"The south quarter of the Western Hemisphere," Mitch reminded him; "your orbiting destroyers tracked him down by radar, remember?"

"Half a hemisphere is a lot of country," Eckels retorted grumpily. They plodded across the field toward the domed city, each man silently pursuing his own bitter thoughts.

Hospital Decontamination passed them with a clean bill of health and a few antibiotic shots. They checked their spacesuits with Port Supply and strode grimly into the large, domed metropolis, two tall, spacetanned men in neat gray with blasters strapped to their thighs. "Where the devil's that Colonial Inspector?" Eckels wondered. "I called for him to meet us here!"

They gazed about them in puzzlement.

Mitch saw it first. Perhaps because he was thoroughly inured to the strange sights and sounds of interplanetary civilization—he paid scant attention to the tall, graceful towers, the moving walkways and trafficways interlacing them, the tiers of roofgardens, or the bronzed people milling about wearing scant costumes, or those near the city's locks who wore fur gar-

ments with harness and helmets strapped over their shoulders. He took a brief notice of the few strikingly attractive women who walked past, wearing mere strips of decorative covering—and then he looked up, and there it was.

The broad telecast screen was mounted above the crowded ramp. Bright green lettering blazed from its transparent surface:

*IN T'P L'N'T A R Y CRIME-KING
CAPTURED!
GIRL BRINGS IN OUTLAW SHIP!
POLICE GIRL QUEEN OF SPACE
KILLERS!
CRIME GANG SURRENDERS TO
GIRL!*

Mitch gaped up at it, speechlessly. He grabbed Eckels' arm and pointed up at it; they stared unbelievably.

"Commander Eckels?"

A bland, smiling Colonial Inspector stood before them in full-dress uniform.

"Eh?" Eckels gasped. "There you are! What the devil does this mean?" He waved at the telecast screen, excitedly.

The Inspector glanced up at it and his smile broadened. "That happened just a few hours ago, sir. Sorry there wasn't time to inform you, but I'll endeavor to explain—if you'll step this way, please? Our car is waiting."

●

MOUNTED MARS Police on unicycles preceded the gray official car as they skimmed along the curving trafficways. Colonial Inspector Channing introduced himself, shook hands with Mitch and launched into his explanation.

"It came as quite a surprise, of course, after hearing from you people that Miss Graham had been taken captive," he said. "She came flying out of the desert on an airsled with Keith Hugonaut lashed to the seat beside

her—he's a manic depressive, incidentally. Penal Correction will have a time with him!

"The story, it seems, was this: the gang did take her captive and brought her off Mercury in the *Zodiac*. But Hugonaut's wild scheme was tumbling about his ears and he was beginning to have trouble with his cutthroat crew. Miss Graham played her cards right and began winning over the ship's crew during the trip to Mars, until she finally managed to engineer a mutiny among them and get herself elected to the command of the ship.

"After that, she made a deal with the crew to have the *Zodiac* landed near Marsport, in an isolated region where these cutthroats would have the time and opportunity to scatter and lose themselves so the Police couldn't catch them. In return, she was given Hugonaut as her captive and was told the location of his hideout here on Mars—our agents are on their way there, now, to clean it out—

"In short, it was as neat a bit of police work as you could ask for! Miss Graham has proved herself a most capable agent, gentlemen." Channing laughed happily. "I might add that I've been married four times, yet she looks good even to me—and that, if anything, is the prime requisite of a good woman intelligence agent!"

The car, with its siren-howling convoy of Police, pulled up on the ramp of a large government tower. They dismounted and were ushered by guards in full-dress uniform through the glittering corridors and anterooms where Mitch and Eckels left their blasters with a bowing major-domo. Then they were being led into a vast, spacious ballroom where symphonic music throbbed on the air. The ballroom was jammed with dignitaries, men in dress uniform, women in beautiful evening gowns.

"A little celebration to honor the event," Channing explained, simpering.

People were turning to stare, from

groups along the sidelines and in couples gracefully circling the ballroom floor. A murmur of excited conversation swelled above the music as the two men in spaceman's gray strode slowly forward, their features expressionless.

Then the throngs parted and there she was. Mitch stopped, gazing at her. The music faded away and a hush fell over the room.

SHE WAS a vision of feminine loveliness, a dream as old as the memories of mankind. A veil of opalescent scarlet was draped from her creamy thighs, split clingingly over her ivory legs; tiny crests of scarlet lacquer were painted upon her breasts. She gazed at Mitch with that familiar, direct look of hers, and swayed slowly to meet him. The music swelled up again and a vast sigh echoed around the room as she slipped into his arms and they glided out across the floor. Other couples joined them and the celebration went on.

"It's so good to feel your arms around me again," she whispered in his ear.

"I like it, too," he murmured; "you had me worried, darling."

She pulled back from him, gazing up at him. "You should have known, shouldn't you?"

"That you would capture the gang-leader all by yourself?" He forced a grin on his lips.

She kissed him, lightly, and they danced on. They were both good at it. Mitch remained silent, waiting...

Then she told him. "It really wasn't too difficult," she began hesitantly. "There were two of the lieutenants who really led the gang—they weren't too hard to influence. For a sweet, innocent girl, I suppose, it would've been impossible—" The words came rushing from her, now. "But there was fear that their scheme was failing and they were beginning to hate him anyway—Hugonaut, I mean—so it wasn't

too hard. Not for a girl with the right sort of experience, a girl who knew how—" She looked up again, that direct look. "I had to make a few concessions, of course."

"I understand," he murmured. He took her arm, leading her off the floor. They slipped quickly through a side entrance and emerged out on a broad terrace.

THE CITY hummed around them, beautiful in the eternal twilight that was Mars. Through the dome above, the Sun was a blazing orb so small it was almost lost in the blue-black sky where stars twinkled faintly, though it was midday. They leaned on the railing, close together, and Mitch took out his cigarettes and shared them with her.

"I think you wanted to tell me you loved me once, Mitch," Eileen murmured, smoke trickling from her lips. "That's the only thing I'm sorry about."

Mitch smiled grimly. *You never know!*

"What are your plans, now that it's over?" he asked her.

"My plans? I have a corporation that must be managed." She gazed out over the city, a faintly bemused expression on her face. "I'll have a husband or two, I suppose, and perhaps a few lovers." She turned, then, and slipped her arms up around his neck. "I'd like to be loved now, Mitch."

"Would you?" He turned toward her.

"But not by you!" She pushed away from him, smiling radiantly. "Don't ask me why, Mitch—please. It's a woman's secret."

"All right." He turned back and leaned on the rail. *You never know!* his thoughts repeated.

She moved close to his side again. "What are your plans, darling, now that it's over?"

"My plans?" He gazed out over the

beautiful, colorful city. Then he began laughing, softly. *His plans?* His laugh grew louder as he swung back to her.

"I'm retiring—didn't you know? There's two hundred and five thousand credits waiting for me back at Port Luna, enough to keep me in comfort for the rest of my life. I'm through knocking around the Solar System, Eileen!"

She gazed up at him, searching his face for something she couldn't find. "I certainly don't blame you for that," she murmured, finally. "Good luck, Mitch!"

She kissed him soundly, then, and whirled away to run swiftly back to the ballroom.

Mitch stared after her, a loose grin twisting his mouth. Then he looked up, through the crystal dome, at the dark Martian sky. The sky of eternal morning, where the stars glittered in cold irony. And his grin shared their irony.

Retire? Sure! It was back to Earth for him, back to the mother world—and all her pageantry and festival for a lonely soul. He'd hunt in the American forests with bow-and-arrow, ride girded and armored on a medieval charger, bid for the captive girls dancing at the slave-markets, swim the lagoons with the slim, brown maidens of the Pacific isles! Man, *how* he'd retire!

He leaned on the rail, alone, smoking and grinning to himself.

And a slender, bronzed girl looked up from a terraced garden below and smiled at him.

YOU HAVE A VOTE

and if you would like to see longer feature stories in this magazine, let us know. If you don't want to see long feature stories, let us know, too; we'll go with the majority!