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The MAN FROM



His attention was on the girl, so he failed to notice the two behind him

ARBUTUS *By* H. B. Hickey

**Magruder had conquered a far frontier of space;
but his return to Earth was far from triumphant**



“WHO?” THE girl asked.
“Who?”

It's enough to drive a man crazy. Two minutes before her voice is all over the spaceport on the p.a. system, blatting my name, dragging me away from the first good drink in five years. And now that name doesn't get a tinkle from her.

“Magruder,” I said. “Lux Magruder, honey.”

“Oh,” she said. “Oh. The man from

Arbutus!”

“Yeah. Arbutus. The Siberia of the universe. The salt mines, baby.”

Her full red mouth was round with wonder. Her black eyes were round with the same. In fact, she is five feet five of rounded womanhood, luscious womanhood. Her charms are apparent without being obstreperous, her aura inviting without being demanding.

For a full minute I stood there,

realizing what a woman can do to a man's adrenal glands, among others. I forgot all about Paul Stewart, about the reason I had returned to this planet called Earth. And then I remembered. My stomach calmed, my pulse slowed.

"Seven hours quarantine," I said. "Don't tell me I'm finally clear."

"Your clearance just came through." She slid my visa across the wicket. "If you'll hand your gun to the guard you'll be free to leave the port."

A guard had appeared at my elbow. I unbuckled my gun belt and handed him the whole thing. There was a sneak gun under my left armpit, but I wasn't mentioning that to him. When you're working alone and blindly you need an ace in the hole.

I'd have beat it right then, but this baby is still slow-eyed. Definitely inviting. Or at least curious.

Who knows? Maybe it's nothing much with Paul. Maybe in a couple of hours I'll find him. Then he can get someone, and I'll take this one, and we'll have ourselves a time before I take off for Arbutus again.

And maybe, the thought hits me, I can get some information. She is working Circle Seven window, and Circle Seven handles all flights to the outermost ring.

The spaceport was a mad bustle, a scurrying of travellers from all points of the galaxy. Every window had a line before it. But not Circle Seven. Maybe the gal would remember.

"You work this window all the time?" I asked.

"Since I've been here."

"A tall, dark fellow. Shoulders a yard wide. Homelier than I am. Acts surly as hell, but when he smiles you know it's another guy. His name is Paul Stewart."

Another name that didn't get a tinkle. She was shaking her pretty head. "Should I know him?"

"Six months ago," I said, and I had a desperate feeling. "From Arbutus."

"I'm only here five months," she said. "I'm sorry."

AND SHE was sorry. I could tell it. There was something there that said she wished she could help me. Five years without a woman's smile! And this smile was more than friendly.

"Skip it, honey." I started to turn away, changed my mind. "How would I go about tracing him?"

"Immigration office, I suppose. But—well, it would depend on how helpful they felt."

Yeah. And they wouldn't be inclined to help anyone from Arbutus. I'd had a hunch that this was going to be that way. The hunch was getting stronger by the second.

You can't live the way I've lived without being able to smell trouble a long way off. Not in the places I've been. I'd smelled this all the way to Arbutus. It was a stink now.

A Venusian drifted up to the window, his green skin glowing. Seven feet tall and with that musty dampness they all carry. His voice gurred like a pigeon's. Information.

"Window four," the gal told him. He drifted off and she raised her voice. "Mr. Magruder!"

I came back. "I'm sorry," she said. "Awfully sorry."

That was sorrier than she had to be. And she was smiling again. Lord, she was beautiful! Hair as black and soft as an Arbutus night, a skin that Ish-tar would have envied.

"I'll give you a chance to make it up to me," I grinned. "When do you get through?"

"Six o'clock." She wasn't even

playing hard to get. "I live at 100 Neptune Drive."

"Pick you up here. Side gate. Six sharp." I had four hours. I'd make it easy. Then I remembered. "Say, what's your name?"

"Rina," she said. "Rina Tyrell. What's Arbutus like, Mr. Magruder?"

"Lux," I told her. "And I'll describe it later. With gestures."

She laughed, and clicked the switch on a transphone she'd been fiddling with all the while we were talking. It was a lovely laugh.

JUMPY, I was jumpy as the devil. Here I was, thinking of that laugh as I strolled along the unfamiliar green of Earth, and all of a sudden I got the notion I was being followed.

New York was much the same, full of glittering stores. I paused at a window and sneaked a look behind me. Nothing. People scurrying. A blonde pulling her stocking tighter on a shapely leg.

I shrugged. I had to get to Eddie Beer's place. Eddie was the man who'd know. He'd be the first anyone from Arbutus would go to see. I hailed a cab and gave the driver Eddie's address.

But when we got there I didn't get out. Something was wrong. I tapped at the glass partition and the driver turned around.

"Wrong place, buddy," I said.

"Right place," he grunted. "This is the address you gave me."

"They must've moved. Trilium Incorporated."

"Can you read, pal? Look at the sign."

I looked at the sign. It was in letters thirty feet high. They glittered like gold, real gold. The building was a needle, threading its way two hundred stories into the air.

It should have been a loft building,

with Eddie's office on the second floor. But it wasn't.

Things had changed, all right. I hit the first receptionist on the hundredth floor. And five years ago there hadn't even been a girl to answer a phone!

"Eddie Beers? You mean Mr. Beers?"

I meant *Mr.* Beers. By the time I got to his fifth secretary, they had me calling him Mister.

And finally I was in his office. It was only fifty feet long, with paneled walls and a rug with a nap to my knees. The desk was the stage of a theater, and behind it sat Eddie.

Not the same Eddie I'd known. He was fat now, and his extra chins flowed over a collar of lustrous silk. His tie was a work of art, not a splatter of gravy spots.

But his eyes were still the same, bright and hard and shrewd. He got up smiling happily.

"Lux! How are you, boy?"

I ignored the question, I ignored his out-thrust hand.

"I had no idea," I said. "None of us had any idea. A thousand of us, digging that damn trilium out there like slaves, grubbing like moles in a hundred and thirty degrees! A thousand of us, putting in five years in a place so damn far and hard to get to that you can't even get live pilots to ferry the stuff out! And *this* is what you did with our work?"

It was dramatic, but untrue. The first year had been hell. But every one of us was an engineer, and a damn good one. If a robot pilot can guide an ore carrier, a robot machine can dig trilium. Four years we'd spent hunting and building and fighting the giant lizards of Arbutus. But Eddie didn't know that.

"Take it easy, Lux," Eddie said. "This place is as much yours as mine."

"But they bow when you come in."

"They'll bow for you too. Listen, Lux, this is Earth. It takes flash. Trilium is big money. I cornered the market, got a monopoly. I let them know how big Trilium Incorporated is, and they came to me. Now it's transport, and atomic plants, and foodstuffs, and communications."

He hit the desk a whack. "By God, when Eddie Beers sneezes now, the Supreme Council says *gesundheit!*"

I SHOOK my head. "We had no idea. We took the risks, you were to handle this end. And for years of living hell we were to have ourselves a stake. Just a nice fat nest egg, that's all we wanted."

"Small time!" he barked. "You're all millionaires now. And you've got the nerve to complain!"

"It's the shock," I said.

"Yeah. That was always the trouble with you men. Impractical, dreamers, looking for a fight always. That's why you were in a jam, facing liquidation or exile. Irreconcilables, irredentists, irresponsibles."

"Anything beginning with 'ir-'," I agreed. "Anybody who wouldn't fit into their neat, orderly, mass production society. Anybody with guts, with life."

"Nuts! Now you can be a big man."

A big man. The phrase was nauseating. We had wanted to be men. In a world gone routine and cut and dried and dull, we had wanted to be men, individuals.

So we had faced liquidation or exile. And a thousand of us had taken exile. We had picked Arbutus, an unknown planet, too far for communication, beyond the deadliest hail of asteroids in the universe.

Eddie Beers had been just a small operator, running a single freighter

to Mars. He'd heard about Arbutus, heard a single rumor of trilium. So we had made a deal with him. We'd trusted him.

"Why didn't you write?" I demanded.

"Too busy. Besides, you wouldn't have understood."

He waved a twelve inch cigar. "You don't like it, I'll buy you out."

"We'll discuss that tomorrow," I said. "But first, where's Paul Stewart?"

He shrugged. "How should I know?"

"He'd come here first."

"Sure. He came here. Six months ago. With the same talk you give me. I bought him out. Cash." He laughed bitterly. "None of you could ever handle money. He probably drank himself to death."

There were a lot of things about us Eddie didn't know. About the homes we'd built on Arbutus, about the research we'd done. We'd developed a few things it would have turned the Supreme Council's hair gray to hear about. But I didn't say that.

"Paul would write to me," I said. "When Johnson and Groves and the others didn't write we were surprised, but it didn't matter. But Paul would write."

"They're all the same. Walk out of here with a fortune apiece and their own families don't hear from them."

"Maybe the others. Not Paul Stewart. Something's happened to him."

"Bah! The d.t.'s."

I was going to hit him but he ducked back behind the desk. He waved a placating hand.

"All right, Lux. I'll find him for you. Nobody goes unaccounted for now. I've got connections. One word and the right files will open up. See

me tomorrow and I'll give you the dope."

I WAS DISMISSED. Just like that. Boiling mad, I stalked out. But I knew it was best to let Eddie handle it. Sure, I could go to police. But then the red tape would begin.

Who're you? Why do you want to know? State your business. Show your papers. From Arbutus? One of the irreconcilables, eh? Probably a plot. Better psyche this guy. Grab him! *Grab him!*

But my best friend. My only friend. Paul Stewart. I had to find him. He was in trouble, or worse. Johnson, Groves, the others who'd gone back. And now Paul.

Something stank to high heaven and I was getting badly worried about it. Inside me, the voice whispered that the smell would get worse within twenty-four hours. Men like Paul and myself couldn't get along in this bookkeeper's world.

And this bookkeeper's world would have no mercy on us. We were just numbers, digits, and if we didn't add up we were erased.

But what could I do? Nothing. I had to give Eddie Beers his full twenty-four hours. And then... I slapped myself under the left armpit. The gun was still there.

In the meantime, I had a date. Might as well keep it. I cast about for a crusing cab and didn't see one. I decided to walk a way.

And again I had the feeling I was being tailed. I stopped at a store window. People passed by. Nobody looked at me twice. A redhead, tall and horsy, was checking her makeup. That was all.

Late afternoon and dusk falling on a crisp autumn day. A good time to think pleasant thoughts as I walked along. Rina Tyrell was a pleasant thought.

She was such a pleasant thought that I became oblivious to my surroundings. I was asleep on my feet. When I finally realized that I was being tailed it was too late to duck.

I'd wandered into a dead-end section. Old and rotting houses on both sides of the street. Not a refuge in sight.

I spun around on my feet, thoroughly awake now, and caught them flatfooted. Four of them! A couple of Martians and a pair of the green Venusians. Between them there'd be little to choose. They'd be hopped up on *giru* and would laugh while they killed me.

Like a scared rabbit, I ran. Like a rabbit, but carrying a tiger's fang. While I ran I clawed my jumper open and got the sneak gun out.

They were shooting now. Flashes of fire lanced past me. Pellets hit buildings and flared into splashes of living flame. If a pellet hit me I was dead. And their aim was narrowing down!

That was when I came around again. The gun in my hand was small but it was mighty. One of the gadgets we'd invented up on Arbutus, and a handy one.

Too many of them to try to take one by one, so I aimed low and let loose. A huge chunk of the street erupted in their faces. One of them screamed.

Only fifty yards separated us and I was back over those yards in seconds. I'd fooled them once, I'd do it again. I'd catch them while they were still stunned.

Through a cloud of settling dust I hurtled. The Venusian who'd screamed was dead. So was the other one. Green blood was thick around them.

One of the Martians was dying, his head cracked by a chunk of flying concrete. But the other Martian

was alive. Dazed, but still alive.

He was still holding his gun and I swiped it out of his hand. He started to come out of his befuddlement and I smashed him in the face and knocked him down. Then I got my hands on his skinny throat and hauled him to his feet.

"Paul Stewart!" I snapped. "What happened to him?"

He was so full of *giru* that I might as well have been talking to a zombie. His face was white, his colorless eyes looking straight out of this world. I had to try something else.

"Your boss! Who sent you to kill me?"

No answer. I hit him again, two fast and jolting punches to the pit of his stomach. Maybe it would snap him out of it. But it didn't. It only got him out of my hands for a second.

Before I could get him again, his own taloned hands ripped across his throat. Blood spurted like a geyser. It was over in no time.

These hadn't been punks, but of the assassin profession. It was kill or die, no quarter asked or given. I'd run into them before on their own home grounds and come out ahead. This one had beaten me.

Feet clattered suddenly and I looked up. Someone running, someone tall. A Venusian. I started after him and a siren wailed, rose to a shriek as it drew near. Police! I had to get out of there.

"SPACEPORT" I told the cab driver as I settled back.

It was a good thirty blocks from the fight, but luckily I was in fine shape. I wasn't even breathing hard after the run. The driver hadn't given me a second look as I got in.

So now I had something to go on. They'd tried to get me. Someone was after my scalp. They'd probably

got Paul's and the rest. Anyone from Arbutus was a dead duck the minute he landed. But why?

While I smoked and pondered that, the driver turned on the radio. Music filled the cab. I shut it out of my mind while I figured this out. Rina Tyrell could wait. I had to get to Eddie Beers.

I leaned forward to tell the driver to stop somewhere so I could look up an address. And just then the music stopped. A hard, fast voice took over.

"Attention! All police personnel, all citizens! Wanted for multiple murder, Lux Magruder! I repeat: Lux Magruder! Carries a visa from Arbutus. Six feet one inch, one hundred and ninety pounds. Blond hair, grey eyes."

He went over it again, then once more. An exact description. Everyone with a radio on was hearing it.

The spaceport was definitely out now. Too many people around. But Eddie Beers was out too. He was my reference for the visa. They'd be sure to check him.

Where could I go? Where? I had to hole up until I could get to Eddie. But where? The answer hit me like a sledge.

"Change that address to 100 Neptune Drive," I told the driver.

"Okay." He didn't even turn around. My heart went back to where it belonged.

When we pulled up to the building, I slid a bill past the window before the cab stopped rolling. I was out and with my back to him so quick he never saw my face.

The address was a swank apartment house, too swank for a working girl. Unless the civil service had upped its wages. But the wonderful thing about the place was its lack of activity.

I checked the mailboxes until I

found her apartment number, 207. Nobody passed me while I was looking. Nobody passed me as I walked into the lobby.

The lobby door was locked. I went back and rang a fourth floor bell and waited. In a few moments a woman's voice came through the tube. "Who's there?"

"Me, honey," I said. The buzzer buzzed and I opened the door and walked on in. That was easy.

Rina's door was that easy, too. It was locked, but there was a space between the door and the strip of molding. I got a knife blade in there and twisted. When I was inside, I locked the door behind me.

MY FEET were up on a coffee table when she came in. Her mouth opened and snapped shut before she could let out a yelp. When she opened it again I shut it by putting my own over it.

"An hour," she said when I let her go. "I waited an hour."

"Couldn't help it. You're not sore?"

"Not *too* sore," she said.

And she didn't seem to be. She didn't even ask how I got in. I couldn't figure her out. Looking at her, listening to her talk, I knew she wasn't the kind. But when I wanted to kiss her again she came right to my arms. Temporarily, I forgot my troubles.

"Now," she said, breaking the clinch, "I'll put on something more domestic and get some dinner."

"Don't tell me you can cook, too!"

She laughed at that and gave me a pat on the cheek. Then she stepped around me and went into the bedroom. The door shut behind her.

I waited a half minute and tip-toed after her. I put my ear to the keyhole. She was talking to someone on the transiphone.

"He's here! In my apartment! Yes, as quickly as you can."

There would have been more, but I was inside that bedroom so fast she didn't have a chance. She half turned and I grabbed the phone and tore it completely out of the wall. Then I flung her roughly clear over a bed. I helped her to her feet again by lifting a handful of hair.

"You *would* call the cops!" I snarled. "One chance I've got to stay clear and you call the cops! Why didn't you say you'd heard that radio call? I'd have got out."

I wanted to hit her but couldn't bring myself to do it. Instead, I shook her so hard her teeth chattered. Why couldn't I get a single break? Why?

"No," she stuttered. "You don't understand. It wasn't the police. Please, Lux. Please."

I let her go. She was lying and I knew it, but I let loose anyway. And then I thought: what if she isn't lying? What if it wasn't the police?

But who else? Who else would be interested in a man from Arbutus, a man named Lux Magruder?

The answer staggered me. If it weren't the police she'd called, then the whole thing began to make some kind of sense. A simple racket, the oldest in the world. Practised in every port of call in the universe.

And it *wasn't* the police! Someone was at the door, knocking gently. The police couldn't have made it that fast. And they wouldn't knock gently.

Now the knocking stopped. Rina Tyrell was quiet, her breasts rising and falling with her breathing. I too was quiet. The knocking had stopped. But now a key was sliding into the lock.

I had to get out and get out fast. I didn't know how many would come through that door. I could handle

them; the sneak gun would take care of plenty. But too many would make a fuss.

A fuss meant the cops and the cops wouldn't give me a chance to talk. Right now the name of Lux Magruder was mud.

I didn't have time to think. I had only to act. The door was no good, but there was a window. Rina yelled something but the window slamming cut it off.

Two stories up and I didn't know what I was jumping into. If it were concrete I was a goner. I took a deep breath and jumped just as the apartment door banged open.

IT WASN'T concrete. It was a flower bed. Somebody's pretty posies took an awful beating as I landed feet first, went into a forward roll and came up running.

If I'd known how much running I was going to do, I'd have worn track shoes. But at least now I knew where I was running to. For the first time since I'd landed, I knew where I was going.

The police were out. I was dead on sight, without a chance to explain. But there was one man who could help me. One man who had the power and the reason.

Maybe Eddie Beers wasn't so far wrong. In a bookkeeper's world there still had to be a head bookkeeper. I knew now with a dreadful certainty that Paul Stewart and the others were gone. But with Eddie's help I'd balance out the account.

I had the page I'd torn out of Rina Tyrell's phone book. Eddie's home address was on that page. Only it wasn't Eddie; it was Edward A. Beers.

And it wasn't too far, just a couple of miles from where I was now. I ran down that dark street, looking for lights, for a cab. And there

wasn't anywhere in sight.

But there was a car. It pulled up to the curb ahead of me and a young fellow got out. He had a box in his hand, a long box. Probably flowers, I thought.

He looked up as I came along and then stepped back to let me get past. Only I didn't go past him.

I hit him right on the button. It was a nice short punch that had all my weight behind it. His feet lifted slightly and then he sagged.

"Sorry, boy," I grunted. Some girl was going to wonder what'd happened to her date.

I dumped him behind a hedge. Then I got the keys from his pocket and went to the car. It was a good many years since I'd driven one of these ground sloths, but I figured I'd manage. If nobody got in my way.

NOBODY DID. The lad would be out for a good half hour, and I had only the couple of miles to drive. I drove it slowly, taking no chances on getting picked up for speeding. And I parked it several blocks from Eddie's place.

He had a nice home. The last time I'd seen Eddie he was living in a hall bedroom, no bath. Now it was a heap of gray stone, with a high wall around it. And a locked gate.

The gate didn't stop me. I went over it. Then a quick run across a tree shaded lawn and I was at the door. I rang four times, sharp and quick.

A light went on in the hall and the door opened. A woman stood there, a blonde in a housekeeper's uniform. She started to get indignant but I cut her off.

"Mr. Beers," I said. "I want to see him. Quick."

She was staring at me, wide eyed, shaking her head. I thought I'd scared her out of her wits.

"He's not home."

"You're—"

No, she wasn't lying. I could see that, and it made me curse the luck of Lux Magruder. One break, and I couldn't get it.

"It's a matter of life and death," I said. "Where can I reach him?"

"His office." She was composed now, more composed than most women would have been. "The entire staff is working late this evening."

Something clicked in the back of my mind as I ran back across the lawn. There was something I should have got, and hadn't. But there was no time to figure it out now.

TRILIUM Incorporated was ablaze with light. That woman hadn't been kidding when she said the entire staff was working. Two hundred floors lit up and it was a pretty sight. I didn't give it a second glance.

At least five people tried to stop me. I walked right on through them, through the words they tossed at me. They must have figured I was someone important because nothing happened.

When I got to the fifth secretary things toughened up. She had her orders and that was that. I wouldn't tell her who I was and what I wanted to see Mr. Beers about. She wouldn't let me through the door she guarded.

What educated people call an impasse, chess players a stalemate. Until the fourth secretary came along. She was a tall redhead with a lovely shape and a face I'd seen at some racetrack. But she was pleasant as could be.

"He was here this afternoon," she said. "I'll okay it."

And within seven seconds I was inside the sanctum sanctorum. Eddie was there, still behind the desk. But now his collar was open and his tie askew. He was yelling orders at a

couple of men as I came in.

One look at me and he waved them away. "Get out!" He waited until the door shut on them.

"Damn!" he yelled at me. "You had to mess things up! Nothing wrong with you men on Arbutus. Not much. One hour on Earth and you already murdered four men!"

"Shut up!" I barked. "You get started on Paul Stewart?"

He glared at me and tossed a sheaf of papers across the desk. Police reports, but just a dossier. Missing report, and nothing written on it. Then a check. A cancelled check for a million bucks.

"Yeah," Eddie rasped. "I paid him off and he went right down and cashed it. And that was the last anyone heard of your pal Paul Stewart. But I'm still working on it."

"You can stop working," I said. "Paul's dead. That's what the mess was about. They tried to get me too."

"But—"

"It starts at Circle Seven window at the spaceport," I cut in. "It starts with a lonely sailor from faraway places, with lots of back pay coming. And with a beautiful girl who gives him the eye. I guess you can take it from there."

"Can you prove it?"

"I got the eye. Too beautiful to be working a window. Lives in a place that costs three times her paycheck. It adds up."

"No. It doesn't add up." And then he pulled the plug on me.

"If it added up they wouldn't try to get you before you had the money, would they?"

No, come to think of it, they wouldn't. Unless they hadn't intended to, and I had merely touched off a premature fuse by catching those killers on my trail. I suggested as much.

"No, Lux." Eddie got up and paced

the floor. "This is big. Bigger than you think. They're after all of us, after Trilium Incorporated. Why do you think we're working tonight?"

I didn't know so he told me. "Because there are only five missing persons who've not been found in the last year. Paul Stewart, Johnson, Groves, and two others. All from Arbutus. And because some of the most important files in this organization are missing!"

"Somebody, Lux, is out to get me!" He took another turn around the desk and suddenly pounded his fist on it. "The girl! The girl! I've got to get her!"

That was it. She might not be more than a cog in a machine, probably wasn't. But she'd know something. I gave Eddie the dope on her and he flicked on a phone.

"Twenty minutes!" he barked after giving her name and address. "I want her here in twenty minutes!"

THEN WE sat and waited. Eddie chewed up a whole cigar and I chewed my nails. I was for calling the police, but Eddie killed the idea. After we had the girl and the information, then I could be cleared.

It wasn't long. It wasn't over fifteen minutes. Eddie Beers had built an efficient machine.

A panel in the wall slid open and there was an elevator behind it. In the elevator were a pair of the tall Venusians, and between them Rina Tyrell. They literally flung her into the room.

"Hello, Baby," I said. And I'd never felt meaner in my life.

But she didn't even look at me. Her eyes were fixed on Eddie Beers. And his eyes were glued on her. His face was white.

If ever a man was scared, it was Eddie Beers. "*Miss Stewart.*" It was a shaky whisper.

"Stewart?" I blurted.

All of a sudden it hit me. A picture Paul Stewart had carried with him. A picture of a kid in pigtails, with enormous eyes. A gawky kid, but she'd grown up. Paul Stewart's sister!

"Get him!" Eddie yelled.

One of the Venusians got me. I was half way to Paul's sister when the seven footer clouted me behind the ear. While the room swam around me, he yanked the gun out of my shoulder holster and then slammed me into a chair.

"Lux," the girl said, and it was almost a sob.

"How does he know you?" I asked. "And why the phony name?"

Eddie was grinning now. "I'll be damned," he murmured to himself. "They put each other right in my lap."

Rina Stewart ignored him. "When Paul vanished, I came to him. He said he'd help, but he didn't even try. I had a hunch that something was wrong, but I couldn't find out what.

"Neither could anyone else. There were the other men who'd disappeared. Nobody knew anything. I had to start somewhere, so I started at the point where anyone from Arbutus had to land."

"Clever," Eddie laughed.

"But what happened to the money?" I said. I needed time to get my senses back.

"They never got any. None of them. Their endorsements on the checks were forged. We couldn't prove it before."

"And you never will," Eddie told her. He looked at the Venusians, who had the pellet guns in their hands.

"All right," Eddie told them. "Right here. Right now."

He wasn't taking any more chances. A million dollars each for a thousand

men. A billion dollars. He'd kill his own mother for that.

"All right," Eddie said.

BANG! The door flew open, catching us all with our bellies sucked in, waiting for death to strike. It was nobody much, just a blonde housekeeper with a brief case in her hand. But she was life itself.

"Mr. Beers," she said. "You forgot this and I thought—"

She was zipping open the case and behind her the redheaded secretary was walking in and Eddie was waving to the secretary to get rid of the housekeeper. And I was realizing now what had clicked in the back of my mind as I went back across Eddie's lawn.

I was remembering a blonde with a shapely leg pulling her stocking up when I looked back over my shoulder. And another time I looked back and there was a horsy redhead examining her face!

What was this? What kind of a crazy nightmare was this?

The blonde had the bag open and what she was taking out was not a sheaf of papers. It was a gun!

The gun went off and one of the Venusians dropped. By that time the redhead had a gun in her hand and she was pointing it at the other Venusian while she kicked the door shut behind her. The green man turned a shade lighter and his gun thudded on the carpet.

Eddie Beers wasn't grinning now. He was a mighty sick man. And mighty confused and scared. I was confused too.

"This is Verna Groves," Rina said. She was pointing at the blonde. "The redhead is Doris Johnson. They once had husbands. Just like I once had a brother named Paul."

I'd never have thought a pretty face could get so hard. But she

wasn't half as hard as the other two. You wait through five years of exile for a man and then a dirty rat kills him.

"We knew it was Beers," Rina said. "But we couldn't prove it. So we took jobs where we could watch him and also the next man to come from Arbutus."

"You can't prove anything now," Eddie protested.

"We don't have to," Verna Groves said. She swung her gun around and fired.

She missed. Just by inches, but she missed. And the Venusian made a grab for her. Everything happened at once.

I tripped the Venusian and kicked him in the face as he went down. Then the Johnson gal's gun went off and the Venusian was dead. But it had given Eddie a chance to yank open a drawer.

HE MADE his play and he almost succeeded. Mrs. Johnson died without knowing what had hit her. And he would have got Mrs. Groves too. But that was where I stepped in.

I came around the side of the desk and I hit Eddie Beers with all the strength I had. His head jerked and his eyes went up until there was nothing but whites showing.

I hit him twice more but the punches were wasted. The first one had broken his neck. It was too easy a death for Eddie Beers, but there wouldn't have been anything bad enough.

Now there was screaming out beyond the office door. Women shrieking and yelling. A minute longer and there'd be cops like flies around here.

And no matter what I tried to say, they'd never believe me. I was just the boy from the wrong side of the tracks. And besides, there just

wasn't enough evidence to clear me.

"The elevator," Rina said. "He had a private entrance."

He had more than that. He had a car down there, a car that could zoom up the long ramp without even straining. But after we were out. What then?

"The spaceport," Rina told me.

"But I can't clear! Without papers I can't get the ship."

"You've had papers since the moment you landed," Rina said. "I don't know how far we'll get, but we'll get off the ground."

She was a very capable girl. I asked her if she was capable of kissing me. She was. She did.

And then the spaceport loomed ahead. I swung through the main gate and rolled right out onto the field, right alongside the cradle where my ship reposed.

"Papers?" A flight inspector had popped up. I handed them over and he gave them a quick check.

"Okay." Then he did a double take. "Magruder!"

I had to hit him. It was the only way. In the distance we could hear the sirens coming along. We couldn't wait.

AT TWO hundred thousand feet we already had pursuit. But it was just an ordinary patrol job and I didn't even have to step up speed to leave it behind.

At five hundred miles there were three cruisers behind us. Three big babies that could blow me out of the sky. And they could travel! I poured it on all the way and they kept pace.

But they couldn't close the gap. That was enough for me. We could run the rest of the race even as far as I was concerned.

"But when we try to land, they'll get us!" Rina said. Mrs. Groves

looked pretty worried about it, too.

"Let me tell you about the three moons of Arbutus," I said. "But first, kiss me again."

Mrs. Groves looked the other way while Rina did just that. I could imagine this going on of Arbutus evenings, and the prospect didn't displease.

There was room for women on Arbutus, women who could take the ruggedness along with the beauty of it. I hadn't thought so before, but I hadn't known Rina before.

But first we'd have to clear up a few things. Once and for all the men of Arbutus would have to be safe from the bookkeepers. As soon as we cleared the last asteroid field, I turned on my phone.

"Magruder," I said. "Magruder coming in."

"So what?" a jaded voice answered. I laughed. Close to home.

"So three big boys would like to stop me."

"What do you know?" the voice murmured. "Where are they?"

"Right on my tail."

"Righto," the voice said.

Arbutus was right below us now, coming out of the blackness. There were purple clouds above it, and below the purple were red and green. A lovely sight.

And then out of the clouds a pair of long, slender ships. I watched them come on. They dipped once and then they were past me.

There was a flash that lit the sky for a thousand miles. And then the long ships were coming back again. This time I dipped.

"The beginning of the end for the bookkeepers," I said. Beside me Rina nodded.

"The beginning for us," she said.

I came into a long glide over the beautiful hills and valleys of Arbutus.