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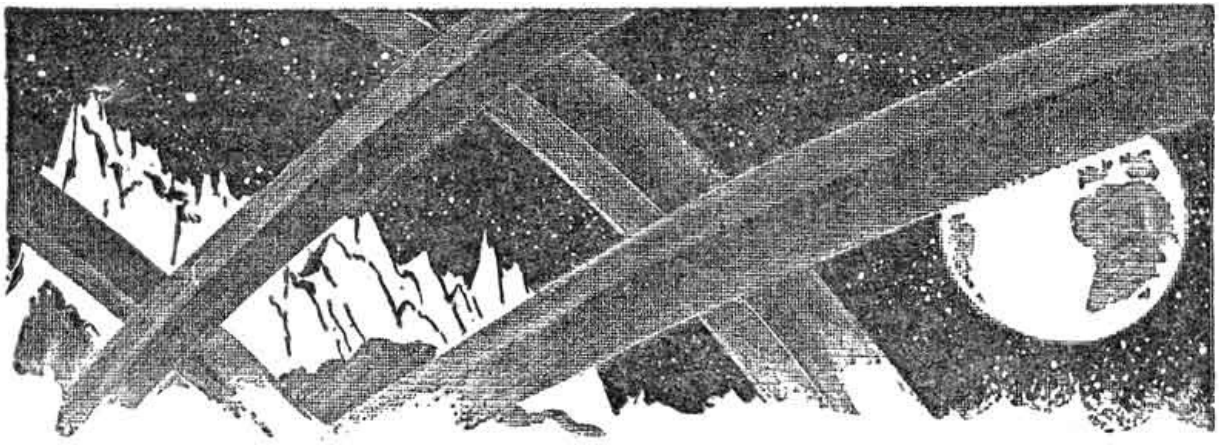
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MASTER of the MOONDOG

By STANLEY MULLEN

Idiotic pets rate idiotic masters. Tod Denver and Charley, the moondog, made ideal companions as they set a zigzag course for the Martian diggings—paradise for fools.

It was Charley's fault, of course; all of it....

Temperature outside was a rough 280 degrees F., which is plenty rough and about three degrees cooler than Hell. It was somewhere over the Lunar Appenines and the sun bored down from an airless sky like an unshielded atomic furnace. The thermal adjustors whined and snarled and clogged-up until the inside of the space sled was just bearable.



Tod Denver glared at Charley, who was a moondog and looked like one, and Charley glared back. Denver was fond of Charley, as one might be of an idiot child. At the moment they found each in the other's doghouse. Charley had curled up and attached himself to the instrument panel from which he scowled at Denver in malignant fury.

Charley was a full-grown, two yard-long moondog. He looked like an oversized comma of something vague and luminous. At the head end he was a fat yellow balloon, and the rest of him

tapered vaguely to a blunt apex of infinity. Whatever odd forces composed his weird physiology, he was undoubtedly electronic or magnetic.



In the physically magnetic sense, he could cling for hours to any metallic surface, or at will propel himself about or hang suspended between any two or more metallic objects. As to his personality, he was equally magnetic, for wherever Denver took him he attracted curious stares and comments. Most people have never seen a moondog. Such creatures, found only on the moons of Saturn, are too rare to be encountered often as household or personal pets.

But Tod Denver had won Charley in a crap game at Crystal City; and thereafter found him both an inseparable companion and exasperating responsibility. He had tried every available means to get rid of Charley, but without success. Either direct sale or horse-trade proved useless. Charley liked Denver too well to put up with less interesting owners so Charley always came back, and nearly always accompanied by profanity and threats. Charley was spectacular, and a monstrous care but Denver ended by becoming fond of the nuisance. He would miss the radiant, stupid and embarrassingly affectionate creature.

Charley had currently burned out a transformer by some careless and exuberant antic; hence the mutual doghouse. Scolding was wasted effort, so Denver merely sighed and made a face at Charley.

"Mad dogs and Martians go out in the Lunar sun," he sang as a punishment. Charley recognized only the word "dog" but he considered the song a personal insult; as if Denver's singing were not sufficient punishment for a minor offense. Charley was irritated.

Charley's iridescence flickered evilly, which was enough to short-circuit two relays and weld an undetermined number of hot switches. Charley's temper was short, and short-circuiting all electrical units within range was mere reflex.

Tod Denver swore nobly and fluently, set the controls on automatic-neutral and tried to localize the damage. But for Charley and his overloaded peeve, they would have been in Crystal City inside the hour.

So it was Charley's fault, of course; all of it....

It was beyond mere prank. Denver calculated grimly that his isolated suit would hold up less than twenty minutes in that noon inferno outside before the stats fused and the suiting melted and ran off him in droplets of metal foil and glass cloth. The thermal adjustors were already working at capacity, transmitting the light and heat that filtered through the mirror-tone hull into stored, useful energy. Batteries were already overcharged and the voltage regulators snapped on and off like a crackling barrage of distant heat-guns.

Below was a high gulch of the Lunar Appenines, a pattern of dazzling glare and harsh moonshadows. Ramshackle mine-buildings of prefabricated plastic straggled out from the shrouding blackness under a pinnacled ridge. Denver eyed the forbidding terrain with hair-raising panic. He checked the speed of the racing space sled, circled once, and tried to pick out a soft spot. The ship swooped down like a falling rock, power off. Denver awaited the landing shock.

It was rough. Space was too cramped and he overshot his planned landing. The spacer set down hard beyond the cleared strip, raising spurting clouds of volcanic ash which showered his view-ports in blinding glare.

Skids shrilled on naked rock, causing painful vibrations in the cabin. Denver wrenched at controls, trying to avoid jagged tongues of broken lava protruding above the dust-floor. Sun-fire turned the disturbed dust into luminous haze blanketing ship and making vision impossible. The spacer ground to an agonized stop. Denver's landing was rough but he still lived.

He sat blankly and felt cold in the superheated cabin. It was nice and surprising to be alive. Without sustaining air the dust settled almost instantly. Haze cleared outside the ports.

Charley whined eagerly. He detached himself from the tilting control panel and sailed wildly about like a hydrophobic goldfish in a bowl of water. A succession of spitting and crackling sounds poured from him as he batted his lunatic face to the view-ports to peer outside. Pseudotendrils formed around his travesty of mouth, and he wrinkled his absurd face into yellow typhoons of excitement. This was fun. Let's do it again!

Denver grunted uncomfortably. He studied the staggering scene of Lunar landscape without any definite hope. Something blazing from the peak of the largest mine-structure caught his eye. With a snort of bitter disgust he identified the dazzle.

Distress signals in Interplanetary Code! That should be very helpful under the poisonous circumstances. He swore again, numbly, but with deep sincerity.

Charley danced and flicked around the cabin like a free electron with a careless disregard for traffic regulations and public safety. It was wordless effort to express his eagerness to go outside and explore with Denver.

In spite of himself, Tod Denver grinned at the display.

"Not this time, Charley. You wait in the ship while I take a quick look around. From the appearance of things, I'll run into trouble enough without help from you."

The moon dog drooped from disappointment. With Charley, any emotion always reached the ultimate absurdity. He was a flowing, flexible phantom of translucent color and radiance. But now the colors faded like gaudy rags in caustic solution. Charley whined as Denver went through the grotesque ritual of donning space helmet and zipping up his glass cloth and metal foil suiting before he dared venture outside. Charley even tried to help by pouring himself through the stale air to hold open the locker where the tool-belts and holstered heat guns were kept.

Space suiting bulged with internal pressure as Denver slid through the airlock and left the ship behind. Walking carefully against the treachery of moonweak gravity, he made cautious way up the slope toward the clustered buildings. Footing was bad, with the feeling of treading upon brittle, glassy surfaces and breaking through to bury his weighted shoes in inches of soft ash. A small detour was necessary to avoid upthrusting pinnacles of lavarock. In the shadow of these outcroppings he paused to let his eyes adjust to the brilliance of sunlight.

A thin pencil-beam of light stabbed outward from behind the nearer building. Close at hand, one of the lava-needles vanished in soundless display of mushrooming explosion. Sharp, acrid heat penetrated even the insulating layers of suit. A pressure-wave of expanding gas staggered him before it dissipated.

Denver flung himself instinctively behind the sheltering rocks. Prone, he inched forward to peer cautiously through a V-cleft between two jagged spires. Heat-blaster in hand, he waited events.

Again the beam licked out. The huddle of lava-pinnacles became a core of flaming destruction. Half-molten rock showered Denver's precarious refuge. He ducked, unhurt, then thrust head and gun-arm above the barricade.

Two dark figures, running awkwardly, detached themselves from the huddled bulk of buildings. Like leaping, fantastic shadows, they scampered toward the mounds of deep shadow beneath the ridge. The route took them away from Denver, making aim difficult. He fired twice, hurriedly. Missed. But near misses because he had not focused for such range.

By the time he could reset the weapon, the scurrying figures had disappeared into the screening puddles of shadow. Denver tried to distinguish them against the blackness, but it lay in solid, covering mass at the base of a titanic ridge. Faintly he could see a ghostly outline, much too large for men. It might be a ship, but it would have to be large enough for a space-yacht. No stinking two-man sled like his spacer. And he could not be sure in that eerie blankness if it even were a ship.

Besides, the range was too great. Uncertainty vanished as a circle of light showed briefly. An airlock door opened and closed swiftly. Denver stood clear of the rocks and wondered if he should risk anything further. Pursuit was useless with such arms as he carried. No question of courage was involved. A man is not required to play quixotic fool under such circumstances. And there might not be time to return to his spacer for a long-range heat gun. If he tried to reach the strange ship, its occupants could smoke him down before he covered half the distance. If he continued toward the buildings, they might return and stalk him. They would, he knew, if they guessed he was alone.

Decision was spared him. Rockets thundered. The ridge lighted up as with magnesium flares. A big ship moved out of the banked shadows, accelerating swiftly. It was a space-yacht, black-hulled, and showed no insignia. It was fast, incredibly fast. He wasted one blaster charge after it, but missed focus by yards. He ducked out of sight among the rocks as the ship dipped to skim low overhead. Then it was gone, circling in stiff, steep spiral until it lost itself to sight in distant gorges.

"Close!" Denver murmured. "Too close. And now what?"

He quickly recharged the blaster. A series of sprawling leaps ate up the remaining distance to the mine's living quarters. One whole side, where airlock doors had been, was now a gaping, ragged hole. A haze of nearly invisible frost crystals still descended in slow showers. It was bitterly cold on the sharp, opaque edge of mountain-shadow. Thermal adjustors in his suiting stopped their irregular humming. Automatic units combined chemicals and began to operate against the biting cold. With a premonition of ugly dread, Denver clambered into the ruined building.

Inside was airless, heatless cell, totally dark. Denver's gloved hand sought a radilume-switch. Light blinked on as he fumbled the button.

Death sat at a metal-topped table. Death wore the guise of a tall, gaunt, leathery man, no longer young. It was no pretty sight, though not too unfamiliar a sight on Luna.

The man had been writing. Frozen fingers still clutched a cylinder pen, and the nub adhered to the paper as the flow of ink had stiffened. From nose, ears and mouth, streams of blood had congealed into fat, crimson icicles. Rimes of ruby crystals ringed pressure-bulged eyes. He was complete, perfect, a tableau of cold, airless death.

The paper was a claim record, registered in the name of Laird Martin, Earthman. An attached photograph matched what could be seen of face behind its mask of frozen blood. Across the foot of the sheet was a hurried scrawl:

Claim jumpers. I know they'll get me. If I can hide this first, they will not get what they want. Where Mitre Peak's apex of shadow points at 2017 ET is the first of a series of deep-cut arrow markings. Follow. They lead to the entrance. Old Martian workings. Maybe something. Whoever finds this, see that my kid, Soleil, gets a share. She's in school on Earth. Address is 93-X south Palma—

The pen had stopped writing half-through the word. Death had intervened hideously. Imagination could picture the scene as that airlock wall disappeared in blinding, soundless flash. Or perhaps there had been sound in the pressured atmosphere. His own arrival may have frightened off the claim jumpers, but too late to help the victim, who sat so straight and hideous in the airless tomb.

There was nothing to do. Airless cold would embalm the body until some bored official could come out from Crystal City to investigate the murder and pick up the hideous pieces. But if the killers returned Denver made sure that nothing remained to guide them in their search for the secret mine worked long-ago by forgotten Martians. It was Laird Martin's discovery and his dying legacy to a child on distant Earth.

Denver picked up the document and wadded it clumsily into a fold-pocket of his spacesuit. It might help the police locate the heir. In Martin's billfold was the child's picture, no more.

Denver retraced his steps to the frosty airlock valve of his ship. Inside the cabin, Charley greeted his master's return with extravagant caperings which wasted millions of electron volts.

"Nobody home, Charley," Denver told the purring moondog, "but we've picked up a nasty errand to run."

It was a bad habit, he reflected; talking to a moondog like that, but he had picked up the habit

from sheer loneliness of his prospecting among the haunted desolations of the Moon. Even talking to Charley was better than going nuts, he thought, and there was not too much danger of smart answers.

He worked quickly, repairing the inadvertent damage Charley's pique had caused. It took ten full minutes, and the heat-deadline was too close for comfort. He finished and breathed more freely as temperatures began to drop. He peeled off the helmet and unzipped the suit which was reaching the thermal levels of a live-steam bath.

He ran tape through the charger to impregnate electronic setting that would guide the ship on its course to Crystal City. "We were on our way, there, anyhow," he mused. "I hope they've improved the jail. It could stand air-conditioning."

II

Crystal City made up in violence what it lacked in size. It was a typical boom town of the Lunar mining regions. Mining and a thriving spacefreight trade in heavy metals made it a mecca for the toughest space-screws and hardest living prospector-miners to be found in the inhabited worlds. Saloons and cheap lodging-houses, gambling dens and neon-washed palaces of expensive sin, the jail and a flourishing assortment of glittery funeral parlors faced each other across two main intersecting streets. X marked the spot and life was the least costly of the many commodities offered for sale to rich-strike suckers who funneled in from all Luna.

The town occupied the cleared and leveled floor of a small ringwall "crater," and beneath its colorful dome of rainbowy perma-plastic, it sizzled. Dealers in mining equipment made overnight fortunes which they lost at the gaming tables just as quickly. In the streets one rubbed elbows with denizens from every part of the solar system; many of them curiously not anthropomorphic. Glittering and painted purveyors of more tawdry and shopworn goods than mining equipment also made fortunes overnight, and some of them paid for their greedy snatching at luxury with their empty lives. Brawls were sporadic and usually fatal.

Crystal City sizzled, and the Lunar Police sat on the lid as uneasily as if the place were a charge of high-explosive. It was, but it made living conditions difficult for a policeman, and made the desk-sergeant's temper extremely short.

Tod Denver's experience with police stations had consisted chiefly of uncomfortable stays as an invited, reluctant guest. To a hard-drinking man, such invitations are both frequent and inescapable. So Tod Denver was uneasy in the presence of such an obviously ill-tempered desk sergeant. Memories are tender documents from past experience, and Denver's experiences had induced extreme sensitivity about jails. Especially Crystal City's jail.

Briefly, he acquainted irritable officialdom with details of his find in the Appenines. The sergeant was fat, belligerent and unphilosophical.

"You stink," said the sergeant, twisting his face into more repulsive suggestion of a distorted rubber mask.

Tod Denver tried to continue. The sergeant cut him off with a rude suggestion.

"So what?" added the official. "Suppose you did run into a murder. Do I care? Maybe you killed the old guy yourself and are trying to cover up. I don't know."

He scowled speculatively at Denver who waited and worried.

"Forget it," went on the sergeant. "We ain't got time to chase down everybody that knocks off a lone prospector. There's a lot of punks like you I'd like to bump myself right here in Crystal City. Even if you're telling the truth I don't believe you. If you'd thought he had something valuable you'd have swiped it yourself, not come running to us. Don't bother me. If you got something, snag it. If not, shove it—"

The suggestion was detailed, anatomical.

Charley giggled amiably. Startled, the sergeant looked up and caught sight of the monstrosity. He shrieked.

"What's that?"

"Charley, my moondog," Denver explained. "They're quite scarce here."

Charley made eerie, chittering noises and settled on Denver's shoulder, waiting for his master to stroke the filaments of his blunt head.

"Looks like a cross between a bird and a carrot. Try making him scarce from my office."

"Don't worry, he's housebroke."

"Don't matter. Get him out of here, out of Crystal City. We have an ordinance against pets. Unhealthy beasts. Disease-agents. They foul up the atmosphere."

"Not Charley," Denver argued hopelessly. "He's not animal; he's a natural air-purifier. Gives off ozone."

"Two hours you've got to get him out of here. Two hours. Out of town. I hope you go with him. If he don't stink, you do. If I have any trouble with either of you, you go in the tank."

Tod Denver gulped and held his nose. "Not your tank. No thanks. I want a hotel room with a tub and shower, not a night in your glue factory. Come on, Charley. I guess you sleep in the ship."

Charley grinned evilly at the sergeant. He gave out chuckling sounds, as if meditating. To escape disaster Tod Denver snatched him up and fled.

After depositing Charley in the ship, he bought clean clothes and registered for a room at the Spaceport Hotel. After a bath, a shave and a civilized meal he felt more human than he had for many lonely months. He transferred his belongings to the new clothes, and opened his billfold to audit his dwindling resources. After the hotel and the new clothes and the storage-rent at the spaceport for his ship, there was barely enough for even a bust of limited dimensions. It would have to do.

As he replaced the money a battered photograph fell out. It was the picture of Laird Martin's child. A girl, not over four. She was plump and pretty in the vague way children are plump and pretty. An old picture, of course; faded and worn from frequent handling. Dirty and not too clear. How could anyone trace a small orphan girl on Earth with the picture and the incomplete address? She would be older, of course; maybe six or seven. Schools do keep records and lists of the pupils' names might be available if he had money to investigate. Which he hadn't.

His ship carried three months of supplies. Beside the money in his billfold, he had nothing else. Nothing but Charley, and the sales of him had always backfired. At best, a moondog was not readily marketable. Besides, could he part with Charley?

Maybe if he looked into those old Martian workings, the money would be forthcoming. After all, the dying Laird Martin had only asked that a share be reserved for his daughter. Put some aside for the kid. Use some to find her. Keep careful accounting and give her a fair half. More if she needed it and there wasn't too much. It was a nice thought. Denver felt warm and decent inside.

For the moment some of his thoughts verged upon indecencies.

He lacked the price but it cost nothing to look. He called it widow-shopping, which was not a misnomer in Crystal City. There were plenty of widows, some lonely, some lively. Some free and uninhibited. And he did have the price of the drinks.

The impulse carried him outside to a point near the X-like intersection of streets. Here, the possibilities of sin and evil splendor dazzled the eye.

Pressured atmosphere within the domed city was richer than Tod Denver was used to. Oxygen in pressure tanks costs money; and he had accustomed himself to do with as little as possible. Charley helped slightly. Now the stuff went tingling through nostrils, lungs and on to his veins. It swept upward to his brain and blood piled up there, feeling as if full of bursting tiny bubbles like champagne. He felt gay and feckless, light-headed and big-headed. Ego expanded, and he imagined himself a man of destiny at the turning point of his career.

He was not drunk, except on oxygen. Not drunk yet. But thirsty. The street was garish with display of drinkeries. In neon lights a tilted glass dripped beads of color. There was a name in luminous pastel-tubing:

Pot o' Stars.

Beneath the showering color stood a girl. Tod Denver's blood pressure soared nimbly upward and collided painfully with blocked safety valves. The look was worth it. Tremendous. Hot stuff.

Wow!

When bestially young he had dreamed lecherously of such a glorious creature. Older, bitter experience had taught him that they existed outside his price class. His eyes worked her over in frank admiration and his imagination worked overtime.

She was Martian, obviously, from her facial structure, if one noticed her face.

Martian, of course. But certainly not one of the Red desert folk, nor one of the spindly yellow-brown Canal-keepers. White. Probably sprang originally from the icy marshes near the Pole, where several odd remnants of the old white races still lived, and lingered painfully on the short rations of dying Mars.

She was pale and perilous and wonderful. Hair was shimmering bright cascade of spun platinum that fell in muted waves upon shoulders of naked beauty. Her eyes swam liquid silver with purple lights dwelling within, and her sullen red lips formed a heartshaped mouth, as if pouting. Heavy lids weighed down the eyes, and heavier barbaric bracelets weighted wrists and ankles. Twin breasts were mounds of soft, sun-dappled snow frosted with thin metal plates glowing with gemfire. Her simple garment was metalcloth, but so fine-spun and gauzelike that it seemed woven of moonlight. It seemed as un-needed as silver leafing draped upon some exotic flowering, but somehow enhanced the general effect.

Her effect was overpowering. Denver followed her inside and followed her sweet, poisonous witchery as the girl glided gracefully along the aisle between ranked tables. As she entered the glittering room talk died for a moment of sheer admiration, then began in swift whispered accents. Men dreamed inaudibly and the women envied and hated her on sight.

She seemed well-known to the place. Her name, Denver learned from the awed whispering, was —Darbor....

The Pot o' Stars combined drinking, dancing and gambling. A few people even ate food. There was muffled gaiety, glitter of glass and chromium, and general bad taste in the decoration. The hostesses were dressed merely to tempt and tease the homesick and lovelorn prospectors and lure the better-paid mine-workers into a deadly proximity to alcohol and gambling devices.

The girl went ahead, and Denver followed, regretting his politeness when she beat him to the only unoccupied table. It had a big sign, *Reserved*, but she seemed waiting for no one, since she ordered a drink and merely played with it. She seemed wrapped in speculative contemplation of the other customers, as if estimating the possible profits to the house.

On impulse, Denver edged to her table and stood looking down at her. Cold eyes, like amber ice, looked through him.

"I know I look like a spacetramp," he observed. "But I'm not invisible. Mind if I pull up a cactus and squat?"

Her eyes were chill calculation.

"Suit yourself ... if you like to live dangerously."

Denver laughed and sat down. "How important are you? Or is it something else? You don't look so deadly. I'll buy you a drink if you like. Or dance, if you're careless about toes."

Her cold shrug stopped him. "Skip it," she snapped. "Buy yourself a drink if you can afford it. Then go."

"What makes you rate a table to yourself? I could go now but I won't. The liquor here's probably poison but who pays for it makes no difference to me. Maybe you'd like to buy me a short snort. Or just snort at me again. On you, it looks good."

The girl gazed at him languorously, puzzled. Then she let go with a laugh which sparkled like audible champagne.

"Good for you," she said eagerly. "You're just a punk, but you have guts. Guts, but what else? Got any money?"

Denver bristled. "Pots of it," he lied, as any other man would. Then, remembering suddenly, "Not with me but I know where to lay hands on plenty of it."

Her eyes calculated. "You're not the goon who came in from the Appenines today? With a wild tale of murder and claim-jumpers and old Martian workings?"

Quick suspicion dulled Denver's appreciation of beauty.

She laughed sharply. "Don't worry about me, stupid. I heard it all over town. Policemen talk. For me, they jump through hoops. Everybody knows. You'd be smart to lie low before someone jumps out of a sung-bush and says boo! at you. If you expected the cops to do anything, you're naive. Or stupid. About those Martian workings, is there anything to the yarn?"

Denver grunted. He knew he was talking too much but the urge to brag is masculine and universal.

"Maybe, I don't know. Martian miners dabbled in heavy metals. Maybe they found something there and maybe they left some. If they did, I'm the guy with the treasure map. Willing to take a chance on me?"

Darbor smiled calculatingly. "Look me up when you find the treasure. You're full of laughs tonight. Trying to pick me up on peanuts. Men lie down and beg me to walk on their faces. They lay gold or jewels or pots of uranium at my feet. Got any money—now?"

"I can pay ... up to a point," Denver confessed miserably.

"We're not in business, kid. But champagne's on me. Don't worry about it. I own the joint up to a point. I don't, actually. Big Ed Caltis owns it. But I'm the dummy. I front for him because of taxes and the cops. We'll drink together tonight, and all for free. I haven't had a good laugh since they kicked me out of Venusport. You're it. I hope you aren't afraid of Big Ed. Everybody else is. He bosses the town, the cops and all the stinking politicians. He dabbles in every dirty racket, from girls to the gambling upstairs. He pays my bills, too, but so far he hasn't collected. Not that he hasn't tried."

Denver was impressed. Big Ed's girl. If she was. And he sat with her, alone, drinking at Big Ed's expense. That was a laugh. A hot one. Rich, even for Luna.

"Big Ed?" he said. "The Scorpion of Mars!"

Darbor's eyes narrowed. "The same. The name sounds like a gangsters' nickname. It isn't. He was a pro-wrestler. Champion of the Interplanetary League for three years. But he's a gangster and racketeer at heart. His bully-boys play rough. Still want to take a chance, sucker?"

A waitress brought drinks and departed. Snowgrape Champagne from Mars cooled in a silver bucket. It was the right temperature, so did not geyser as Denver unskilfully wrested out the cork. He filled the glasses, gave one to the girl. Raising the other, he smiled into Darbor's dangerous eyes.

"The first one to us," he offered gallantly. "After that, we'll drink to Big Ed. I hope he chokes. He was a louse in the ring."

Darbor's face lighted like a flaming sunset in the cloud-canopy of Venus.

"Here's to us then," she responded. "And to guts. You're dumb and delightful, but you do something to me I'd forgotten could be done. And maybe I'll change my mind even if you don't have the price. I think I'll kiss you. Big Ed is still a louse, and not only in the ring. He thinks he can out-wrestle me but I know all the nasty holds. I play for keeps or not at all. Keep away from me, kid."

Denver's imagination had caught fire. Under the combined stimuli of Darbor and Snowgrape Champagne, he seemed to ascend to some high, rarified, alien dimension where life became serene and uncomplicated. A place where one ate and slept and made fortunes and love, and only the love was vital. He smoldered.

"Play me for keeps," he urged.

"Maybe I will," Darbor answered clearly. She was feeling the champagne too, but not as exaltedly as Denver who was not used to such potent vintages as Darbor and SG-Mars, 2028. "Maybe I will, kid, but ask me after the Martian workings work out."

"Don't think I won't," he promised eagerly. "Want to dance?"

Her face lighted up. She started to her feet, then sank back.

"Better not," she murmured. "Big Ed doesn't like other men to come near me. He's big, bad and jealous. He may be here tonight. Don't push your luck, kid. I'm trouble, bad trouble."

Denver snapped his fingers drunkenly. "That for Big Ed. I eat trouble."

Her eyes were twin pools of darkness. They widened as ripples of alarm spread through them. "Start eating," she said. "Here it comes!"

Big Ed Caltis stood behind Denver's chair.

III

Tod Denver turned. "Hello, Rubber-face," he said pleasantly. "Sit down and have a drink. You're paying for it."

Big Ed Caltis turned apoplectic purple but he sat down. A waitress hustled up another glass. Silence in the room. Every eye focused upon the table where Big Ed Caltis sat and stared blindly at his uninvited guest.

Skilfully, Denver poured sparkling liquid against the inside curve of the third glass. With exaggerated care, he refilled his own and the girl's. He shoved the odd glass toward Big Ed with a careless gesture that was not defiance but held a hint of something cold and deadly and menacing.

"Drink hearty, champ," he suggested. "You'll need strength and Dutch courage to hear some of the things I've wanted to tell you. I've been holding them for a long time. This is it."

Big Ed nodded slowly, ponderously. "I'm listening."

Denver began a long bill of particulars against Big Ed Caltis of Crystal City. He omitted little, though some of it was mere scandalous gossip with which solo-prospectors who had been the objects of a squeeze-play consoled themselves and took revenge upon their tormentor from safe distance. Denver paused once, briefly, to re-assess and recapture the delight he took in gazing at Darbor's beauty seated opposite. Then he resumed his account of the life and times of Big Ed, an improvised essay into the folly and stupidity of untamed greed which ended upon a sustained note of vituperation.

Big Ed smiled with sardonic amusement. He was in his late forties, running a bit to blubber, but still looked strong and capable. He waited until Tod Denver ran down, waited and smiled patiently.

"If you've finished," he said. "I should compliment you on the completeness of the picture you paint of me. When I need a biographer, I'll call on you. Just now I have another business proposition. I understand you know the location of some ancient Martian mine-workings. You need a partner. I'm proposing myself."

Denver paled. "I have a partner," he said, nodding toward the girl.

Big Ed smiled thinly. "That's settled then. Her being your partner makes it easy. What she has is mine. I bought her. She works for me and everything she has is mine."

Darbor's eyes held curious despair. But hatred boiled up in her.

"Not altogether," she corrected him evenly. "You never got what you wanted most—me! And you never will. I just resigned. Get yourself another dummy."

But Ed stood up. "Very good. Maudlin but magnificent. Let me offer my congratulations to both of you. But you're mistaken. I'll get everything I want. I always do. I'm not through with either of you."

Darbor ignored him. "Dance?" she asked Denver. He rose and gallantly helped her from her chair.

Big Ed Caltis, after a black look, vanished toward the offices and gambling rooms upstairs. He paused once and glanced back.

Denver laughed suddenly. Darbor studied him and caught the echo of her own fear in his eyes. He mustered a hard core of courage in himself, but it required distinct effort.

"When I was a kid I liked to swing on fence-gates. Once, the hinges broke. I skinned my knee."

Her body was trembling. Some of it got into her voice. "It could happen again."

He met the challenge of her. She was bright steel, drawn to repel lurking enemies.

"I have another knee," he said, grinning. "But yours are too nice to bark up. Where's the back door?"

The music was Venusian, a swaying, sensuous thing of weirdest melodies and off-beat rhythms. Plucked and bowed strings blended with wailing flutes and an exotic tympany to produce music formed of passion and movement. Tod Denver and Darbor threaded their way through stiffly-paired swaying couples toward the invisible door at the rear.

"I hope you don't mind scar tissue on your toes," he murmured, bending his cheek in impulsive caress. He wished that he were nineteen again and could still dream. Twenty-seven seemed so aged and battered and cynical. And dreams can become nightmares.

They were near the door.

"Champagne tastes like vinegar if it's too cold," she replied. "My mouth is puckery and tastes like swill. I hope it's the blank champagne. Maybe I'm scared."

They dropped pretense and bolted for the door.

In the alley, they huddled among rubbish and garbage cans because the shadows lay thicker there.

The danger was real and ugly and murderous. Three thugs came boiling through the alley door almost on their heels. They lay in the stinking refuse, not daring to breathe. Brawny, muscular men with faces that shone brutally in the blazing, reflected Earthlight scurried back and forth, trying locked doors and making a hurried expedition to scout out the street. Passersby were buttonholed and roughly questioned. No one knew anything to tell.

One hatchetman came back to report.

Big Ed's voice could be heard in shrill tirade of fury.

"You fools. Don't let them get away. I'll wring the ears off the lot of you if they get to the spaceport. He was there; he was the one who spotted us. He can identify my ship. Now get out and find them. I'll pay a thousand viktals Martian to the man who brings me either one. Kill the girl if you have to, but bring him back alive. I want his ears, and he knows where the stuff is. Now get out of here!"

More dark figures spurted from the dark doorway. Darbor gave involuntary shudder as they swept past in a flurry of heavy-beating footsteps. Denver held her tightly, hand over her mouth. She bit his hand and he repressed a squeal of pain. She made no outcry and the pounding footsteps faded into distance.

Big Ed Caltis went inside, loudly planning to call the watch-detail at the spaceport. His word was law in Crystal City.

"Can we beat them to the ship?" Denver asked.

"We can try," Darbor replied....

The spaceport was a blaze of light. Tod Denver expertly picked the gatelock. The watchman came out of his shack, picking his teeth. He looked sleepy, but grinned appreciatively at Darbor.

"Hi, Tod! You sure get around. Man just called about you. Sounded mad. What's up?"

"Plenty. What did you tell him?"

The watchman went on picking his teeth. "Nothing. He don't pay my wages. Want your ship? Last one in the line-up. Watch yourself. I haven't looked at it, but there've been funny noises tonight. Maybe you've got company."

"Maybe I have. Lend me your gun, Ike?"

"Sure, I've eaten. I'm going back to sleep. If you don't need the gun, leave it on the tool-locker. If you do, I want my name in the papers. They'll misspell it, but the old lady will get a kick. So long. Good luck. If it's a boy, Ike's a good, old-fashioned name."

Tod Denver and Darbor ran the length of the illuminated hangar to the take-off pits at the far end. His space sled was the last in line. That would help for a quick blast-off.

Darbor was panting, ready to drop from exhaustion. But she dragged gamely on. Gun ready, he reached up to the airlock flap.

Inside the ship was sudden commotion. A scream was cut off sharply. Scurried movement became bedlam. Uproar ceased as if a knife had cut through a ribbon of sound.

Denver flung open the flap and scrambled up and through the valve to the interior.

Two of Big Ed's trigger men lay on the floor. One had just connected with a high-voltage charge from Charley. The other had quietly fainted. Denver dumped them outside, helped Darbor up and closed the ship for take-off. He switched off cabin lights.

He wasted no time in discussion until the ship was airborne and had nosed through the big dome-valves into the airless Lunar sky.

A fat hunk of Earth looked like a blueberry chiffon pie, but was brighter. It cast crazy shadows on the terrain unreeling below.

Darbor sat beside him. She felt dazed, and wondered briefly what had happened to her.

Less than an hour before she had entered the *Pot o' Stars* with nothing on her mind but assessing the clients and the possible receipts for the day. Too much had happened and too rapidly. She could not assimilate details.

Something launched itself through darkness at her. It snuggled tightly to shoulder and neck and made chuckling sounds. Stiff fur nuzzled her skin. There was a vague prickling of hot needles, but it was disturbing rather than painful. She screamed.

"Shut up!" said Denver, laughing. "It's just Charley. But don't excite him or you'll regret it."

From the darkness came a confused burble of sounds as Charley explored and bestowed his affections upon a new friend still too startled to appreciate the gesture. Darbor tried vainly to fend off the lavish demonstrations.

Denver gunned the space sled viciously, and felt the push of acceleration against his body. He headed for a distant mountain range.

"Just Charley, my pet moondog," he explained.

"What in Luna is that?"

"You'll find out. He loves everybody. Me, I'm more discriminating, but I can be had. My father warned me about women like you."

"How would he know?" Darbor asked bitterly. "What did he say about women like me?"

"It's exciting while it lasts, and it lasts as long as your money holds out. It's wonderful if you can afford it. But Charley's harmless. He's like me, he just wants to be loved. Go on. Pet him."

"All males are alike," Darbor grumbled. Obediently, she ran fingers over the soft, wirelike pseudo-fur. The fingers tingled as if weak charges of electricity surged through them.

"Does it—er, Charley ever blow a fuse?" she asked. "I'd like to have met your father. He sounds like a man who had a lot of experience with women. The wrong women. By the way, where are we going?"

Tod Denver had debated the point with himself. "To the scene of the crime," he said. "It's not good, and they may look for us there. But we can hole up for a few days till the hunt dies down. It might be the last place Big Ed would expect to find us. Later, unless we find something in the Martian workings, we'll head for the far places. Okay?"

Darbor shrugged. "I suppose. But then what. I don't imagine you'll be a chivalrous jackass and want to marry me?"

The space sled drew a thin line of silver fire through darkness as he debated that point.

"Now that I'm sober, I'll think about it. Give me time. They say a man can get used to to anything."

A ghostly choking sounded from the seat beside him. He wondered if Charley had blown something.

"Do they say what girls have to get used to?" she asked, her voice oddly tangled.

Tod Denver tempered the wind to the shorn lamb. "We'll see how the workings pan out. I'd want my money to last."

What Darbor replied should be written on asbestos.

Their idyl at the mines lasted exactly twenty-seven hours. Denver showed Darbor around, explained some of the technicalities of moon-mining to her. The girl misused some precious water to try washing the alley-filth from her clothes. Her experiment was not a success and the diaphanous wisps of moonsilver dissolved. She stood in the wrapped blanket and was too tired and depressed even to cry.

"I guess it wasn't practical," she decided ruefully. "It did bunch up in the weirdest places in your spare spacesuit. Have you any old rag I could borrow?"

Denver found cause for unsafe mirth in the spectacle of her blanketed disaster. "I'll see." He rooted about in a locker and found a worn pair of trousers which he threw to the girl. A sweater, too shrunken and misshapen for him to wear again, came next. Dismayed, she inspected the battered loot; then was inspired to quick alterations. Pant-legs cut off well above the baggy knees made passable shorts; the sweater bulged a trifle at the shoulders, it fit adequately elsewhere—and something more than adequately.

Charley fled her vicinity in extremes of voluble embarrassment as she changed and zipped up the substitute garments.

"Nice legs," Denver observed, which was an understatement.

"Watch out you don't skin those precious knees again," she warned darkly.

Time is completely arbitrary on the Moon as far as Earth people are concerned. One gets used to prolonged light and dark periods. Earth poked above the horizon, bathing the heights of the range with intense silver-blue light. But moonshadows lay heavily in the hollows and the deep gorges were still pools of intense gloom. Clocks are set to the meaningless twenty-four hour divisions of day and night on Earth, which have nothing to do with two-week days and nights on Luna. After sunset, with Earthlight still strong and pure and deceptively warm-looking, the landscapes become a barren, haunted wasteland.

Time itself seems unreal.

Time passed swiftly. The idyl was brief. For twenty-seven Earth-hours after their landing at the mines came company...!

An approaching ship painted a quick-dying trail of fire upon the black vault of sky. It swooped suddenly from nowhere, and the trapped fugitives debated flight or useless defense.

Alone, Denver would have stayed and fought, however uneven and hopeless the battle. But he found the girl a mental block to all thoughts of open, pitched battle on the shadowy, moonsilvered slopes. He might surprise the pursuers and flush them by some type of ambush. But they would be too many for him, and his feeble try would end either in death or capture.

Neither alternative appealed to him. With Darbor, he had suddenly found himself possessed of new tenacity toward life, and he had desperate, painful desire to live for her.

He chose flight.

IV

The ship dropped short-lived rocket landing flares, circled and came in for a fast landing on the cleared strip of brittle-crust ash.

Some distance from the hastily-patched and now hastily abandoned mine buildings, Tod Denver and Darbor paused and shot hasty, fearful glances toward the landed ship. By Earthlight, they could distinguish its lines, though not the color. It was a drab shadow now against the vivid grayness of slopes. Figures tiny from distance emerged from it and scattered across the flat and up into the clustered buildings. A few stragglers went over to explore and investigate Denver's space sled in the unlikely possibility that he and the girl had trusted to its meager and dubious protection.

Besides the ship, the hunters would find evidence of recent occupation in the living quarters, from which Denver had removed the frozen corpse before permitting Darbor to assist with the crude remodeling which he had undertaken. Afterward, when the mine buildings and exposed

shafts had been turned out on futile quest for the fugitives, the search would spread. Tracks should be simple enough to follow, once located. Denver had anticipated this potential clue to the pursuit, and had kept their walking to the bare, rocky heights of the spur as long as possible.

He hoped to be able to locate the old Martian working, but the chance was slim. Calculating the shadow-apex of Mitre Peak at 2017 ET was complicated by several unknown quantities. Which peak was Mitre Peak? Was that shadow-apex Earth-shadow or Sun-shadow? And had he started out in the correct direction to find the line of deep-cut arrow markings at all?

The first intangible resolved itself. One mitre-shaped peak stood out alone and definite above the sharply defined silhouettes of the mountains. It must be Mitre Peak. It had to be.

The next question was the light source casting the shadow-apex. There were two possible answers. It was possible to estimate the approximate location of either sun or Earth at a given time, but calculations involved in working out too many possibilities on different Earth-days of the Lunar-day made the Earth's shadow-casting the likeliest prospect. Neither location was particularly exact, and probably Laird Martin had expected his directions to be gone into under less harrowing circumstances than those in which Denver now found himself. With time for trial and error one could eventually locate the place.

But Denver was hurried. He trod upon one of the markings while he still sought the elusive shadow apex.

After that, it was a grim race to follow the markings to the old mines, and to get under cover behind defensible barricades in time to repel invasion.

They played a nerve-wracking game of hare and hounds in tricky floods of Earthlight, upon slopes and spills of broken rock, amid a goblin's garden of towering jagged spires. It was tense work over the bad going, and the light was both distorted and insufficient. In shadow, they groped blindly from arrow to arrow. In the patches of Earthglare, they fled at awkward, desperate speed.

Life and death were the stakes. Life, or a fighting chance to defend life, possible wealth from the ancient workings, made a glittering goal ahead. And ever the gray hounds snapped at their heels, with death in some ugly guise the penalty for losing the game.

Charley was ecstatic. He gamboled and capered, he zoomed and zigzagged, he essayed quick, climbing spirals and almost came to grief among the tangled pinnacles on the ridge of the hogback. He swooped downward again in a series of shallow, easy glides and began the performance all over again. It was a game for him, too. But a game in which he tried only to astound himself, with swift, dizzy miracles of magnetic movement.

Charley enjoyed himself hugely. He was with the two people he liked most. He was having a spirited game among interlaced shadows and sudden, substantial obstacles of rock. He nuzzled the fleeing pair playfully, and followed them after his own lazy and intricate and incredibly whimsical fashion. His private mode of locomotion was not bounded by the possibilities involved in feet and tiring legs. He scampered and had fun.

It was not fun for Tod Denver and Darbor. The girl's strength was failing. She lagged, and Denver slowed his pace to support her tottering progress.

Without warning, the mine entrance loomed before them. It was old and crumbly with a thermal erosion resembling decay.

It was high and narrow and forbiddingly dark.

Tod Denver had brought portable radilumes, which were needed at once. Inside the portals was no light at all. Thick, tangible dark blocked the passage. It swallowed light.

Just inside, the mine gallery was too wide for easy defense. Further back, there was a narrowing.

Denver seized on the possibilities for barricading and set to work, despite numbed and weary muscles. Walking on the Moon is tiring for muscles acquired on worlds of greater gravity. He was near exhaustion, but the stimulus of fear is strong. He worked like a maniac, hauling materials for blockade, carrying the smaller ingredients and rolling or dragging the heavier. A brief interval of rest brought Darbor to his side. She worked with him and helped with the heavier items. Fortunately, the faint gravity eased their task, speeded it.

For pursuit had not lagged. Their trail had been found and followed.

From behind his barricade, Denver picked off the first two hired thugs of the advance guard as they toiled upward, too eagerly impatient for caution. A network of hastily-aimed beams of heat licked up from several angles of the slope, but none touched the barricade. The slope, which flattened just outside the entrance made exact shooting difficult, made a direct hit on the barricade almost impossible, unless one stood practically inside the carved entrance-way. Denver inched to the door and fired.

The battle was tedious, involved, but a stalemate. Lying on his belly, Denver wormed as close as he dared to the break of slope outside the door. There, he fired snap shots at everything that

moved on the slopes. Everything that moved on the slopes made a point of returning the gesture. Some shots came from places he had seen no movement.

It went on for a long time. It was pointless, wanton waste of heat-blaster ammunition. But it satisfied some primal urge in the human male without solving anything.

Until Darbor joined him, Denver did not waste thought upon the futilities of the situation. Her presence terrified him, and he urged her back inside. She was stubborn, but complied when he dragged her back with him.

"Now stay inside, you fool," she muttered, her voice barely a whisper in his communication amplifier.

"You stay inside," he commanded with rough tenderness. They both stayed inside, crouched together behind the barricade.

"I think I got three of them," he told her. "There seemed to be eight at first. Some went back to the ship. For more men or supplies, I don't know. I don't like this."

"Relax," she suggested. "You've done all you can."

"I guess it's back to your gilded cage for you, baby," he said. "My money didn't last."

"Sometimes you behave like a mad dog," she observed. "I'm not sure I like you. You enjoyed that butchery out there. You hated to come inside. What did it prove? There are too many of them. They'll kill us, eventually. Or starve us out. Have you any bright ideas?"

Denver was silent. None of his ideas were very bright. He was at the end of his rope. He had tied a knot in it and hung on. But the rope seemed very short and very insecure.

"Hang on, I guess. Just hang on and wait. They may try a rush. If they do I'll bathe the entrance in a full load from my blaster. If they don't rush, we sit it out. Sit and wait for a miracle. It won't happen but we can hope."

Darbor tried to hug the darkness around her. She was a Martian, tough-minded she hoped. It would be nasty, either way. But death was not pleasant. She must try to be strong and face whatever came. She shrugged and resigned herself.

"When the time comes I'll try to think of something touching and significant to say," she promised.

"You hold the fort," Denver told her. "And don't hesitate to shoot if you have to. There's a chance to wipe them out if they try to force in all at once. They won't, but—"

"Where are you going? For a walk?"

"Have to see a man about a dog. There may be a back entrance. I doubt it, since Martian workings on the Moon were never very deep. But I'd like a look at the jackpot. Do you mind?"

Darbor sighed. "Not if you hurry back."

Deep inside the long gallery was a huge, vaulted chamber. Here, Denver found what he sought. There was no back entrance. The mine was a trap that had closed on him and Darbor.

Old Martian workings, yes. But whatever the Martians had sought and delved from the mooncrust was gone. Layered veins had petered out, were exhausted, empty. Some glittering, crystalline smears remained in the crevices but the crystals were dull and life-less. Denver bent close, sensed familiarity. The substance was not unknown. He wetted a finger and probed with it, rubbed again and tested for taste.

The taste was sharp and bitter. As bitter as his disappointment. It was all a grim joke. Valuable enough once to be used as money in the old days on earth. But hardly valuable enough, then, even in real quantity, to be worth the six lives it had cost up to now—counting his and Darbor's as already lost. First, Laird Martin, with his last tragic thoughts of a tiny girl on Earth, now orphaned. Then the three men down the slope, hideous in their bulged and congealing death. Himself and Darbor next on the list, with not much time to go. All for a few crystals of—Salt!

The end was as viciously ironic as the means had been brutal, but greed is an ugly force. It takes no heed of men and their brief, futile dreams.

Denver shrugged and rejoined his small garrison. The girl, in spite of the comradeship of shared danger, was as greedy as the others outside. Instinctively, Denver knew that, and he found the understanding in himself to pity her.

"Are they still out there?" he asked needlessly.

Darbor nodded. "What did you find?"

He debated telling her the truth. But why add the bitterness to the little left of her life? Let her dream. She would probably die without ever finding out that she had thrown herself away following a mirage. Let her dream and die happy.

"Enough," he answered roughly. "But does it matter?"

Her eyes rewarded his deceit, but the light was too poor for him to see them. It was easy enough to imagine stars in them, and even a man without illusions can still dream.

"Maybe it will matter," she replied. "We can hope for a miracle. It will make all the difference for us if the miracle happens."

Denver laughed. "Then the money will make a difference if we live through this? You mean you'll stay with me?"

Darbor answered too quickly. "Of course." Then she hesitated, as if something of his distaste echoed within her. She went on, her voice strange. "Sure, I'm mercenary. I've been broke in Venusport, and again here on Luna. It's no fun. Poverty is not all the noble things the copybooks say. It's undignified and degrading. You want to stop washing after a while, because it doesn't seem to matter. Yes, I want money. Am I different from other people?"

Denver laughed harshly. "No. I just thought for a few minutes that you were. I hoped I was at the head of your list. But let's not quarrel. We're friends in a jam together. No miracle is going to happen. It's stupid to fight over a salt mine, empty at that, when we're going to die. I'm like you; I wanted a miracle to happen, but mine didn't concern money. We both got what we asked for, that's all. If you bend over far enough somebody will kick you in the pants. I'm going out, Darbor. Pray for me."

The blankness of her face-plate turned toward him. A glitter, dark and opaque, was all he could make out.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I know it was the wrong answer. But don't be a fool. He'll kill you, and I'm afraid to be in the dark, alone."

"I'll leave Charley with you."

Denver broke the girl's clasp on his arm and edged slow to the doorway. He shouted.

"Hey, Caltis!"

There was stunning silence. Then a far, muted crackle in his earphones.

A voice answered, "Yes? I'm here. What's on your mind, funny boy?"

"A parley."

"Nuts, but come on out. I'll talk."

"You come up," Denver argued. "I don't trust you."

Big Ed Caltis considered the proposition. "How do I know you won't try to nail me for hostage?"

"You don't. But I'm not a fool. What good would it do even if I killed you. Your men are down there. They'd still want the mine. I don't think they care enough about you to deal. They'd kill us anyhow. Bring your gun if it makes you feel more like a man."

After an interval Big Ed Caltis appeared in the doorway. As he entered Denver retreated into the shadow-zone until he stood close beside the rude barricade.

"I'll bargain with you, Caltis. You can have the workings. Let us go free, with an hour's start in my space sled. I'll sign over any share we could claim and agree never to bother you again. It's no use to a corpse. Just let us go."

Caltis gave a short laugh. In the earphones, it sounded nasty.

"No deal, Denver. I hate your guts. And I want Darbor. I've got both of you where I want you, sewed up. We can sit here and wait. We've plenty of air, food and water. You'll run short. I want you to come out, crawling. She can watch you die, slowly, because I'm not giving you any air, water or food. Then I want her to squirm a while before I kick her back into the sewers. You can't bargain. I have her, you, the workings. I've got what I want."

Hate and anger strangled Denver's reply. Caltis skulked back out of sight. Without moving, Denver hailed him again.

"Okay, puttyface!" Denver screamed. "You asked for it. I'm coming out. Stand clear and order off your thugs or I'll squeeze you till your guts squirt out your nose like toothpaste from a tube. I'll see how much man there is left in you. It'll be all over the slope when I'm through."

His taunt drew fire as he had hoped it would. He dodged quickly behind the shelter of the barricade. A beam of dazzling fire penciled the rock wall. It crackled, spread, flaring to incredible heat and light. It exploded, deluging the gallery with glare and spattering rock.

After the glare, darkness seemed thick enough to slice.

In that second of stunned reaction blindness, Denver was leaping the barricade and sprinting toward the entrance. Caltis came to meet him. Both fired at once. Both missed. The random beams flicked at the rough, timbered walls and lashed out with thunderous violence.

Locked together, the men pitched back and forth. They rocked and swayed, muscles straining. It

was deadlock again. Denver was youth and fury. Caltis had experience and the training of a fighter. It was savage, lawless, the sculptured stance of embattled champions. Almost motionless, as forces canceled out. The battle was equal.

V

While they tangled, both blocked, Darbor slipped past them and stood outside the entrance. She was exposed, a clear target. But the men below dared not fire until they knew where Caltis was, what had happened to him. She held the enemy at bay. Gun ready, Darbor faced down the slopes. It was not necessary to pull trigger. Not for the moment. She waited and hoped and dared someone to move.

Neither man gave first. It was the weakened timbering that supported the gallery roof. Loose stones rained down. Dry, cold and brittle wood sagged under strain. Both wild shots had taken shattering effect. Timbers yielded, slowly at first, then faster. Showering of loose stones became a steady stream. A minor avalanche.

Darbor heard the sound or caught some vibration through her helmet microphones. The men were too involved to notice. Caltis heard her. He got a cruel nosehold, twisted Denver's nose like an instrument dial. Denver screamed, released his grip. In the scramble, his foot slipped. Darbor cried out shrill warning.

Breaking free, Caltis bolted in panic toward the entrance.

The fall of rock was soundless. It spilled down in increasing torrents. Larger sections of ceiling were giving away.

Above the prostrate Denver hovered a poised phantom of eerie light. Charley, bored, had gone to sleep. Awakening, he found a game still going on. A fine new game. It was fascinating. He wanted to join the fun. Like an angle of reflected light cast by a turning mirror, he darted.

The running figure aroused his curiosity. Charley streamed through the collapsing gallery. He caught up with Caltis just inside the entrance. With a burble of insane, twittering glee, he went into action. It was all in the spirit of things. Just another delightful game.

Like a thunderbolt he hurtled upon Caltis, tangled with him. It was absurd, insane. Man and moon dog went down together in a silly sprawl. Sparks flew, became a confused tesseract of luminous motion. Radiance blazed up and danced and flickered and no exact definition of the intertwined bodies was possible. Glowing lines wove fat webs of living color. It was too swift, too involved for any sane perception.

A wild, sprawling of legs, arms and body encircled and became part of the intricacies of speeding, impossible light.

It was a mess.

Some element or combination of forces in Charley, inspired by excitement and sheer delight, made unfortunate contact with ground currents of vagrant electricity. Electricity ceased to be invisible. It became sizzling, immense flash, in which many complexities made part of a simple whole. It was spectacular but brief. It was a flaming vortex of interlocked spirals of light and color and naked force. It was fireworks.

And it was the end of Big Ed Caltis. He fried, and hot grease spattered about him. He sizzled like a bug on a hot stove.

When Denver reached the entrance, man and moon dog lay in a curious huddle of interrupted action. It was over.

Charley was tired, but he still lived and functioned after his curious fashion. For the moment, he had lost interest in further fun and games. He lay quietly in a corner of rough rock and tried to rebuild his scattered and short-circuited energies. He pulsed and crackled and sound poured in floods of muffled static from the earphones in Denver's helmet.

But this was no time for social amenities. Big Ed Caltis was dead, very dead. But the others down the slope were still alive.

Like avenging angels, Denver and Darbor charged together down the slope. Besiegers scattered and fled in panic as twinned beams of dreadful light and heat scourged their hiding places. They fled through the grotesque shadow patterns of Lunar night. They fled back, some of them, to the black ship which had brought them. And there, they ran straight into the waiting arms of a detail from Space Patrol headquarters.

Today Denver's friend, the watchman, had talked. From spaceport he had called the Space Patrol and talked where it would do some good. A bit late to be of much use, help had arrived. It took the Space Patrol squads a half hour to round up the scattered survivors.

Darbor went back to the mine-buildings with the Space Patrol lieutenant as escort. Denver

trudged wearily back up the slope to recover Charley.

The moondog was in a bad way. He bulged badly amidstships and seemed greatly disturbed, not to say temperamental. With tenderness and gentle care, Denver cradled the damaged Charley in his arms and made his way back to the living shack at the mine. Space Cops were just hustling in the last of the prisoners and making ready to return to civilization. Denver thanked them, but with brief curtness, for Charley's condition worried him. He went inside and tried to make his pet comfortable, wondering where one would look on the Moon for a veterinary competent to treat a moondog.

Darbor found him crouched over Charley's impoverished couch upon the metal table.

"I want to say goodbye," she told him. "I'm sorry about Charley. The lieutenant says I can go back with them. So it's back to the bright lights for me."

"Good luck," Denver said shortly, tearing his attention from Charley's flickering gyrations. "I hope you find a man with a big fat bankbook."

"So do I," Darbor admitted. "I could use a new wardrobe. I wish it could have been you. If things had worked out—"

"Forget it," Denver snapped. "There'd have been Martin's kid. She'd have got half anyhow. You wouldn't have liked that."

Darbor essayed a grin. "You know, I've been thinking. Maybe the old guy was my father. It could be. I never knew who my old man was, and I did go to school on Earth. Reform school."

Denver regarded her cynically. "Couldn't be. I'm willing to believe you don't know who your father was. Some women should keep books. But that kid's not Martian."

Darbor shrugged. "Doesn't matter. So long, kid. If you make a big strike, look me up."

The Space Patrol lieutenant was waiting for her. She linked arms with him, and vanished toward the ship. Denver went back to Charley. Intently he studied the weird creature, wondering what to do.

A timid knock startled him. For a moment, wild hope dawned. Maybe Darbor—

But it wasn't Darbor. A strange girl stood in the doorway. She pushed open the inner flap of the airlock and stepped from the valve.

"I was looking around," she explained. "I bummed my way out with the Patrol Ship. Do you mind?"

Denver scowled at her. "Should I?"

The girl tried a smile on him but she looked ill-at-ease. "You look like one of the local boy scouts," she said. "How about helping a lady in distress?"

"I make a hobby of it," he snarled. "I don't even care if they're ladies. But I'm fresh out of romance and slightly soured. And I'm worried about the one friend who's dumb enough to stick by me. You picked a bad time to ask. What do you want?"

The girl smiled shyly. "All right, so you don't look like a boy scout. But I'm still a girl in a jam. I'm tired and broke and hungry. All I want is a sandwich, and maybe a lift to the next town. I should have gone back with the Patrol ship but I guess they forgot me. I thought maybe, if you're going somewhere that's civilized, I could bum a lift. What's wrong with your friend?"

Denver indicated Charley. "Frankly, I don't know." He balked at trying to explain again just what a moondog was. "But who are you? What did you want here?"

The girl stared at him. "Didn't you know? I'm Soleil. My father owned this mine. He thought he'd found something, and sent for me to share it. It took the last of our money to get me here, but I wanted to come. We hadn't seen each other for twenty years. Now he's dead, and I'm broke, alone and scared. I need to get to some place where I can dream up an eating job."

"You're Martin's kid?"

Soleil nodded, absently, looking at Charley. The moondog gave a strange, electronic whimper. There was an odd expression on the girl's face. A flash of inspiration seemed to enlighten her.

"I'll take care of this," she said softly. "You wait outside."

Somewhat later, after blinding displays of erratic lightnings had released a splendor of fantastic color through the view-ports to reflect staggeringly from the mountain walls, a tired girl called out to Tod Denver.

She met him inside the airlock. In her arms snuggled a pile of writhing radiance, like glowing worms. Moonpups. A whole litter of moonpups.

"They're cute," Soleil commented, "but I've never seen anything quite like this before."

"It must have been a delayed fuse," said Denver, wilting. "Here we go again."

He fainted....

A wakening was painful to Denver. He remembered nightmare, and the latter part of his memory dealt with moonpups. Swarms of moonpups. As if Charley hadn't been enough. He was not sure that he wanted to open his eyes.

He thought he heard the outer flap of the airlock open, then someone pounding on the inner door. Habit of curiosity conquered, and his eyelids blinked. He looked up to find a strange man beside his bed. The man was fat, fussy, pompous. But he looked prosperous, and seemed excited.

Denver glanced warily about the room. After all, he had been strained. Perhaps it was all part of delirium. No sign of the girl either. Could he have imagined her, too? He sighed and remembered Darbor.

"Tod Denver?" asked the fat, prosperous man. "I got your name from a Sergeant of Security Police in Crystal City. He says you own a moondog. Is that true?"

Denver nodded painfully. "I'm afraid it is. What's the charge?"

The stranger seemed puzzled, amused. "This may seem odd to you, but I'm in the market for moondogs. Scientific laboratories all over the system want them, and are paying top prices. The most unusual and interesting life form in existence. But moondogs are scarce. Would you consider parting with yours? I can assure you he'll receive kind treatment and good care. They're too valuable for anything else."

Denver almost blanked out again. It was too much like the more harrowing part of his dreams. He blinked his eyes, but the man was still there.

"One of us is crazy," he mused aloud. "Maybe both of us. I can't sell Charley. I'd miss him too much."

Suddenly, as it happens in dreams, Soleil Martin stood beside him. Her arms were empty, but she stood there, smiling.

"You wouldn't have to sell Charley," she said, giving Denver a curious, thrusting glance. "Had you forgotten that you're now a father, or foster-grandfather, or something. You have moonpups, in quantity. I had to let you lie there while I put the little darlings to bed. And it's not Charley any more, please. Charlotte. It has to be Charlotte."

Denver paled and groaned. He turned hopefully to the fat stranger.

"Say, mister, how many moonpups can you use?"

"All of them, if you'll sell." The man whipped out a signed, blank check, and quickly filled in astronomical figures. Denver looked at it, whistled, then doubted first his sanity, then the check.

"Take them," Denver murmured. "Take them, quick, before you change your mind, or all this evaporates in dream."

A moondog has no nerves. Charley—or Charlotte—had none, but the brood of moonpups had already begun to get on whatever passed for nerves in his electronic make-up. He was glad and relieved to be rid of his numerous progeny. He, or she, showed passionate and embarrassing affection for Denver, and even generously included Soleil Martin in the display.

Denver stared at her suddenly while she helped the commission agent round up his radiant loot and make ready for the return to town. It was as if he were seeing her for the first time. She was pretty. Not beautiful, of course. Just pretty. And nice. He remembered that he was carrying her picture in his pocket.

She was even an Earth-girl. They were almost as scarce in the moon colonies as moondogs.

"Look here," he said. "I have money now. I was going out prospecting but it can wait. I kind of inherited you from your father, you know. Do you need dough or something?"

Soleil laughed. "I need everything. But don't bother. I haven't any claim on you. And I can ride back to the city with Mr. Potts. He looks like a better bet. He can write such big checks, too."

Denver made a face of disgust. "All women are alike," he muttered savagely. "Go on, then—"

Soleil frowned. "Don't say it. Don't even think it. I'm not going anywhere. Not till you go. I just wanted you to ask me nice. I'm staying. I'll go prospecting with you. I like that. Dad made me study minerals and mining. I can be a real help. With that big check, we can get a real outfit."

Denver stopped dreaming. "But you don't know what it's like out there. Just empty miles of loneliness and heat and desert and mountains of bare rock. Not even the minimum comforts. Nights last two Earth weeks. There'd just be you and me and Charlotte."

Soleil smiled fondly. "It listens good, and might be fun. I like Charlotte and you. I'm realistic and strong enough to be a genuine partner."

Tod Denver gasped. "You sure know what you want—Partner!" He grinned. "Now we'll have a married woman along. I was worried about wandering around, unprotected, with a female

moondog—"

Soleil laughed. "I think Charlotte needs a chaperone."

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MASTER OF THE MOONDOG ***

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