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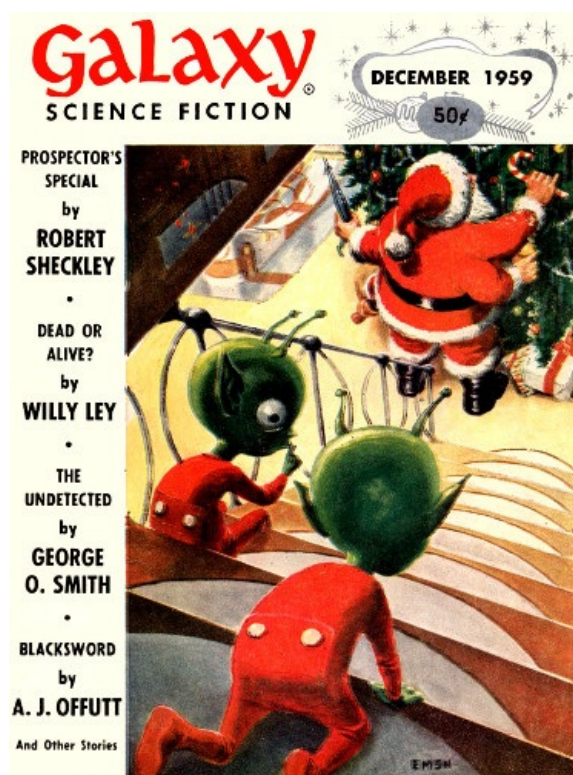
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK PROSPECTOR'S SPECIAL ***



PROSPECTOR'S SPECIAL

By ROBERT SHECKLEY

Illustrated by DILLON

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***Lost in the vast Scorpion Desert of Venus,
he needed all the courage a man could own—and
every bit of credit he could raise!***

The sandcar moved smoothly over the rolling dunes, its six fat wheels rising and falling like the ponderous rumps of tandem elephants. The hidden sun beat down from a dead-white sky, pouring heat into the canvas top, reflecting heat back from the parched sand.

"Stay awake," Morrison told himself, pulling the sandcar back to its compass course.

It was his twenty-first day on Venus's Scorpion Desert, his twenty-first day of fighting sleep while the sandcar rocked across the dunes, forging over humpbacked little waves. Night travel would have been easier, but there were too many steep ravines to avoid, too many house-sized boulders to dodge. Now he knew why men went into the desert in teams; one man drove while the other kept shaking him awake.

"But it's better alone," Morrison reminded himself. "Half the supplies and no accidental murders."

His head was beginning to droop; he snapped himself erect. In front of him, the landscape shimmered and danced through the polaroid windshield. The sandcar lurched and rocked with treacherous gentleness. Morrison rubbed his eyes and turned on the radio.

He was a big, sunburned, rangy young man with close-cropped black hair and gray eyes. He had come to Venus with a grubstake of twenty thousand dollars, to find his fortune in the Scorpion Desert as others had done before him. He had outfitted in Presto, the last town on the edge of the wilderness, and spent all but ten dollars on the sandcar and equipment.

In Presto, ten dollars just covered the cost of a drink in the town's only saloon. So Morrison ordered rye and water, drank with the miners and prospectors, and laughed at the oldtimers' yarns about the sandwolf packs and the squadrons of voracious birds that inhabited the interior desert. He knew all about sunblindness, heat-stroke and telephone breakdown. He was sure none of it would happen to him.

But now, after twenty-one days and eighteen hundred miles, he had learned respect for this waterless waste of sand and stone three times the area of the Sahara. You really *could* die here!

But you could also get rich, and that was what Morrison planned to do.

His radio hummed. At full volume, he could hear the faintest murmur of dance music from Venusborg. Then it faded and only the hum was left.

He turned off the radio and gripped the steering wheel tightly in both hands. He unclenched one hand and looked at his watch. Nine-fifteen in the morning. At ten-thirty he would stop and take a nap. A man had to have rest in this heat. But only a half-hour nap. Treasure lay somewhere ahead of him, and he wanted to find it before his supplies got much lower.

The precious outcroppings of goldenstone *had* to be up ahead! He'd been following traces for two days now. Maybe he would hit a real bonanza, as Kirk did in '89, or Edmonson and Arslar in '93. If so, he would do just what they did. He'd order up a Prospector's Special, and to hell with the cost.

The sandcar rolled along at an even thirty miles an hour, and Morrison tried to concentrate on the heat-blasted yellow-brown landscape. That sandstone patch over there was just the tawny color of Janie's hair.

After he struck it rich, he and Janie would get married, and he'd go back to Earth and buy an ocean farm. No more prospecting. Just one rich strike so he could buy his spread on the deep blue Atlantic. Maybe some people thought fish-herding was tame; it was good enough for him.

He could see it now, the mackerel herds drifting along and browsing at the plankton pens, himself and his trusty dolphin keeping an eye out for the silvery flash of a predatory barracuda or a steel-gray shark coming along behind the branching coral....

Morrison felt the sandcar lurch. He woke up, grabbed the steering wheel and turned it hard. During his moments of sleep, the vehicle had crept over the dune's crumbling edge. Sand and pebbles spun under the fat tires as the sandcar fought for traction. The car tilted perilously. The tires shrieked against the sand, gripped, and started to pull the vehicle back up the slope.

Then the whole face of the dune collapsed.

Morrison held onto the steering wheel as the sandcar flipped over on its side and rolled down the slope. Sand filled his mouth and eyes. He spat and held on while the car rolled over again and dropped into emptiness.

For seconds, he was in the air. The sandcar hit bottom squarely on its wheels. Morrison heard a double boom as the two rear tires blew out. Then his head hit the windshield.

When he recovered consciousness, the first thing he did was look at his watch. It read 10:35.

"Time for that nap," Morrison said to himself. "But I guess I'll survey the situation first."

He found that he was at the bottom of a shallow fault strewn with knife-edged pebbles. Two tires had blown on impact, his windshield was gone, and one of the doors was sprung. His equipment was strewn around, but appeared to be intact.

"Could have been worse," Morrison said.

He bent down to examine the tires more carefully.

"It *is* worse," he said.

The two blown tires were shredded beyond repair. There wasn't enough rubber left in them to make a child's balloon. He had used up his spares ten days back crossing Devil's Grill. Used them and discarded them. He couldn't go on without tires.

Morrison unpacked his telephone. He wiped dust from its black plastic face, then dialed Al's Garage in Presto. After a moment, the small video screen lighted up. He could see a man's long, mournful, grease-stained face.

"Al's Garage. Eddie speaking."

"Hi, Eddie. This is Tom Morrison. I bought that GM sandcar from you about a month ago. Remember?"

"Sure I remember you," Eddie said. "You're the guy doing a single into the Southwest Track. How's the bus holding out?"

"Fine. Great little car. Reason I called—"

"Hey," Eddie said, "what happened to your face?"

Morrison put his hand to his forehead and felt blood. "Nothing much," he said. "I went over a dune and blew out two tires."

He turned the telephone so that Eddie could see the tires.

"Unrepairable," said Eddie.

"I thought so. And I used up all my spares crossing Devil's Grill. Look, Eddie, I'd like you to 'port me a couple of tires. Retreads are fine. I can't move the sandcar without them."

"Sure," Eddie said, "except I haven't any retreads. I'll have to 'port you new ones at five hundred apiece. Plus four hundred dollars 'porting charges. Fourteen hundred dollars, Mr. Morrison."

"All right."

"Yes, sir. Now if you'll show me the cash, or a money order which you can send back with the receipt, I'll get moving on it."

"At the moment," Morrison said, "I haven't got a cent on me."

"Bank account?"

"Stripped clean."

"Bonds? Property? Anything you can convert into cash?"

"Nothing except this sandcar, which you sold me for eight thousand dollars. When I come back, I'll settle my bill with the sandcar."

"If you get back. Sorry, Mr. Morrison. No can do."

"What do you mean?" Morrison asked. "You know I'll pay for the tires."

"And you know the rules on Venus," Eddie said, his mournful face set in obstinate lines. "No credit! Cash and carry!"

"I can't run the sandcar without tires," Morrison said. "Are you going to strand me out here?"

"Who in hell is stranding you?" Eddie asked. "This sort of thing happens to prospectors every day. You know what you have to do now, Mr. Morrison. Call Public Utility and declare yourself a bankrupt. Sign over what's left of the sandcar, equipment, and anything you've found on the way. They'll get you out."

"I'm not turning back," Morrison said. "Look!" He held the telephone close to the ground. "You see the traces, Eddie? See those red and purple flecks? There's precious stuff near here!"

"Every prospector sees traces," Eddie said. "Damned desert is full of traces."

"These are rich," Morrison said. "These are leading straight to big stuff, a bonanza lode. Eddie, I know it's a lot to ask, but if you could stake me to a couple of tires—"

"I can't do it," Eddie said. "I just work here. I can't 'port you any tires, not unless you show me money first. Otherwise I get fired and probably jailed. You know the law."

"Cash and carry," Morrison said bleakly.

"Right. Be smart and turn back now. Maybe you can try again some other time."

"I spent twelve years getting this stake together," Morrison said. "I'm not going back."

He turned off the telephone and tried to think. Was there anyone else on Venus he could call? Only Max Krandall, his jewel broker. But Max couldn't raise fourteen hundred dollars in that crummy two-by-four office near Venusborg's jewel market. Max could barely scrape up his own rent, much less take care of stranded prospectors.

"I can't ask Max for help," Morrison decided. "Not until I've found goldenstone. The real stuff, not just traces. So that leaves it up to me."

He opened the back of the sandcar and began to unload, piling his equipment on the sand. He would have to choose carefully; anything he took would have to be carried on his back.

The telephone had to go with him, and his lightweight testing kit. Food concentrates, revolver, compass. And nothing else but water, all the water he could carry. The rest of the stuff would have to stay behind.

By nightfall, Morrison was ready. He looked regretfully at the twenty cans of water he was leaving. In the desert, water was a man's most precious possession, second only to his telephone. But it couldn't be helped. After drinking his fill, he hoisted his pack and set a southwest course into the desert.

For three days he trekked to the southwest; then on the fourth day he veered to due south, following an increasingly rich trace. The sun, eternally hidden, beat down on him, and the dead-white sky was like a roof of heated iron over his head. Morrison followed the traces, and something followed him.

On the sixth day, he sensed movement just out of the range of his vision. On the seventh day, he saw what was trailing him.

Venus's own brand of wolf, small, lean, with a yellow coat and long, grinning jaws, it was one of the few mammals that made its home in the Scorpion Desert. As Morrison watched, two more sandwolves appeared beside it.

He loosened the revolver in its holster. The wolves made no attempt to come closer. They had plenty of time.

Morrison kept on going, wishing he had brought a rifle with him. But that would have meant eight pounds more, which meant eight pounds less water.

As he was pitching camp at dusk the eighth day, he heard a crackling sound. He whirled around and located its source, about ten feet to his left and above his head. A little vortex had appeared, a tiny mouth in the air like a whirlpool in the sea. It spun, making the characteristic crackling sounds of 'porting.

"Now who could be 'porting anything to me?" Morrison asked, waiting while the whirlpool slowly widened.

Solidoporting from a base projector to a field target was a standard means of moving goods across the vast distances of Venus. Any inanimate object could be 'ported; animate beings couldn't because the process involved certain minor but distressing molecular changes in protoplasm. A few people had found this out the hard way when 'porting was first introduced.

Morrison waited. The aerial whirlpool became a mouth three feet in diameter. From the mouth stepped a chrome-plated robot carrying a large sack.

"Oh, it's you," Morrison said.

"Yes, sir," the robot said, now completely clear of the field. "Williams 4 at your service with the Venus Mail."

It was a robot of medium height, thin-shanked and flat-footed, humanoid in appearance, amiable in disposition. For twenty-three years it had been Venus's entire postal service—sorter, deliverer, and dead storage. It had been built to last, and for twenty-three years the mails had always come through.

"Here we are, Mr. Morrison," Williams 4 said. "Only twice-a-month mail call in the desert, I'm sorry to say, but it comes promptly and that's a blessing. This is for you. And this. I think there's one more. Sandcar broke down, eh?"



"It sure did," Morrison said, taking his letters.

Williams 4 went on rummaging through its bag. Although it was a superbly efficient postman, the old robot was known as the worst gossip on three planets.

"There's one more in here somewhere," Williams 4 said. "Too bad about the sandcar. They just don't build 'em like they did in my youth. Take my advice, young man. Turn back if you still have the chance."

Morrison shook his head.

"Foolish, downright foolish," the old robot said. "Pity you don't have my perspective. Too many's the time I've come across you boys lying in the sand in the dried-out sack of your skin, or with your bones gnawed to splinters by the sandwolves and the filthy black kites. Twenty-three years I've been delivering mail to fine-looking young men like you, and each one thinking he's unique and different."

The robot's eyecells became distant with memory. "But they *aren't* different," Williams 4 said. "They're as alike as robots off the assembly line—especially after the wolves get through with them. And then I have to send their letters and personal effects back to their loved ones on Earth."

"I know," Morrison said. "But some get through, don't they?"

"Sure they do," the robot said. "I've seen men make one, two, three fortunes. And then die on the sands trying to make a fourth."

"Not me," Morrison said. "I just want one. Then I'm going to buy me an undersea farm on Earth."

The robot shuddered. "I have a dread of salt water. But to each his own. Good luck, young man."

The robot looked Morrison over carefully—probably to see what he had in the way of personal effects—then climbed back into the aerial whirlpool. In a moment, it was gone. In another moment, the whirlpool had vanished.

Morrison sat down to read his mail. The first letter was from his jewel broker, Max Krandall. It told about the depression that had hit Venusborg, and hinted that Krandall might have to go into bankruptcy if some of his prospectors didn't strike something good.

The second letter was a statement from the Venus Telephone Company. Morrison owed two hundred and ten dollars and eight cents for two months' telephone service. Unless he remitted this sum at once, his telephone was liable to be turned off.

The last letter, all the way from Earth, was from Janie. It was filled with news about his cousins, aunts and uncles. She told him about the Atlantic farm sites she had looked over, and the wonderful little place she had found near Martinique in the Caribbean. She begged him to give up prospecting if it looked dangerous; they could find another way of financing the farm. She sent all her love and wished him a happy birthday in advance.

"Birthday?" Morrison asked himself. "Let's see, today is July twenty-third. No, it's the twenty-fourth, and my birthday's August first. Thanks for remembering, Janie."

That night he dreamed of Earth and the blue expanse of the Atlantic Ocean. But toward dawn, when the heat of Venus became insistent, he found he was dreaming of mile upon mile of goldenstone, of grinning sandwolves, and of the Prospector's Special.

Rock gave way to sand as Morrison plowed his way across the bottom of a long-vanished lake. Then it was rock again, twisted and tortured into a thousand gaunt shapes. Reds, yellows and browns swam in front of his eyes. In all that desert, there wasn't one patch of green.

He continued his trek into the tumbled stone mazes of the interior desert, and the wolves trekked with him, keeping pace far out on either flank.

Morrison ignored them. He had enough on his mind just to negotiate the sheer cliffs and the fields of broken stone that blocked his way to the south.

By the eleventh day after leaving the sandcar, the traces were almost rich enough for panning. The sandwolves were tracking him still, and his water was almost gone. Another day's march would finish him.

Morrison thought for a moment, then unstrapped his telephone and dialed Public Utility in Venusborg.

The video screen showed a stern, severely dressed woman with iron-gray hair. "Public Utility," she said. "May we be of service?"

"Hi," Morrison said cheerfully. "How's the weather in Venusborg?"

"Hot," the woman said. "How's it out there?"

"I hadn't even noticed," Morrison said, grinning. "Too busy counting my fortune."

"You've found goldenstone?" the woman asked, her expression becoming less severe.

"Sure have," Morrison said. "But don't pass the word around yet. I'm still staking my claim. I think I can use a refill on these."

Smiling easily, he held up his canteens. Sometimes it worked. Sometimes, if you showed enough confidence, Public Utility would fill you up without checking your account. True, it was embezzling, but this was no time for niceties.

"I suppose your account is in order?" asked the woman.

"Of course," Morrison said, feeling his smile grow stiff. "The name's Tom Morrison. You can just check—"

"Oh, I don't do that personally," the woman said. "Hold that canteen steady. Here we go."

Gripping the canteen in both hands, Morrison watched as the water, 'ported four thousand miles from Venusborg, appeared as a slender crystal stream above the mouth of his canteen. The stream entered the canteen, making a wonderful gurgling sound. Watching it, Morrison found his dry mouth actually was beginning to salivate.



Then the water stopped.

"What's the matter?" Morrison asked.

His video screen went blank. Then it cleared, and Morrison found himself staring into a man's narrow face. The man was seated in front of a large desk. The sign in front of him read *Milton P. Reade, Vice President, Accounts*.

"Mr. Morrison," Reade said, "your account is overdrawn. You have been obtaining water under false pretenses. That is a criminal offense."

"I'm going to pay for the water," Morrison said.

"When?"

"As soon as I get back to Venusborg."

"With what," asked Mr. Reade, "do you propose to pay?"

"With goldenstone," Morrison said. "Look around here, Mr. Reade. The traces are rich! Richer than they were for the Kirk claim! I'll be hitting the outcroppings in another day—"

"That's what every prospector thinks," Mr. Reade said. "Every prospector on Venus is only a day from goldenstone. And they all expect credit from Public Utility."

"But in this case—"

"Public Utility," Mr. Reade continued inexorably, "is not a philanthropic organization. Its charter specifically forbids the extension of credit. Venus is a frontier, Mr. Morrison, a *farflung* frontier. Every manufactured article on Venus must be imported from Earth at outrageous cost. We do have our own water, but locating it, purifying it, then 'porting it is an expensive process. This company, like every other company on Venus, necessarily operates on a very narrow margin of profit, which is invariably plowed back into further expansion. That is why there can be no credit on Venus."

"I know all that," Morrison said. "But I'm telling you, I only need a day or two more—"

"Absolutely impossible. By the rules, we shouldn't even help you out now. The time to report bankruptcy was a week ago, when your sandcar broke down. Your garage man reported, as required by law. But you didn't. We would be within our rights to leave you stranded. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, of course," Morrison said wearily.

"However, the company has decided to stretch a point in your favor. If you turn back immediately, we will keep you supplied with water for the return trip."

"I'm not turning back yet. I'm almost on the real stuff."

"You must turn back! Be reasonable, Morrison! Where would we be if we let every prospector wander over the desert while we supplied his water? There'd be ten thousand men out there, and

we'd be out of business inside of a year. I'm stretching the rules now. Turn back."

"No," said Morrison.

"You'd better think about it. If you don't turn back now, Public Utility takes no further responsibility for your water supply."

Morrison nodded. If he went on, he would stand a good chance of dying in the desert. But if he turned back, what then? He would be in Venusborg, penniless and in debt, looking for work in an overcrowded city. He'd sleep in a community shed and eat at a soup kitchen with the other prospectors who had turned back. And how would he be able to raise the fare back to Earth? When would he ever see Janie again?

"I guess I'll keep on going," Morrison said.

"Then Public Utility takes no further responsibility for you," Reade repeated, and hung up.

Morrison packed up his telephone, took a sip from his meager water supply, and went on.

The sandwolves loped along at each side, moving in closer. Overhead, a delta-winged kite found him. It balanced on the up-drafts for a day and a night, waiting for the wolves to finish him. Then a flock of small flying scorpions sighted the waiting kite. They drove the big creature upstairs into the cloud bank. For a day the flying reptiles waited. Then they in turn were driven off by a squadron of black kites.

The traces were very rich now, on the fifteenth day since he had left the sandcar. By rights, he should be walking over goldenstone. He should be surrounded by goldenstone. But still he hadn't found any.

Morrison sat down and shook his last canteen. It gave off no wet sound. He uncapped it and turned it up over his mouth. Two drops trickled down his parched throat.

It was about four days since he had talked to Public Utility. He must have used up the last of his water yesterday. Or had it been the day before?

He recapped the empty canteen and looked around at the heat-blasted landscape. Abruptly he pulled the telephone out of his pack and dialed Max Krandall in Venusborg.

Krandall's round, worried face swam into focus on the screen. "Tommy," he said, "you look like hell."

"I'm all right," Morrison said. "A little dried out, that's all. Max, I'm near goldenstone."

"Are you sure?" Krandall asked.

"See for yourself," Morrison said, swinging the telephone around. "Look at the stone formations! Do you see the red and purple markings over there?"

"Traces, all right," Krandall admitted dubiously.

"There's rich stuff just beyond it," Morrison said. "There has to be! Look, Max, I know you're short on money, but I'm going to ask you a favor. Send me a pint of water. Just a pint, so I can go on for another day or two. We can both get rich for the price of a pint of water."

"I can't do it," Krandall said sadly.

"You can't?"

"That's right. Tommy, I'd send you water even if there wasn't anything around you but sandstone and granite. Do you think I'd let you die of thirst if I could help it? But I can't do a thing. Take a look."

Krandall rotated his telephone. Morrison saw that the chairs, table, desk, filing cabinet and safe were gone from the office. All that was left in the room was the telephone.

"I don't know why they haven't taken out the phone," Krandall said. "I owe two months on my bill."

"I do too," said Morrison.

"I'm stripped," Krandall said. "I haven't got a dime. Don't get me wrong, I'm not worried about myself. I can always eat at a soup kitchen. But I can't 'port you any water. Not you or Remstaater."

"Jim Remstaater?"

"Yeah. He was following a trace up north past Forgotten River. His sandcar broke an axle last week and he wouldn't turn back. His water ran out yesterday."

"I'd bail him out if I could," said Morrison.

"And he'd bail you out if he could," Krandall said. "But he can't and you can't and I can't. Tommy, you have only one hope."

"What's that?"

"Find goldenstone. Not just traces, find the real thing worth real money. Then phone me. If you really have goldenstone, I'll bring in Wilkes from Tri-Planet Mining and get him to advance us some money. He'll probably want fifty per cent of the claim."

"That's plain robbery!"

"No, it's just the high cost of credit on Venus," Krandall answered. "Don't worry, there'll still be plenty left over. But you have to find goldenstone first."

"OK," Morrison said. "It should be around here somewhere. Max, what's today's date?"

"July thirty-first. Why?"

"Just wondering. I'll call you when I've found something."

After hanging up, Morrison sat on a little boulder and stared dully at the sand. July thirty-first. Tomorrow was his birthday. His family would be thinking about him. Aunt Bess in Pasadena, the twins in Laos, Uncle Ted in Durango. And Janie, of course, waiting for him in Tampa.

Morrison realized that tomorrow might be his last birthday unless he found goldenstone.

He got to his feet, strapped the telephone back in his pack beside the empty canteens, and set a course to the south.

He wasn't alone. The birds and beasts of the desert marched with him. Overhead, the silent black kites circled endlessly. The sandwolves crept closer on his flanks, their red tongues lolling out, waiting for the carcass to fall....

"I'm not dead yet!" Morrison shouted at them.

He drew his revolver and fired at the nearest wolf. At twenty feet, he missed. He went down on one knee, held the revolver tightly in both hands and fired again. The wolf yelped in pain. The pack immediately went for the wounded animal, and the kites swooped down for their share.

Morrison put the revolver back in its holster and went on. He could tell he was in a badly dehydrated state. The landscape jumped and danced in front of him, and his footing was unsure. He discarded the empty canteens, threw away everything but the testing kit, telephone and revolver. Either he was coming out of the desert in style or he wasn't coming out at all.

The traces continued to run rich. But still he came upon no sign of tangible wealth.

That evening he found a shallow cave set into the base of a cliff. He crawled inside and built a barricade of rocks across the entrance. Then he drew his revolver and leaned back against the far wall.

The sandwolves were outside, sniffing and snapping their jaws. Morrison propped himself up and got ready for an all-night vigil.

He didn't sleep, but he couldn't stay awake, either. Dreams and visions tormented him. He was back on Earth and Janie was saying to him, "It's the tuna. Something must be wrong with their diet. Every last one of them is sick."

"It's the darnedest thing," Morrison told her. "Just as soon as you domesticate a fish, it turns into a prima donna."

"Are you going to stand there philosophizing," Janie asked, "while your fish are sick?"

"Call the vet."

"I did. He's off at the Blake's place, taking care of their dairy whale."

"All right, I'll go out and take a look." He slipped on his face mask. Grinning, he said, "I don't even have time to dry off before I have to go out again."

His face and chest were wet.

Morrison opened his eyes. His face and chest *were* wet—from perspiration. Staring at the partially blocked mouth of the cave, he could see green eyes, two, four, six, eight.

He fired at them, but they didn't retreat. He fired again, and his bullet ricocheted off the cave wall, stinging him with stone splinters. With his next shots, he succeeded in winging one of the wolves. The pack withdrew.

That emptied the revolver. Morrison searched through his pockets and found five more cartridges. He carefully loaded the gun. Dawn couldn't be far away now.

And then he was dreaming again, this time of the Prospector's Special. He had heard about it in every little saloon that bordered the Scorpion. Bristly-bearded old prospectors told a hundred different stories about it, and the cynical bartenders chimed in with their versions. Kirk had it in '89, ordered up big and special just for him. Edmonson and Arsler received it in '93. That was certain. And other men had had it too, as they sat on their precious goldenstone claims. Or so people said.

But was it real? Was there such a thing as the Prospector's Special? Would he live to see that

rainbow-hued wonder, tall as a church steeple, wide as a house, more precious than goldenstone itself?

Sure he would! Why, he could almost see it now....

Morrison shook himself awake. It was morning. Painfully, he crawled out of the cave to face the day.

He stumbled and crawled to the south, escorted closely by wolves, shaded by predatory flying things. His fingers scrabbled along rock and sand. The traces were rich, rich!

But where in all this desolation was the goldenstone?

Where? He was almost past caring. He drove his sunburned, dried-out body, stopping only to fire a single shot when the wolves came too close.

Four bullets left.

He had to fire again when the kites, growing impatient, started diving at his head. A lucky shot tore into the flock, downing two. It gave the wolves something to fight over. Morrison crawled on blindly.

And fell over the edge of a little cliff.

It wasn't a serious fall, but the revolver was knocked from his hand. Before he could find it, the wolves were on him. Only their greed saved Morrison. While they fought over him, he rolled away and retrieved his revolver. Two shots scattered the pack. That left one bullet.

He'd have to save that one for himself, because he was too tired to go on. He sank to his knees. The traces were rich here. Fantastically rich. Somewhere nearby....

"Well, I'll be damned," Morrison said.

The little ravine into which he had fallen was solid goldenstone.

He picked up a pebble. Even in its rough state he could see the deep luminous golden glow, the fiery red and purple flecks deep in the shining stone.

"Make sure," Morrison told himself. "No false alarms, no visions, no wild hopes. Make sure."

He broke off a chunk of rock with the butt of his revolver. It still looked like goldenstone. He took out his testing kit and spilled a few drops of white solution on the rock. The solution foamed green.

"Goldenstone, sure as sure," Morrison said, looking around at the glowing cliff walls. "Hey, I'm rich!"

He took out his telephone. With trembling fingers he dialed Krandall's number.

"Max!" Morrison shouted. "I've hit it! I've hit the real stuff!"

"My name is not Max," a voice over the telephone said.

"Huh?"

"My name is Boyard," the man said.

The video screen cleared, and Morrison saw a thin, sallow-faced man with a hairline mustache.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Boyard," Morrison said. "I must have gotten the wrong number. I was calling—"

"It doesn't matter who you were calling," Mr. Boyard said. "I am District Supervisor of the Venus Telephone Company. Your bill is two months overdue."

"I can pay it now," Morrison said, grinning.

"Excellent," said Mr. Boyard. "As soon as you do, your service will be resumed."

The screen began to fade.

"Wait!" Morrison cried. "I can pay as soon as I reach your office. But I must make one telephone call. Just one call, so that I—"

"Not a chance," Mr. Boyard said decisively. "*After* you have paid your bill, your service will be turned on immediately."

"I've got the money right here!" Morrison said. "Right here in my hand!"

Mr. Boyard paused. "Well, it's unusual, but I suppose we could arrange for a special robot messenger if you are willing to pay the expenses."

"I am!"

"Hm. It's irregular, but I daresay we ... Where is the money?"

"Right here," Morrison said. "You recognize it, don't you? It's goldenstone!"

"I am sick and tired of the tricks you prospectors think you can put over on us. Holding up a handful of pebbles—"

"But this is really goldenstone! Can't you see it?"

"I am a businessman," Mr. Boyard said, "not a jeweler. I wouldn't know goldenstone from

goldenrod."

The video screen went blank.

Frantically, Morrison tried to reach the operator. There was nothing, not even a dial tone. His telephone was disconnected.

He put the instrument down and surveyed his situation. The narrow crevice into which he had fallen ran straight for about twenty yards, then curved to the left. No cave was visible in the steep walls, no place where he could build a barricade.

He heard a movement behind him. Whirling around, he saw a huge old wolf in full charge. Without a moment's hesitation, Morrison drew and fired, blasting off the top of the beast's head.

"Damn it," Morrison said. "I was going to save that bullet for myself."

It gave him a moment's grace. He ran down the ravine, looking for an opening in its sides. Goldenstone glowed at him and sparkled red and purple. And the sandwolves loped along behind him.

Then Morrison stopped. In front of him, the curving ravine ended in a sheer wall.

He put his back against it, holding the revolver by its butt. The wolves stopped five feet from him, gathering themselves for a rush. There were ten or twelve of them, and they were packed three deep in the narrow pass. Overhead, the kites circled, waiting for their turn.

At that moment, Morrison heard the crackling sound of 'porting equipment. A whirlpool appeared above the wolves' heads and they backed hastily away.

"Just in time!" Morrison said.

"In time for what?" asked Williams 4, the postman.

The robot climbed out of the vortex and looked around.

"Well, young man," Williams 4 said, "this is a fine fix you've gotten yourself into. Didn't I warn you? Didn't I advise you to turn back? And now look!"

"You were perfectly right," Morrison said. "What did Max Krandall send me?"

"Max Krandall did not, and could not, send a thing."

"Then why are you here?"

"Because it's your birthday," Williams 4 said. "We of the Postal Department always give special service for birthdays. Here you are."

Williams 4 gave him a handful of mail, birthday greetings from Janie, and from his aunts, uncles and cousins on Earth.

"Something else here," Williams 4 said, rummaging in his bag. "I *think* there was something else here. Let me see.... Yes, here it is."

He handed Morrison a small package.

Hastily, Morrison tore off the wrappings. It was a birthday present from his Aunt Mina in New Jersey. He opened it. It was a large box of salt-water taffy, direct from Atlantic City.

"Quite a delicacy, I'm told," said Williams 4, who had been peering over his shoulder. "But not very satisfactory under the circumstances. Well, young man, I hate to see anyone die on his birthday. The best I can wish you is a speedy and painless departure."

The robot began walking toward the vortex.

"Wait!" Morrison cried. "You can't just leave me like this! I haven't had any water in days! And those wolves—"

"I know," Williams 4 said. "Do you think I feel *happy* about it? Even a robot has some feelings!"

"Then help me."

"I can't. The rules of the Postal Department expressly and categorically forbid it. I remember Abner Lathe making much the same request of me in '97. It took three years for a burial party to reach him."

"You have an emergency telephone, haven't you?" Morrison asked.

"Yes. But I can use it only for personal emergencies."

"Can you at least carry a letter for me? A special delivery letter?"

"Of course I can," the robot postman said. "That's what I'm here for. I can even lend you pencil and paper."

Morrison accepted the pencil and paper and tried to think. If he wrote to Max now, special delivery, Max would have the letter in a matter of hours. But how long would Max need to raise some money and send him water and ammunition? A day, two days? Morrison would have to

figure out some way of holding out....

"I assume you have a stamp," the robot said.

"I don't," Morrison replied. "But I'll buy one from you. Solidoport special."

"Excellent," said the robot. "We have just put out a new series of Venusborg triangulars. I consider them quite an esthetic accomplishment. They cost three dollars apiece."

"That's fine. Very reasonable. Let me have one."

"There is the question of payment."

"Here," Morrison said, handing the robot a piece of goldenstone worth about five thousand dollars in the rough.

The postman examined the stone, then handed it back. "I'm sorry, I can accept only cash."

"But this is worth more than a thousand postage stamps!" Morrison said. "This is goldenstone!"

"It may well be," Williams 4 said. "But I have never had any assaying knowledge taped into me. Nor is the Venus Postal Service run on a barter system. I'll have to ask for three dollars in bills or coins."

"I don't have it."

"I am very sorry." Williams 4 turned to go.

"You can't just go and let me die!"

"I can and must," Williams 4 said sadly. "I am only a robot, Mr. Morrison. I was made by men, and naturally I partake of some of their sensibilities. That's as it should be. But I also have my limits, which, in their nature, are similar to the limits most humans have on this harsh planet. And, unlike humans, I cannot transcend my limits."

The robot started to climb into the whirlpool. Morrison stared at him blankly, and saw beyond him the waiting wolfpack. He saw the soft glow of several million dollars' worth of goldenstone shining from the ravine's walls.

Something snapped inside him.

With an inarticulate yell, Morrison dived, tackling the robot around the ankles. Williams 4, half in and half out of the 'porting vortex, struggled and kicked, and almost succeeded in shaking Morrison loose. But with a maniac's strength Morrison held on. Inch by inch he dragged the robot out of the vortex, threw him on the ground and pinned him.

"You are disrupting the mail service," said Williams 4.

"That's not all I'm going to disrupt," Morrison growled. "I'm not afraid of dying. That was part of the gamble. But I'm damned if I'm going to die fifteen minutes after I've struck it rich!"

"You have no choice."

"I do. I'm going to use that emergency telephone of yours."

"You can't," Williams 4 said. "I refuse to extrude it. And you could never reach it without the resources of a machine shop."

"Could be," said Morrison. "I plan to find out." He pulled out his empty revolver.

"What are you going to do?" Williams 4 asked.

"I'm going to see if I can smash you into scrap metal *without* the resources of a machine shop. I think your eyecells would be a logical place to begin."

"They would indeed," said the robot. "I have no personal sense of survival, of course. But let me point out that you would be leaving all Venus without a postman. Many would suffer because of your anti-social action."

"I hope so," Morrison said, raising the revolver above his head.

"Also," the robot said hastily, "you would be destroying government property. That is a serious offense."

Morrison laughed and swung the pistol. The robot moved its head quickly, dodging the blow. It tried to wriggle free, but Morrison's two hundred pounds was seated firmly on its thorax.

"I won't miss this time," Morrison promised, hefting the revolver.

"Stop!" Williams 4 said. "It is my duty to protect government property, even if that property happens to be myself. You may use my telephone, Mr. Morrison. Bear in mind that this offense is punishable by a sentence of not more than ten and not less than five years in the Solar Swamp Penitentiary."

"Let's have that telephone," Morrison said.

The robot's chest opened and a small telephone extruded. Morrison dialed Max Krandall and

explained the situation.

"I see, I see," Krandall said. "All right, I'll try to find Wilkes. But, Tom, I don't know how much I can do. It's after business hours. Most places are closed—"

"Get them open again," said Morrison. "I can pay for it. And get Jim Remstaater out of trouble, too."

"It can't be done just like that. You haven't established any rights to your claim. You haven't even proved that your claim is valuable."

"Look at it." Morrison turned the telephone so that Krandall could see the glowing walls of the ravine.

"Looks real," Krandall said. "But unfortunately, all that glitters is not goldenstone."

"What can we do?" Morrison asked.

"We'll have to take it step by step. I'll 'port you the Public Surveyor. He'll check your claim, establish its limits, and make sure no one else has filed on it. You give him a chunk of goldenstone to take back. A big chunk."

"How can I cut goldenstone? I don't have any tools."

"You'll have to figure out a way. He'll take the chunk back for assaying. If it's rich enough, you're all set."

"And if it isn't?"

"Perhaps we better not talk about that," Krandall said. "I'll get right to work on this, Tommy. Good luck!"

Morrison signed off. He stood up and helped the robot to its feet.

"In twenty-three years of service," Williams 4 said, "this is the first time anybody has threatened the life of a government postal employee. I must report this to the police authorities at Venusborg, Mr. Morrison. I have no choice."

"I know," Morrison said. "But I guess five or ten years in the penitentiary is better than dying."

"I doubt it. I carry mail there, you know. You will have the opportunity of seeing for yourself in about six months."

"What?" said Morrison, stunned.

"In about six months, after I have completed my mail calls around the planet and returned to Venusborg. A matter like this must be reported in person. But first and foremost, the mails must go through."

"Thanks, Williams. I don't know how—"

"I am simply performing my duty," the robot said as it climbed into the vortex. "If you are still on Venus in six months, I will be delivering your mail to the penitentiary."

"I won't be here," Morrison said. "So long, Williams!"

The robot disappeared into the 'porting vortex. Then the vortex disappeared. Morrison was alone in the Venusian twilight.

He found an outcropping of goldenstone larger than a man's head. He chipped at it with his pistol butt, and tiny particles danced and shimmered in the air. After an hour, he had put four dents in his revolver, but he had barely scratched the highly refractory surface of the goldenstone.

The sandwolves began to edge forward. Morrison threw stones at them and shouted in his dry, cracked voice. The wolves retreated.

He examined the outcropping again and found a hairline fault running along one edge. He concentrated his blows along the fault.

The goldenstone refused to crack.

Morrison wiped sweat from his eyes and tried to think. A chisel, he needed a chisel....

He pulled off his belt. Putting the edge of the steel buckle against the crack, he managed to hammer it in a fraction of an inch. Three more blows drove the buckle firmly into the fault. With another blow, the outcropping sheared off cleanly. He had separated a twenty-pound piece from the cliff. At fifty dollars a troy ounce, this lump should be worth about twelve thousand dollars—if it assayed out as pure as it looked.

The twilight had turned a deep gray when the Public Surveyor 'ported in. It was a short, squat robot with a conservative crackle-black finish.

"Good day, sir," the surveyor said. "You wish to file a claim? A standard unrestricted mining claim?"

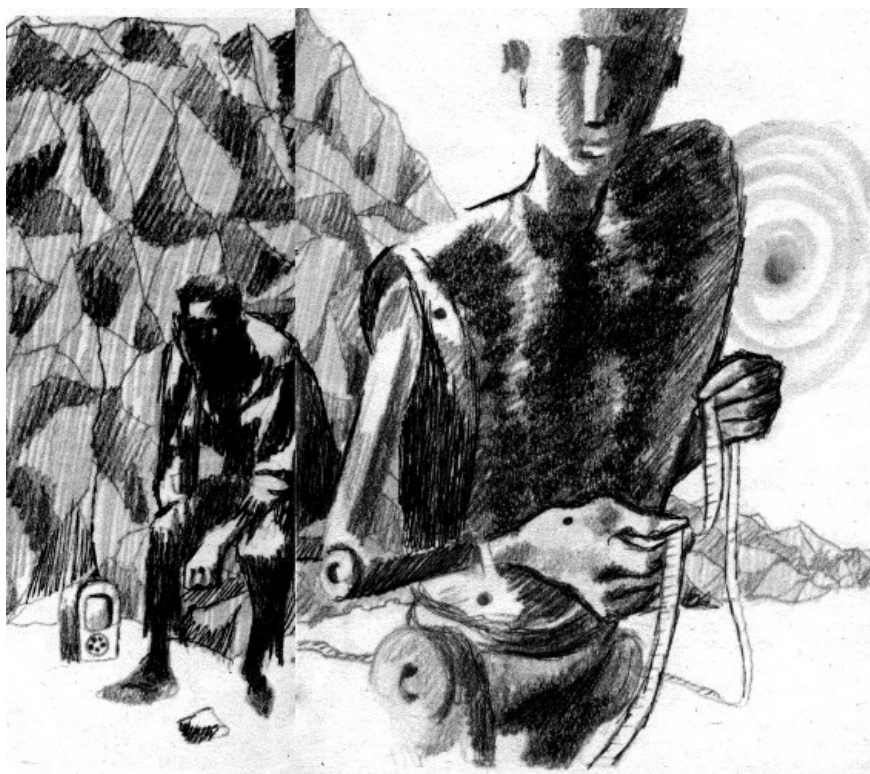
"That's right," Morrison said.

"And where is the center of the aforesaid claim?"

"Huh? The center? I guess I'm standing on it."

"Very well," the robot said.

Extruding a steel tape, it walked rapidly away from Morrison. At a distance of two hundred yards, it stopped. More steel tape fluttered as it walked, flew and climbed a square with Morrison at the center. When it had finished, the surveyor stood for a long time without moving.



"What are you doing?" Morrison asked.

"I'm making depth-photographs of the terrain," the robot said. "It's rather difficult in this light. Couldn't you wait till morning?"

"No!"

"Well, I'll just have to cope," the robot said.

It moved and stood, moved and stood, each subterranean exposure taking longer than the last as the twilight deepened. If it had had pores, it would have sweated.

"There," said the robot at last, "that takes care of it. Do you have a sample for me to take back?"

"Here it is," Morrison said, hefting the slab of goldenstone and handing it to the surveyor. "Is that all?"

"Absolutely all," the robot said. "Except, of course, that you haven't given me the Deed of Search."

Morrison blinked. "I haven't given you the what?"

"The Deed of Search. That is a government document showing that the claim you are filing on is free, as per government order, of fissionable material in excess of fifty per cent of the total mass to a depth of sixty feet. It's a mere formality, but a necessary one."

"I never heard of it," Morrison said.

"It became a requirement last week," explained the surveyor. "You don't have the Deed? Then I'm afraid your standard unrestricted claim is invalid."

"Isn't there anything I can do?"

"Well," the robot said, "you *could* change your standard unrestricted claim to a special restricted claim. That requires no Deed of Search."

"What does the special restricted part mean?"

"It means that in five hundred years all rights revert to the Government of Venus."

"All right!" Morrison shouted. "Fine! Good! Is that all?"

"Absolutely all," the surveyor said. "I shall bring this sample back and have it assayed and

evaluated immediately. From it and the depth-photographs we can extrapolate the value and extent of your claim."

"Send me back something to take care of the wolves," Morrison said. "And food. And listen—I want a Prospector's Special."

"Yes, sir. It will all be 'ported to you—if your claim is of sufficient value to warrant the outlay."

The robot climbed into the vortex and vanished.

Time passed, and the wolves edged forward again. They snarled at the rocks Morrison threw, but they didn't retreat. Jaws open and tongues lolling, they crept up the remaining yards between them and the prospector.

Then the leading wolf leaped back and howled. A gleaming vortex had appeared over his head and a rifle had fallen from the vortex, striking him on a forepaw.

The wolves scrambled away. Another rifle fell from the vortex. Then a large box marked *Grenades, Handle With Care*. Then another box marked *Desert Ration K*.

Morrison waited, staring at the gleaming mouth of the vortex. It crossed the sky to a spot a quarter of a mile away and paused there, and then a great round brass base emerged from the vortex, and the mouth widened to allow an even greater bulge of brass to which the base was attached. The bulge grew higher as the base was lowered to the sand. When the last of it appeared, it stood alone in the horizon-to-horizon expanse, a gigantic ornate brass punchbowl in the desert. The vortex rose and paused again over the bowl.

Morrison waited, his throat raw and aching. Now a small trickle came out of the vortex and splashed down into the bowl. Still Morrison didn't move.

And then it came. The trickle became a roar that sent the wolves and kites fleeing in terror, and a cataract poured from the vortex to the huge punchbowl.

Morrison began staggering toward it. He should have ordered a canteen, he told himself thirstily, stumbling across the quarter of a mile of sand. But at last he stood beneath the Prospector's Special, higher than a church steeple, wider than a house, filled with water more precious than goldenstone itself. He turned the spigot at the bottom. Water soaked the yellow sands and ran in rivulets down the dune.

He should have ordered a cup or glass, Morrison thought, lying on his back with open mouth.

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