



THE SOLUTION

By William C. Bailey

When young Pinky Lane returned to Castor, he was considered fair game by everyone at the Casino. Pinky, however, had learned his lesson the first time and now had a few plans of his own.



IT was still dark when Pinky Lane reached the hotel. Castor had turned its back on the sun, and the rippling of the temblots said Pollux was not due to rise for an hour. The rain flew in solid horizontal sheets as the wet planet's atmosphere rushed in its regular tidal movement toward its satellite twin.

Pinky scarcely gave the hotel a glance. The weird, mushroom-cap architecture of Castor, so functionally adapted to its unique conditions, had lost its fascination for him. As in all the Dutch colonies, the Holland House had a big book for registering guests to sign. Pinky filled in the first empty line with a quick scrawl:

"Pinkland Lane, age 27, single, birthplace Centaurus III, occupation engineer." He could not help but read the previous entry: "Joseph Bayuk, age 55, widower, birthplace Sol III, occupation tango dancer." He grunted briefly at the joke of it, and slung his dripping slicker to the "front boy."

Turning to pick up his bags and go to his room, he saw Bart coming purposefully toward him across the lobby. A particularly sharp earth shock made the hotel owner lurch and catch himself, griming wryly at the red-headed engineer. The bulging silica-gel walls heaved and wriggled, and the floor rippled queasily as the soft quicksand on which the hotel floated yielded with the quake.

"Pollux'll be up in a little while," Bart told Lane huskily. "Well, kid, I never thought I'd see you back here, not after the rooking you got."

Lane reached down to shake the gambler's outstretched hand. "Hello, Mr. Bartalucia," he said, blushing to the tips of his ears. "And you can bet I never wanted to come back, either. I've had enough of the Twin Planets to last a lifetime."

Bart's husky croupier's voice laughed with soft understanding. "Tough break for a young pup," he agreed. "Come on, I'll buy you a drink."

Pinky followed Bart's lithe walk across the fluttery ripples of the floor into the Casino. Play was slow. Freddy was dealing black

jack to a new stickman, recognizable as a crap dealer by his short black apron. They gave him the cool, indifferent eye that every player sooner or later gets to know.

There was a new bartender, too, Lane noticed. Things never stood still on Castor, in more ways than one. The sharpest shock of the oncoming land tide swayed the whole ballooning structure to emphasize his thought. Automatically both Bart and Pinky steadied themselves with a hand against the bar.

It was a royal fizz for Bart. It always was. Pinky joined him in the drink.

"All right, Pinky," Bart said, as he set his glass on the bar. "How come you're back?" Pinky's fair young features colored again in an embarrassed blush.

"I came back to get my pay, Mr. Bartalucia," he said diffidently. "My father nearly took my head off when he heard about it. He said no gang of crooked promoters backed by a tin-horn gambler could do that to a son of his."

Bart's sharp eyes were veiled by half-drawn lids. "Your father says some pretty rough things," he breathed softly.

"Yes, Mr. Bartalucia," Pinky replied. "I hope you don't take it personally, of course. He's like that. You know I don't feel that way myself. It's just that my father raised so much hell I *had* to come back. No matter *what* you people do to me." He swallowed nerv-

ously.

"I don't know what you're talking about, of course," Bart told him quietly. "You're a nice clean kid, Pinky, and you shouldn't hang around a hole like this. So far you've been lucky, but you shouldn't stretch it."

"Lucky?" Pinky said nervously.

"Yeah. Lucky I don't get sore at you for being so damned honest in repeating the things your old man says. It would be a shame if the boys had to give you a mud bath."

Pinky had a quick unhappy realization of what it would be like to flounder deeper and deeper into the bottomless quicksand. He could not mistake the icy threat.

BEFORE Pinky could reply, there was a little ripple of activity at the tables.

A short, pot-bellied man dressed in cool, well-tailored nylon, had breezed into the Casino. He waved his cigar cheerily to Bart and walked to where Freddy was still dealing to the new stickman. His bald scalp glistened in the overhead lights. Fat jowls creased in the happiest of grins. He threw a bill on the table and called for chips.

"The tango dancer," Bart snorted huskily.

"New here?" Pinky asked, glad to change the subject.

"Yeah. Just blew in. Has the room right across from you. Retired banker or something. Seeing the world. Says he gets a kick out of

rubbing elbows with the seamy side of life. He's too honest, too, Pinky."

Laughter broke out at the black jack table as Bayuk, the tango dancer, sat down. The idle stickman rose slowly to his feet, took off his black apron and folded it carefully over the back of the stool next to Bayuk. He drifted away like smoke.

"Thanks for the drink, Mr. Bartalucia," Pinky told the gambler. He got up and started from the bar.

"Pinky!" Bart called after him. The Centaurian stopped.

"Yes?"

"Oh, all right. Go ahead. It's all right."

Pinky shrugged mentally and walked to his room.

A quick succession of quakes threw him against the yielding silica-gel wall of the corridor. The hotel rode with the blow, its mushroom-cap shape sagging and recoiling sluggishly. The "give" of the building sprang several doors open in the corridor. Pinky was left standing with an unneeded key in his hand. A sound behind him made him whirl. He was embarrassed to see the new stickman standing inside the tango dancer's room, a tiny flashlight in his hand, obviously surprised in the act of rifling the newcomer's luggage.

"Hello," Pinky said solemnly. It was a rather hard place to make conversation. The other nodded

with one quick jerk of his head. The light in his hand went out. The hotel sagged and swayed again, and the door of Bayuk's room swung shut, cutting off Pinky's view of the other. He didn't like it. But maybe Bart felt he had to know who his guests really were.

WITH the sketchy contents of his bags stowed in the dresser, Lane returned to the Casino. Bayuk was still at the black jack table, apparently winning. Another player had come in, a thin, rat-faced little man, whose soiled and wrinkled seersucker hung limp and ill-fitting on his skimpy body.

Pinky ditched his big frame onto the straddle-legged stool next to the tango dancer and bought fifty chips. They played silently for a while, giving Freddy a pretty good run for his money. Bayuk was betting with yellow ten-guilder chips. The unkempt, nervous stranger in seersucker played singles, as did Pinky.

Freddy shuffled deftly, but bent a card. He turned coolly behind him to get a fresh deck. Lane seized the opportunity to lean close to the tango dancer.

"Mr. Bayuk?" he whispered softly.

The jowly Terrestrial turned his beaming face toward him, removing the cigar from his fat lips. "Yes?" he said.

"I'm not trying to be nosy," he said, blushing. "But have you any

idea why the other dealer is searching your room?"

Bayuk's face never lost its grin. "I don't," he replied cheerfully. "I'd like to know what he makes of five pounds of dirty linen, though. That, some clean shirts, a couple suits and three pair of shoes are all he'll find." His eyes were owlish and inscrutable behind the horn-rims.

The third man on the player's side of the table appeared to pay no notice to the conversation. He was sweating heavily, mopping the trickling beads from his pocked and pitted face with the back of his hand.

"Just thought you might care," Pinky said, somehow hurt that the other took the matter so lightly. He turned back to the dealer as Freddy broke open the new pack. The game seemed to pick up. A kind of electric tension was more and more noticeable in the air. Pinky swallowed and heard his ears pop. That was it, he knew. Rising Pollux was dragging a great bubble of Castor's atmosphere with him, the wild air-tide of the rainy planet. Atmospheric pressure was increasing palpably. They were all getting a little oxygen drunk. He remembered to temper his bets. In an hour or so Castor's twin would pass the zenith and the pressure would start to fall again. In a few days he would be used to it again.

The added pressure made it hotter. Sweat ran more and more

heavily from the rat-faced player's face. With a muffled curse he pulled a wadded, disreputably filthy handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his pocked features. From the corner of his eye Pinky saw a slip of paper drop to the undulating floor. His natural politeness was about to make him call the other's attention to it, but a sharp dig in his ribs from Bayuk's elbow quieted him for an instant. Risking and losing his last chip, the skinny man wriggled off his stool and walked jerkily across the swaying floor to the bar. Bayuk slipped one fat haunch off the padded seat and picked up what had been dropped. It disappeared within the side pocket of his coat without creating a ripple of interest from its inser or from the dealer.

"Enough of this," the bald Terrestrial said happily, after a couple more hands. He pressed the fire from his cigar butt. "Come along, young fellow. I'll buy you a drink."

IT was a gin fizz this time. All the Dutch ever drank was gin, Pinky decided.

"First today," said Bayuk raising his glass.

"Mud in your eye," Pinky told him, a little ill at ease with a stranger. "Plenty of it, here on Castor."

"Quite a place," the Terrestrial nodded vigorously. "And what people!" His fat lips split in a

delighted grin.

"I don't find them so very funny," Lane confessed.

"Come, come," Bayuk told him. "They're more fun than you'll have in a century back home. Have you ever been on Earth?"

"Oh, yes, sir. I did my graduate work at Colorado School of Mines."

"Well, you know what it is back there," Bayuk said. "All my life I sat around an office, all duded up, so polite, so nice, so genteel. I never saw a crook that I can remember until I retired."

"You're retired?"

"I'll say I am," the other said joyfully, bouncing up and down as the planet writhed and heaved beneath them, I'm seeing the Galaxy. And not just the tourist spots. I get the kick of my life rubbing elbows with people like these." The flash of diamonds on his hand took them all in, but somehow seemed to exclude Pinky.

"You don't count me as one of them, eh?" he observed.

"Don't be silly," Bayuk protested, rapping his glass on the bar for a refill. "These shoddy outcasts all have that look about them. What of that seedy looking shill who just left? Didn't he look the part?"

"The one who dropped the paper?" the big redhead reminded him, his blond features turning bright pink.

"Yes. That one. That was the house's money he was playing with. Or else they put it on the tab. A

regular, you can tell it." He stopped, but Pinky's embarrassed, questioning frown forced him on.

"Oh, yes," he said. "The paper. Perhaps you think I should have returned it? Well, had you dropped it, I would have done so. But that character, no." He reached into his coat and removed the soiled and wrinkled sheet from his pocket. It was limp with sweat, crumpled and soiled. A huge diamond flashed on his fat fingers as he carefully spread it on the bar.

"Copy of a radiogram," Lane told him.

"Yes," Bayuk agreed. "But read it."

Lane frowned at the message. The address had been torn off. Only the first word of the text made any sense. It read: "TELEGRAPH TSOOA MOGES HRYEO UITKX MBOLN LRTIA RHONALYSCI ODCDC AENGL ASOAN SGATH ELOLI AKULI NDUCK ACIIP CURST CESNT EOWLD CCFPW UEOSE NNTPL ITNLG TCNHE GLURU UNFLA LDI-FR."

"The jack-pot," Bayuk gloated. "We bought ourselves something. What's your name, son?"

"Lane, Mr. Bayuk," the engineer said, swallowing. "Pinkland Lane. They call me Pinky."

"I don't wonder," Bayuk laughed, showing large, tobacco-stained teeth. "With that hair, and the way you blush every time you open your mouth." He was instant-

ly contrite. "I'm sorry," he said, on seeing Pinky's face flame red, and sounding as if he meant it. "Not a very good joke, eh, Pinky?"

The redhead frowned at the enciphered message. "I wonder," he said. "Could it be that simple?"

"You mean you understand it?" Bayuk whispered excitedly.

"No, but perhaps I can decipher it." Pinky declared. He sketched a simple diagram on the back of an opened letter he found in a pocket.

"Let me see it," Bayuk insisted. He looked over Pinky's work:

T	E	L	E	G	R	A	P	H
9	2	6	3	4	8	1	7	5
-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
G	U	A	R	A	N	T	E	E
L	I	C	H	E	N	S	O	L
U	T	I	O	N	T	O	W	O
R	K	I	N	G	P	O	L	L
U	X	P	A	L	L	A	D	I
-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
U	M	C	L	A	I	M	C	A
N	R	U	Y	S	T	O	C	K
F	O	R	S	O	N	G	F	U
L	L	S	C	A	L	E	P	L
A	N	T	I	N	G	S	W	I
-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
L	L	C	O	S	T	H	U	N
D	R	E	D	G	C	R	E	D
I	T	S	C	A	N	Y	O	U
F	I	N	D	T	H	E	S	C
R	A	T	C	H	O	E	K	
-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Pinky copied the message in linear style:

"TELEGRAM GUARANTEE
LICHEN SOLUTION TO WORK-
ING POLLUX PALLADIUM

CLAIM CAN BUY STOCK FOR SONG FULL SCALE PLANTINGS WILL COST HUNDRED G CREDITS CAN YOU FIND THE SCRATCH HOEK."

"Now, that makes some sense," Bayuk gloated, straightening. "How did you ever figure it out?"

"Simple columnar transposition," Pinky said, embarrassed at his quick success. "That first word *en clair* would be a tip-off to anybody who had ever played with ciphers."

"It doesn't look simple to me," Bayuk admired. "Damned clever, Pinky!"

"Not really," he disagreed. "Shucks, you'd almost think they wanted somebody to dope it out, using that simple a cipher. Anyway, they're in for a big surprise about the stock."

Bayuk digested the implication of Pinky's statement for a moment. "Do you know what this is about?" he demanded.

"Funny, isn't it?" Pinky agreed. "But I do."

"Well?" Bayuk insisted. The Casino heaved and its walls writhed insubstantially. They both steadied themselves against the bar.

PINKY looked at the Terrestrial speculatively. After all, maybe this was the break he needed to recoup the salary he had never been paid. A quick sale of his stock for ten thousand credits would square that account. And he certainly could use a friend on a

hell-hole like Castor, where every outcast was at the throat of every other. He and Bayuk were probably the only two men on the planet who weren't fugitives from some form of justice. Take a chance, he decided, his stomach fluttering nervously.

"Remember that ratty little guy, the one you called a shill?"

"Yes," Bayuk recalled, nodding vigorously.

"Well, that's Hoek, the guy who sent this radiogram. He's a character around here. A sneaky crook, if there ever was one. Sort of a confidence man. A crooked promoter."

Bayuk chuckled. "You aren't telling me a thing," he said emphatically. "One look was enough. It looks as though he's trying to promote somebody right now," the bald Terrestrial decided, fingering the message.

"That's what's funny about it," Lane protested. "He sent that message to somebody he knows. The cipher proves it. And that last phrase. He wouldn't ask if the other guy could 'find some scratch' if he was promoting somebody's confidence. It sounds more like one crook talking to another. He's still selling the same old thing, though," Pinky concluded, puzzled.

"What's that?"

"It's in the message. The lichen. He says he guarantees it's the solution to working the palladium deposits on Castor. That outfit he mentions, Pollux-Palladium, went

bust a couple months ago trying to do it. The climate licked them."

"The climate?"

"Uh huh. Pollux is completely arid. And hot as hell. You have to live in a respirator. Men just won't stay, except at wages that bankrupt any company."

Bayuk read the deciphered message carefully again. "But Hoek says he's got that licked. I wonder what he's got?" he mused.

"I told you. His lichen."

"I don't get it."

"Hoek's famous, or should I say infamous, around here. He has some trick lichen he either found or developed that he swears will grow on Pollux. You see, if vegetation could thrive there, it would put water in the air, and make the place fit to live in. Would shield the sun, too, and lower the temperature. He claims this weird plant of his actually pulls the water of crystallization out of the rocks. There's water in them, all right. The only water there is on Pollux. It's a nice idea."

"Why don't they try it?" Bayuk demanded.

"Oh, they have, Mr. Bayuk. Three or four times. That's how that little crook makes his living. He finds some suckers who never heard of him, peddles his idea, and gets them to outfit an expedition. Of course his lichens die. They may make a little water, but not enough, and they dry out in the arid atmosphere on Pollux. You

can't imagine what it's like unless you've been there. One breath of that stuff just about takes the lungs right out of you. You sweat and it feels like you're getting an alcohol rub, and all the time the sun is burning the skin off you."

"But, Pinky," Bayuk gasped, getting the picture. "Don't you see what this radiogram means? Hoek has made his process, whatever it is, work after all! He's apparently going to try it on his own! Do you suppose he really could have done it?"

"That's what he says," Pinky said. "Well, we'll find out soon enough, if he's really trying to corner the stock. I own a big slice myself. That's all I ever got for working for them."

"You worked for them?"

"Yes. That's why I'm here, really. When they went broke they stuck me for my pay, so I got a judgment against the unissued-treasury stock of the company. I'm trying to get some cash for it now."

Bayuk spread his hands. "Why, it's tailor-made," he cried. "You're a cinch!"

"Not that easy," the big Centaurian protested. "Hoek hasn't any dough. His radiogram asks for money. Trying to make a deal with him would be borrowing trouble. I'd sure like to know where Bart fits in this."

"Bart!" Bayuk exclaimed. "You mean our host?"

"Sure. I hate to call him a master

mind, because it's not that sort of thing, but nobody has a grift around here unless Bart gets his cut."

"Good grief!" Bayuk gasped. "You've certainly been around, young man." Pinky blushed modestly, unable to help a little glow of pleasure at the words.

"Well," Bayuk went on. "Play it smart. Wait for them to come to you."

IT was a short wait. Pinky had his breakfast brought into the bar the next morning and ate it perched on one of the tumblerproof stools. The low barometer of low tide gave him a dead feeling. In the coolness of the reduced pressure he shivered, conscious of the clammy wetness of Castor. He suddenly realized that Bart had silently seated himself beside him.

"Good morning, Mr. Bartalucia," Pinky greeted him, flushing at the other's icily detached survey.

"You ought to go home," Bart said huskily.

"I want to," Pinky said. "Really I do. But not till I've got some dough in my jeans. You ought to meet my father. He's . . ."

"He's a punk," Bart sneered. "You should see the characters who are stoging around here with their tongues hanging out for you. They'll gobble you up in one bite."

"Who?" Pinky asked.

Bart's head made the slightest motion toward the lobby. "A little

rat. A hurt rat. A vicious one, Pinky. Go home, I tell you, kid. They'll take your pants."

"Who?"

"A little Dutch sneak from Three," Bart said in his oddly carrying whisper. "A sly little fraud named Hoek. He's poison, Pinky, and he's asking for you. Beat it, kid!"

Pinky finished the limp-yolked eggs. "I'll see him," he said.

"All right. So I told you," Bart said, apparently washing his hands of the matter. His light touch restrained Pinky as the Centaurian made to leave. "One thing," he said, as if it were an afterthought.

"Yes, Mr. Bartalucia?"

"I hear you met my new stick-man sort of *al fresco* last night."

"Oh. Him. Yes, Mr. Bartalucia, we met."

"That wouldn't explain how you said the tango dancer got so friendly so quick, would it?"

Pinky felt his cheeks redden and burn. He would never make a liar. But he tried. It was pretty weak, he guessed. "Oh, no. He's a Terrestrial. I went to school on Earth, Mr. Bartalucia. We just got talking."

"Do you mind forgetting about meeting him?" he asked with that pithy hint of a mud bath in his voice.

Pinky tried to ape the gambler's casual shrug. "Why not?" he replied. "He's your pigeon."

"That's better," Bart breathed.

Some unseen signal of his head brought Hoek into the Casino. He walked with a jittery twitch across the almost motionless floor, twice as unappetizing in the cold claminess of low tide. His seersucker said he had slept in it. His stringy tie was pulled away from his collar, and the top button of his shirt was unfastened, showing a sallow, dirty expanse of neck. Bart drifted.

Pinky started it. "I hear you're looking for me, Mr. Hoek," he told him.

"I am, Meinheer," Hoek said quickly, in a high-pitched, strained voice. "Nothing important. Just heard you were around."

"You heard right," Pinky said, trying to keep cool.

"Sorry to hear about it," Hoek said lamely. "About your not getting paid, I mean."

"I'll bet," Pinky said, flushing.

"I am. I really am," Hoek insisted excitedly. "See here, Meinheer, maybe you can get a little out of it at that."

"I'd like to."

"Some friends of mine, people I know, that is, are thinking of taking another try at Pollux-Palladium," he confided, his lips close to Pinky's tingling ear. His breath was dead and fetid with the memories of gin.

"Suckers," Pinky commented, drawing away from the other's reek.

"They might be interested in picking up your stock," Hoek told him, drawing close again.

"Let's make it easy," Pinky suggested. "I read the radio you sent yesterday."

Hoek was plainly startled. "That Bart!" he gasped. Pinky let that one ride.

"All right," the engineer insisted. "So you think your screwy lichen will make water on Pollux after all. And you want my stock."

"Yes."

"What for? Pollux-Palladium went bust."

"No mining, Meinheer," Hoek insisted. "But listen! Pollux-Palladium has rights which really tie the whole planet up! They had a terrific concession. I hear they bribed . . ." He stopped.

"Now, Mr. Hoek," Pinky protested. "You know you can't bribe the Dutch. *You* never could."

"I know. I know," he whispered intensely. "I would have *sworn* it could not be done. But did you ever read that concession? There were millions in the Corporation. It went somewhere, you know that."

"Somewhere else, that's a cinch," Pinky admitted. "But what of it?"

"Let me get my hands on that stock," Hoek promised. "Just so I control the planet. We'll plant my lichen—it will grow like wildfire. As soon as they see it is making water, the stock will be worth billions!"

"Nice point," said Pinky. "All right, Hoek, I'll sell you mine."

"Good!" the other exclaimed. "I can't pay you much, you under-

stand . . ."

"Oh, but you'll have to," Pinky insisted. "You said it would be worth billions."

"Oh, no, Meinheer, that's only if it all works out," Hoek protested.

"It might be better if I just kept the stock," Pinky suggested, hunching his broad shoulders over the bar.

"Oh, but my partners, I don't think they'd like an outsider. You might not approve our policies."

"Listen, if the thing'll pan out, I'll approve them," Pinky insisted. "Let me take a look at your lichen," Hoek shrugged. With a hint something less than subtle that he had to get in touch with his principals by radiogram before going any farther, Hoek arranged to pick Pinky up following the noon meal.

NO sooner had he sidled away from the bar with his jittery, twitchy step, than Bayuk appeared from the lobby.

"It didn't take long," he said to the big redhead.

"How'd your room look?" Pinky asked.

"An expert job," Bayuk told him. "I'd never have guessed." He reached out tentatively with his left hand as the floor gave a slow heave, like a giant, ponderous hiccup. "Is it starting again?" he asked.

Pinky raised an indifferent eye. "Not for a while," he said. "Transmitted shocks, that's all we'll get for the next couple hours." He swung

his eyes around the bar. Neither the bartender nor any of the dealers was paying them any attention. "Mr. Bayuk," Pinky said softly. "Hoek fell all over his feet trying to buy my stock. I got him to tell me what it's all about. Maybe this is the McCoy."

"How can you find out?" Bayuk asked.

"I'm going to his laboratory after lunch. He'll show me."

Bayuk's face lighted with a fierce, restrained grin. "Take me with you!" he insisted.

"Oh, I can't," Pinky protested, reddening. "He's all googly over the idea of letting even one outsider in."

"Nobody with money is an outsider," Bayuk said flatly. "And I've got it. Don't be a fool, Pinky. You'll need dough!"

THE tide was backing and filling when Hoek came for Pinky: Rough blustery gusts rushed aimlessly east and west as the atmosphere first yielded to the continuing swirl of air following Pollux on around Castor and then eddied back, drawn by the more powerful attraction to the east, where the dry planet would soon rise. Rain no longer fell, but gust-borne droplets still smacked wetly against the face. The towering, incredible cumulus were replaced by a low-flying scud that was running in all directions at once with the turn of the tide. Patches of blue blazed daz-

zingly through the broken cloud cover, revealing first the ardent disc of Berius, and then, betimes, the hard, tiny discs of the other Dutch Cluster suns near enough to be visible in daylight.

The ground outside the pool of quicksand on which the Holland House floated was firmer. Even the blurred, indistinct earth shocks of the land-tide's neap hit one in the knees.

Hoek pulled his slicker tighter about his limp and wrinkled seer-sucker. "What's this?" he said excitedly, glaring at Bayuk.

"My principals," Pinky explained. It didn't take.

"The money, chum," Bayuk grinned, rolling his cigar to the other corner of his fat lips. That did it.

Hoek's place was easy walking distance. The laboratory was at least as dank, foul and unkempt as the botanist himself. It stank mightily, a wet, mouldy reek, miasmatic and unclean. He recognized it himself.

"The algae," he said. "They smell a little."

"Algae?" Bayuk asked. "I thought it was lichen."

"Lichen is symbiotic," Pinky explained absently. "A fungus and a green algae living together."

The demonstration lay in the center of the floor. Hoek had brought in a flat slab of sandstone and laid it on the gel. It was streaked with rivulets of rusty water. In its center

a black, foul, spongy mass of rotten stuff quaked and rippled in sympathy with the shocks of the incoming tide.

"Is that it?" Pinky said, unable to restrain his distaste.

"The wonder plant," Hoek breathed in awe.

"It smells to high Heaven," Bayuk gasped.

Hoek grinned. "It's worth it," he said. "See that water?"

"Sure," Pinky said. "I see it. What of it? How do you know it doesn't come from the atmosphere?"

Hoek's ferile teeth flashed brownly with his acid grin. "Wait, Mein-beer!" he cried. Pinky could not restrain a sickened writhing in his stomach as the dirty little Dutchman plunged his hands into the nauseous mass. He pushed it to one side, and exposed the sandstone on which it had rested. Rising, he seized a pail of water and flushed away the rusty streak of slime that covered the portion of the slab he had just exposed. There was a noticeable pit or depression in the stone.

"It has done that in an hour," he cried shrilly. "The rock has been broken down into an impalpable powder by the acid. The water of crystallization is gone—the crystals have collapsed."

Jumping up nervously, and steadying himself against a solid, heaving tumbler that swayed the walls of his laboratory, he picked

up a hammer and chisel. Quickly he knocked a dozen chips out of the eroded portion of the slab. With no sign of distaste, he scooped the spongy blackness of the lichen back into the depression.

"Just a few minutes," he promised. "Those chips will be eaten clean away." The performance was as good as he promised.

"How come you can put your hand in that stuff?" Pinky demanded as Hoek scooped the plant aside again. "If it's so water hungry, why doesn't it dehydrate your hand?"

Hoek winked. "That's the miracle of lichens," he said. "They grow on stone, no? And on any kind of stone, yes? But for each different mineral the fungus secretes a different acid, tailored to fit that one mineral. It may etch others, of course, but not very dissimilar ones. My flesh is not even touched by this orange stuff. On marble, the acid is more red. On bauxite, almost yellow."

PINKY knelt and laid his hand against the wet, etched slab. He pressed his palm tighter and held it there. "You damned cheat," he breathed softly. Hoek shrank back against a table, taking a new hand-hold against the regular rippling of the mud.

"Not" he exclaimed. "It *does* work, you fool!"

"Then why are you heating the slab?" Pinky demanded angrily. "You have heating coils buried un-

der it!"

He heard the swift intake of Bayuk's breath. The bald financier's face had suddenly hardened.

"Certainly," Hoek cried shrilly. "Isn't Pollux hot?"

"Um," Pinky said thoughtfully, reaching out for a hold as he straightened slowly. "That's true. But of course, you'd have to heat it." He looked in long thoughtfulness at the slab.

"Does it make water fast enough?" he asked.

"Fast enough for what?"

"To resist evaporation on Pollux?"

"Yes. I have calculated these things. You would like to see my figures?"

"I guess not," Pinky said. "The other figures come first."

"The other figures?"

"The money," Bayuk chimed in softly.

"Let's get out of the smell," Hoek said. He gave them gin and no chaser. "Something is going on," he said, once they were seated.

"Like what?" Bayuk asked.

"Somebody else is buying stock, Meinheer," Hoek said. "My backers won't touch it unless we control it all."

"Spell it out," Pinky suggested. "Who has how much?"

Hoek shrugged. "There were seven hundred thousand shares," he said. "You've got a couple hundred thousand, and I've got a little more than that. Not enough for control,

though."

"Exactly how much have you got?" Bayuk demanded.

Hoek glared at him angrily. "Why should I tell you?" he asked. Then, "All right. Two hundred forty thousand shares."

"Then we have it all," Bayuk said, beaming behind his glasses.

Pinky twisted his big frame to look at him. "You've been buying?" he demanded.

"Why not? Cheap enough," Bayuk said. "Bart got it for me. Two hundred sixty thousand shares. That accounts for all of it."

Hoek was on his feet, striding twitchily back and forth. "This queers the deal," he protested. "My backers won't touch it with you in it."

"No problem," Bayuk told him. "Deal them out. How much were they plunging for?"

Hoek eyed him like a ferret. "You'd take their place, Meinheer?" he asked.

"I'm suggesting it," Bayuk grinned flatly. "Pinky told you I was the money end."

"Why not?" Hoek shrugged. "It's their tough luck. They said they'd come in for two hundred thousand credits."

Bayuk shook his head.

"What do you mean?" Hoek demanded.

"One hundred thousand," Bayuk said pointedly.

"No!" Hoek protested. "They . . ."

"Oh, stow it," Pinky said irritably. "He's seen the radiogram, too."

The little Dutchman shrugged fatalistically. "It is true," he said. "I need a hundred thousand." He gauged Bayuk with his red-rimmed eyes. "You'll come in for that, Meinheer?"

"I might like to," Bayuk grinned. "But I can't. I haven't got it."

"How come?" Pinky asked, and instantly blushed his embarrassment. "I thought you were loaded!"

"On Earth, certainly. Or give me six months to convert some assets and arrange the transfer, yes, I'd be good for a million. I've got my roll with me. That's the nut." He carefully unbuttoned his shirt and disclosed a money belt strapped around his fat middle. He took the new, mint fresh bills from its outlet.

"Guilders," Hoek said.

"Of course. I had them changed on Berius III," Bayuk told him. "A little better than a hundred thousand," he said, without counting the money.

"Not enough," Hoek frowned. "It will take a hundred thousand credits. That's nearly two hundred fifty thousand guilders."

"But what about you?" Bayuk demanded. "What do you put in?"

"I can almost match you," Hoek said despondently. "Still not enough." Their eyes jointly sought Pinky.

"Me?" the Centaurian gasped.

"Gosh, don't look at me, Mr. Bayuk," he said awkwardly. "I'm here to get some money, remember? I've only got a couple thousand guilders."

"Sometimes it takes money to get money," Bayuk observed. "And I thought I was smart not to carry too much with me!" He cursed his shortsightedness. "I never thought I'd see anything I'd want to get in on," he confessed.

"How about Bart?" Pinky suggested desperately.

"Not me!" Bayuk snapped in concert with Hoek's anguished, "No!"

Pinky reddened at their vehemence. This was the plunge. "All right," he decided. "I'll fire an eldogram to Dad. Maybe he'll come across." The very thought of asking his father for forty thousand credits made his stomach crawl.

BART brought a copy of the outgoing eldogram to the bar before dinner.

"Where did you get that? Do you see everything?" the big red-head asked, feeling his ears burn with anger.

Bart shrugged. "Everything important. Especially anything going outside the Cluster. You sucker," he said bitterly. He read the message in his husky voice. "WONDERFUL CHANCE TO RECOUP MY LOSS AND GET IN ON GROUND FLOOR. NEED FORTY THOUSAND CREDITS

AT ONCE, PLEASE TRUST MY JUDGMENT AND CONFIRM BY ELDOGRAM THAT CREDITS FORTHCOMING." He looked at the young engineer pityingly. "Don't you know how these things work?" he demanded. "Nobody will pay on an eldogram trickling in from out in space somewhere. You'll have to wait for the documents. It'll take weeks."

Pinky swallowed. "Mr. Bayuk had an idea," he offered diffidently.

"I'll bet," Bart said sourly.

"He thought maybe you'd advance me the money," Pinky said, blushing furiously. "You know me, Mr. Bartalucia."

"Sure I do, kid," Bart grinned. "I know you for a natural-born sucker. Why should I let you take me?"

"I guess I haven't got any answer for that," he replied.

"What the devil," Bart went on. "It wouldn't be so bad if I didn't know that sneak Hoek was taking you for it. You'll lose your shirt and then figure the only way to keep your old man from finding out about it is to welch on me. And that'll make me think I've got to give you a mud bath."

"I don't do those things," Pinky protested miserably, his head hanging on his chest.

"Maybe you don't," said Bart. "Maybe if you get taken good and proper, your old man will drag you home. Okay, kid. I'll ride on his eldogram. You get the dough."

"But we'll have to wait to see what he says," Pinky reminded him.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you," Bart said with elaborate casualness, pulling an envelope from his pocket. "He already said okay. Here's his eldogram."

Pinky opened it. It didn't make him feel any better. He read it: "TRANSFERRING FORTY THOUSAND CREDITS YOUR ACCOUNT PLANETARY BANK OF BERIUS III. CAN'T FEEL MUCH WORSE THINKING YOU SUCKER FOR FIFTY THOUSAND THAN TEN THOUSAND CREDITS. PLEASE WRITE. DAD."

Pinky raised his flaming face. "Do me a favor, Mr. Bartalucia," he asked.

"What?"

"Don't let on about this, I mean, about your advancing me the money. I'll tell them you wouldn't help, or maybe I'll say we have to wait for the documents."

Bart looked at him curiously. "Now, that's the first sensible thing I've ever heard you say," he declared. "You realize that means you'll have to move in with Hoek?"

Pinky frowned. "What makes you think that?" he asked.

Bart shook his head pityingly. "For a minute there I thought you knew what you were doing," he said sadly.

"Gosh, I hope I do," Pinky replied earnestly. "I admit I don't

trust Mr. Hoek very far."

"Even that's too much," Bart told him dryly.

THE big redhead promptly told Bayuk about the message from his father. The Terrestrial grinned fatly. "Okay," he said. "If you plunge, so do I. Just one thing."

"What's that?"

"I'm handing my roll to Hoek, keeping just enough to live on and get back home if this thing goes bust. He'll have to handle the detail. He's done it before. But while we wait for your money to come from Centaurus, I want you to hang on to that Dutchman like a leech. Move in with him. You know we can't trust him. You told me his history yourself."

Pinky agreed with a brief nod. He was too surprised at the accuracy of Bart's prediction to trust his never too reliable voice.

Moving in with Hoek was no fun. They were too busy preparing their equipment for Pinky to mind the Dutchman's filch.

Hoek had arranged for a freighter to haul them the few hundred thousand miles across space to the arid twin. "It took nearly everything we have," he protested. "They wanted a hundred fifty thousand guilders for the two trips. In advance."

Pinky could scarcely believe the price. "Where do they get that stuff?" he demanded. "Let's radio Three for a ship. We don't have

to use a local gyp-outfit."

"No good, Meinheer," Hoek said, yanking his stringy tie farther from his grimy neck. "Nothing flies here without Bart's okay. The price is high so he can get a cut. It would make no difference who hauled us."

Pinky was sufficiently disturbed about what Hoek had told him to leave the unkempt Dutchman for the first time since Bayuk had surrendered his bankroll. He colored Bart in his usual spot at the bar. A few players were at the tables. The click of chips sounded soft accompaniment to the chanting of the crap dealer.

"See here, Mr. Bartalucia," Pinky burst out the moment he saw him.

"Slow down," Bart snapped, his sallow face darkening. "Back up and start again."

Pinky gulped. "I'm sorry," he said in a low voice. He took a deep breath. The floor rocked, rattling glassware behind the bar.

"About that advance, Mr. Bartalucia," Pinky said at last. "Maybe I don't want to take it down after all."

"Things going queer?" Bart suggested.

"Yes, Mr. Bartalucia. Very queer. They tell me you've cut yourself in for a big slice of our transportation cost. Is that true?"

Bart's swarthy features paled. His thin brown lips faded as he compressed them against his even teeth. "Pinky," he breathed. "The things you say, I've shot men for

less."

"I'm still sorry," Pinky said earnestly. "I'm not very good about these things. It's just that I've got to be sure."

The gambler regarded him through narrowed eyes. "Sonny, the things people say I do! Don't believe them."

His somehow equivocal reply left Pinky quiet and thoughtful. "I'd be satisfied with that," he said at last. "If you told me how you knew I would move in with Hoek."

"You haven't figured that out yet?" Bart demanded, obviously surprised.

"No."

"Then go home, kid. You're too light for this work."

Pinky shook his head. "I can handle Hoek," he replied. "Just so I don't have to watch you, too. All right. I'll take the guilders."

THE three of them stood in their respirators on Pollux's burning hot surface. All about them on the glistening gypsum that had fed the venture with water loomed the abandoned equipment of Pollux-Palladium, Ltd. The white bubbles that were the silica gel barracks still huddled together, and the long, skeletal arm of a jetisoned dragline whipped springily with the recurrent land shocks. Pinky could see stars twinkling feebly through its open structure, stars that shone all day in Pollux's waterless, violet sky. They were pale and weak beside the

tiny, merciless brilliance of the Cluster suns.

It was day, and Berius' too-large disk seared them from a scant fifty million miles. The very air vibrated with the intensity of the sun's radiation, with all its unfiltered ultraviolet. Pinky turned to look at the deeply tinted helmets on the respirators of the other two.

They were an oddly assorted pair. Bayuk, his paunch all the more evident in the all-enveloping thinness of his sun-proof jumper, seemed the more grotesquely out of place. His bandy-leggedness was twice as noticeable.

A sharp earth shock sent their pile of gear clattering down. He heard Bayuk cry out. This was something else again. Polflux was no gooey, flexible mudball, like water-soaked Castor. The rock was solid, and the temblors gave you a ringing, nasty shock. Only the mushroom-cap barracks, floating on pools of mercury, were livable when the land tide came in.

"Come on," Pinky said bitterly. "We might have known they would welch. We'll stow it ourselves."

Their gear had been dumped unceremoniously on the hard gypsum in spite of a contract that called for the freighter's crew to stow the frozen food in the lockers, and lug their laboratory equipment to the site Hoek selected.

Pinky unconsciously put himself in command. "Get the food first," he ordered. "It won't stay frozen

forever in this sunlight, and be careful with the radio. We'll need it."

"No," Hoek protested. "The lichen first."

Pinky gave him a scathing glance. "If it can't stand a couple hours here," he snapped. "We wasted our time."

"And money," Bayuk reminded him. He picked up a carton of frozen food. "Which way?" he asked.

Pinky pointed out one of the white, ballooning structures. "That one," he said, picking up twice the load the others could handle. "It was the last one they blew, and I don't suppose it's as filthy as the others. When the men knew they were leaving, they stopped all housekeeping. The place is a pig-pen."

The wind was freshening, but its vibrant heat made it no more comfortable. The temblors quickened in tempo. Castor would soon come up over the horizon. Then it *would* get hot, Pinky remembered, as the air tide built up, compressing the atmosphere at ground level.

Bayuk slipped and sprawled under his load as the gypsum leaped resoundingly beneath his feet. You could *hear* the shocks. The whole planet cracked and groaned in protest at the vicious wrench its twin's gravity gave it. The Terrestrial was back on his feet. The coarse mineral had ripped and torn one leg of his jumper at the knee.

"Get inside!" Pinky cried.

"I'm not hurt," Bayuk protested.

"You will be," Pinky promised.

"Berius will fry your skin through that rip. Patch it."

They had their hands full for the first couple weeks. The solar generator, as yet undamaged by the quakes, soon had power at the bus bar. Charging the accumulators of one of the three scout freighters still in running order, Pinky ferried gypsum blasted from the pit to the south. Baked in their calcining kettles, it gave them water to humidify their barrack, and an adjoining bubble of silica gel which they had cleaned out to make a greenhouse. The lichen thrived on native sandstone, ferried in from some miles to the east.

They made their first planting in the same region, ringing a depression in the rock with tiny pellets of the lichen wadded with moss.

"The acid has adapted to that sandstone," Hoek explained. "The growth will take better on an identical substratum. As it spreads to the other rock, the lichen will alter the acid enough to etch the new nutrient."

THE little Dutchman, who somehow managed to foul and bespatter his sun jumper as quickly as he got it on, chose nightfall for the first plantings. The air cooled noticeably at night, for Pollux' water-free atmosphere produced but little hot-house effect.

"They won't dry out so fast at night," Hoek promised. "By dawn they will have grown and pushed aside their cover glasses, and will be able to sustain themselves. By the next night, we can go back to see how they are doing. No sense working in the sun if you can help it."

Berius' disc rose briefly for a second sunset as Pinky climbed the scout freighter toward the planting. The tubby little craft, a spaceship but for its lack of sufficient power, responded pleasingly to his fingers.

"I don't see any water," Bayuk complained, peering through the untinted helmet they wore at night.

"Of course not," Hoek scoffed. "Did you think that depression would fill in a day? This is not a miracle we are working. But wait a week!"

They grounded on a fairly level spot fifty yards from the nearest planting. Hoek scrambled dangerously over the cracked and ruptured rock toward the line of cover glasses. He threw himself on his knees, heedless of damage to his thin jumper. Pinky heard his curse, and had not yet reached the thin row of plantings before Hoek had hurled himself across the rock to where the next glass wafer glistened. They followed his agonized progress from seeding to seeding. There was no need for comment. Without exception, they had dried to a rusty black and died. All were crisp and flakey to the touch. Hoek was whimpering

with rage. His jumper was a wreck. Blood trickled from his abraded knees.

"They died!" he shrieked, leaping up. He stumbled blindly back toward the scout.

"What happened?" Bayuk belatedly, running after him. A rippling transmitted shock threw him heavily to the arid rock. He screamed and cursed, holding his scraped elbow, but ran fatly after the little Dutchman.

Pinky sank down beside one of the plantings that Hoek had not touched. The cover glass was undisturbed. Carefully, tenderly, he lifted the dead lichen from where it had been planted. He ran his fingers over the spot where it had striven and died. The rough and crusty surface of the sandstone was smooth and slick to the touch. A tiny depression, less than an inch in diameter, had begun to form beneath the lichen in its brief span of life. A few millimeters of the rock had surrendered its water of crystallization, to the accompanying etching of the surface roughness. But the glass had not been tight—it could not be, without some sort of gasket to make it conform to the rough mineral on which the planting had been made. The dry wind had knifed in around the unprotected edges of the plant and greedily sucked away what water there had been in the seeding, and whatever other it made from the sandstone.

Each of the plantings showed the same thing. Slowly, thoughtfully, Pinky made his way back to the ship. Hoek was sobbing, his face streaming inside his respirator with tears he could not touch. Wordlessly Pinky sealed the scout, and climbed away from the depression.

THERE was no sound in the little ship except Hoek's bitter, wracking sobs. By unspoken agreement, they exchanged not a word until they were once again within the swaying walls of silica gel. Pinky closed the air-lock for the night, and turned up the humidity, as he always did after they had been in the open.

"Well?" he demanded of Hoek at last.

The wrinkled Dutchman's pitted face was dry. His narrow shoulders moved in the briefest shrug. "This damned planet has beaten me once again," he conceded bitterly. His eyes glittered wildly for a moment. "But I shall never give up!" he swore softly. "Never!"

"How about you, Bayuk?" Pinky asked.

Bayuk heaved a deep sigh. "I guess that's life," he decided, his fat face breaking into a rueful grin. "An hour ago I was worth billions! At least I get a lot of action for my money."

"You're quitting?"

"I know when I've had enough," Bayuk said, contentedly enough.

"Aren't you?" Hoek cried, his

rat-like face drawn and tense.

"Don't you see how to make it work?" the big redhead parried.

"How do I know?" Hoek almost sobbed. "Our food will last a few months, yes. But I would need more laboratory apparatus. Perhaps one of the other strains . . ." he mused, his wasted face rapt in concentration. "But that would all take money," he went on briskly. He turned jerkily on the Centaurian. "You can get it?"

"Maybe I could," Pinky admitted. "But I don't think we need it. I know why your lichens died, Hoek. I'll have another batch growing within a week."

"Now wait a minute," Bayuk protested. "I told you I've had enough!" The gregarious friendliness had been swept from his fat features.

Looking at him thoughtfully, Pinky nodded briefly and walked across the rocking gel to their link with Castor, the interplanet radio. "Just to make sure you don't call the ship while I'm asleep," he said amiably, wrenching the driver tube from its socket. He dropped it in his jumper. "I really do know how to make this stuff grow. I'll show you in the morning. We'll know by noon."

His sudden, unexpected action had ripped away every shred of pretense. He could see plainly chiselled in Bayuk's face the thought that they were at his mercy as long as the radio's tube remained in his

pocket. The welling resentment of the other two seemed to poison the air with bitterness, yes, and hate.

"This had better be good," Bayuk growled. Hoek, strangely, was equally alarmed at Pinky's obvious intention not to quit.

"Out with it!" he spat shrilly. "What can you do?"

Pinky tried to calm him with a grin. "Just remember a little basic physics," he said soothingly. "First, we'll make the planting bigger. The planting will have proportionately less surface area, and lose less by evaporation. But most important, we'll plant at dawn, not at dusk!"

"Idiot!" Hoek screamed, his frail body quivering with wrath. "The sun will wither it in a few minutes!"

Pinky shook his head sorrowfully. "And you pretend to be a scientist," he marveled. "Can't you see that yanking the water of crystallization out of rocks is an exothermic process? You can't do it without the addition of heat. Look at the gypsum we get our drinking water from. We have to heat the hell out of it to drive out the moisture. How can you possibly expect the lichen acids to pull the water out of rock without getting that heat somewhere? It does get a little water, of course. Each of your plantings at least etched the surface. But as soon as they cooled the rock some, the reaction had to quit, or it slowed down so much that the plant dried out."

"What will you do?" Hoek

sneered. "Put a little heater coil under each lichen, as I did with the slab in my laboratory? You might as well simply calcine the water from the rocks with solar helix power!"

"That's why we plant at dawn," Pinky grinned. "The lichen is black. It will drink heat from Berius like crazy."

IT was a long night for them all. In the close confinement, the tension redoubled. Bayuk's grin was gone. His narrowed, calculating eyes were only half-shrouded by the blue wreaths of smoke from a succession of cigars.

With dawn they took the scout to the edge of the gypsum and threw a single planting on the barren rock, bereft of any protection. The splashes of moisture impelled by its fall had scarcely evaporated before fresh ooings and trickles began to stem from the plant's base. They swelled as the sun climbed the violet sky. Pinky stripped off his sun glove and felt the black, quivering mass. It was steamingly hot! Recalling that some algae could survive the heat of boiling geysers, he cheered himself that the full sun would not kill the weird growth. It battered gruesomely before their eyes. After an hour, there could be no doubt that it was thriving with an all-enveloping swiftness.

"Well?" demanded Pinky the moment they had stripped off their helmets in the barrack.

"It grows! Saints, how it grows!" Hoek replied in a spasm of emotion.

Pinky looked his question at Bayuk. The paunchy Terrestrial's fat features were an enigma. "Well, Bayuk?" he asked at length.

"What about it, Hoek?" Bayuk replied.

"Good Lord, you saw it too," Pinky protested.

"Be quiet," Bayuk told the Centaurian. "Well, Hoek, is he right?"

"How can I think otherwise?" the rat-faced Dutchman demanded. "It grew in the heat of the sun, and water streamed from it. Yes, it works."

"This changes things," Bayuk said thoughtfully, his voice oddly colored.

"Doesn't it?" Hoek mused.

"What the hell," Pinky protested.

"Don't act so shocked. This is what we came here for, isn't it?"

"I thought I told you to be quiet," Bayuk growled, his glance unexpectedly level and direct.

"You told me, and I wasn't," Pinky said in a strained voice. "We've got to fix the other two scouts, and all start planting as fast as we can. Our food won't last forever."

"Well, Hoek?" Bayuk demanded again.

"I think he's right," the botanist said, his pocked face creasing with his grimace.

"All right. I stay," Bayuk said, addressing Pinky again. The Centaurian walked to the radio, the

driver tube in his hand. He stood by it, bracing himself against the sharpening shocks of the incoming tide, his face a study of calculating emotions.

He turned back to the others, tossing the metal canister thoughtfully up and down in his hand. The strange change in Bayuk's manner troubled him. His odd way of addressing Hoek was disquieting. "I think I'll keep this a little longer," he said to them, slipping the tube back in his pocket.

Nearly five months had gone by before their instruments detected significant quantities of water vapor. Pinky's continued possession of the radio's vital part underlined the disappearance of any outward show of friendship. But they had all worked like Trojans. In long rumb lines from their base, they had flown the three little freighters out across the arid waste of the planet, tossing out handfull of the black, foul stuff. What little time they took from planting to inspect its progress showed the lichen to be uniformly viable.

THE first night after they had decided to consider their planting completed, Pinky stepped outside the gel to rid himself of the silent, bitterly resentful company of the others. Berius had set some hours before. High tide had come and gone. The air eddied fitfully. Seven suns of the Dutch Cluster were grouped near the horizon, bril-

liant and baleful in the deep blue sky. Pinky regarded them for many thoughtful minutes. He called Hoek to come outside.

The sweat-wrinkled Dutchman was out in a moment, still adjusting his night helmet of clear silicone to his respirator.

"Look at the Cluster," Pinky directed him.

Hoek studied the stars woodenly. "Well," he said. "Is this all? I've lived in the Cluster all my life. It's nothing to me."

"You don't notice anything?" Pinky insisted.

"Nothing special," Hoek admitted.

"The sky is blue," Pinky persisted.

Hoek shrugged. "Skies are like that," he said acidly.

"Not this one, damn it," Pinky insisted. "This one is *violet*, remember. Not blue. No water vapor!"

The moment Hoek had the idea he leaped to its implications with the speed of thought. "You're mad," he gasped. "No, it couldn't be! That would take years!"

"I thought so, too," Pinky agreed. "And I hate to think how many uncounted trillions of tons of water."

"We'd better tell Bayuk," Hoek said tensely, scuttling for the lock.

"So the sky is blue," Bayuk said with his irritating unconcern for anything Pinky said. "I like blue. I don't care. Blue, violet. What of it?"

"Tell him," Hoek shrilled excitedly, seizing his slide rule from the desk.

"It takes water vapor to make the sky blue," Pinky explained. "And a hell of a lot more than we can believe the lichens have made." Silence greeted his announcement, while they watched Hoek move the slide and jot figures on a pad. He looked up.

"In theory there has been enough solar energy absorbed," he said pensively. "But . . ." The slide moved again. "I thought so. There was not that much water of crystallization in the rock that has been eroded so far.

"Where did it come from, then?" Bayuk demanded irritably.

Hoek was jerking his helmet over his head. "There is still some stock in the greenhouse," he told them nervously. "This thing frightens me!"

Pinky and the Terrestrial exchanged disquietingly veiled glances as the unkempt botanist twitched his way through the air-lock.

His pocked and pitted features were drawn and pale when he came back. He stacked his respirator with lips still tightly drawn. Steadying himself against the drying rack, he swung to face them.

"Well?" Bayuk growled from his chair.

"The solution tears the sandstone completely to pieces," he said tensely.

"What solution?"

"The water from the lichens," Hoek told him, his voice choked and bitter. "Billions! I would have made billions!" He cursed in vicious space Dutch.

"I drained off some of the solution," he told Pinky, apparently realizing that the engineer would understand him better. "I put some sandstone chips in it and heated it. The rock broke down—completely!"

"What do you mean, completely?" Pinky demanded, half-fearful he knew the answer.

"The sludge in the beaker," Hoek said, almost sobbing. "The solution pulled out the water of crystallization, yes, but that was not enough! It is so water-hungry that it yanked oxygen and hydrogen from the compound and made still more water!"

"I don't understand that," Bayuk protested.

"It will do the same to anything," Hoek expanded. "Put bauxite in it, and it would strip off the hydroxyl to make more water! Anything! Any mineral with hydrogen and oxygen in its compound will break down!"

"So what?" Bayuk growled, getting the point. "If some water's good, more is better."

"Not this much more," Pinky declared grimly. "It will make huge seas of it. Castor will drag them around in mile-high tides, sweeping everything before them. The hills and pressure ridges will be broken down by the solution. This will be

a watery planet, one huge, wildly tidal sea!"

The vision of it struck Bayuk deeply. "How soon will this happen?" he gasped. "We must call for a ship at once!"

"Oh, we're not trapped," Pinky said, disgusted with the other's fear. "It will take a year or so."

Bayuk's pallid eyes slowly regained their color. "A year?" he whispered. "A year?" He brightened suddenly. A triumphant grin split his fat face.

"You morons!" he crowed, hurling his cigar from him. "This won't make a bit of difference! Hoek! Wake up, you fool! We can pull out yet!" He turned quickly to Pinky. "Give me that tube," he demanded, lurching to his feet.

"Why?"

"We've got to get news to Castor that the lichen is growing! Have you ever heard of a gold rush? Ships will swarm here like flies, everybody trying to buy a claim from us!"

HOEK was instantly resuscitated. "Saints!" he shrieked. "Yes. Quick, Pinky! The tube!"

"Don't be silly," Pinky said stubbornly. "No one would have time to develop a claim before there was too much water, and you could never kill off the lichen—it's too widespread!"

"Don't be a fool!" Bayuk stormed. "You've got a chance to make a billion-credit killing in a

couple days. Lightning never strikes twice! Give me that tube!" He sprang toward the redhead.

His paunchiness was betraying, Pinky found in the first instant of physical encounter. Months of gruelling labor on Pollux had hardened Bayuk. They were struggling on the gel in an instant. He felt rather than saw Hoek join the fray. It was a wild scramble for a few brief instants, with no weapons more lethal than fists and knees. Pinky tore himself free momentarily. Before either of the others could stop him, he had wrenched the driver tube from his jumper. Still half on his back, with one arm in Hoek's chancery, he hurled the tiny lump of metal and quartz at the sink with all his force. It rang shatteringly, the sound of its sundered filaments plain. Pinky relaxed in their grip.

"Go on," he taunted them, flat on his back. "Now let me see you call Castor!"

The pointlessness of the struggle stopped it. Pinky sat up. "And no spare!" he told them.

Bayuk was squatting on his haunches, his knees on the gel. He could not seem to tear his eyes from the battered wreck of the tube. "You've marooned us!" he gasped.

"No," Pinky said, getting to his feet. "I can get you home, but on my terms."

Hoek squalled like an injured animal. "He wants it all for himself!" he screamed.

Bayuk's broad features darkened

with hate. "Sol" he hissed. "You pious blackmailer! And imagine, I felt a little bad about taking your money! It takes an old fool to be fool enough!" he concluded bitterly.

Pinky felt his senses swim. "You take my money?" he gasped.

"Oh, don't overplay it," Hoek snarled. "I warned you, Bayuk," he told the other shrilly. "We should never have trusted him! I told you to slug him back on Castor! We never should have come here!"

"Partners, eh?" Pinky said bitterly. "No wonder you're so willing to sell claims to the suckers!" He retreated within himself.

"Now, wait," Bayuk said, suddenly all smiles again. "We can't get anywhere this way. You can't leave here yourself without letting us get away, too. I say, Pinky, there's plenty for all of us. We can make a deal. There's no point to your being a pig about this."

Pinky laughed bitterly. "I suppose you crooks couldn't imagine any other motive," he told them. "I don't want any part of it. It's fraud. I won't touch it."

Bayuk was stunned. "You'd turn your back on a fortune?" he gasped.

"Yes, if I had to get it that way," Pinky declared.

"Well, what about us?" Hoek demanded. "We're not such fools!"

Bayuk had still not gotten over the shock of it. "You mean you really thought this was on the level?" he demanded.

"Yes."

The bald Terrestrial roared with laughter. "You are a sucker!" he gasped. "How you fell for that radiogram!" The engineer cursed himself bitterly. Now he could see it. Now he could recall that he had never seen Hoek's money. And it was *Bayuk* who had declared what *his* roll had been worth. Of course, it had all been a scheme to get his forty thousand credits. The expedition hadn't cost a tenth of that!

"You guys certainly fixed me," Pinky said sadly. "Wait till my old man hears about it." He looked at them, his pink face young and guileless. "After all, the Company did owe me my pay!"

"That's right!" Bayuk said earnestly, scenting a chance to salvage something for himself.

"I'll tell you what," said Pinky. "Pay me now for what I put into your little fraud and the ten thousand the Company owes me, and you can have my stock. I don't give a damn what you do with it."

Bayuk frowned. "You mean *now*—literally—today?"

"That's what I mean."

"Well, we can't. It isn't here. We don't have any real money with us."

"It's stashed in my place," Hoek told him.

"And we'll have to sell some stock," Bayuk pointed out. "But the minute we're back on Castor . . ."

"I'll bet," Pinky interrupted

bitterly. "All I ever got from you guys on Castor was a rooking. No thanks. Pay me now. In cash."

Bayuk shrugged hopelessly. "Then it's no deal," he protested.

"I've got to get *something* out of this," Pinky said angrily. "All right, then," he exclaimed with more gusto. "Sell me the lichen process! Let me take that back! Some other planet, under control . . ."

"Don't be a fool, Meinbeer," Hoek told him stiffly. "How many places are there in the Galaxy where it's important to have water? Only the unusual coincidence of a dry planet that had water in its rocks, right in the middle of a lot of other planets poor in minerals makes this place of any value."

"I still want it," Pinky said. "I can't take anything else without being an accessory to your fraud. Sell it to me for my stock!"

Bayuk looked at Hoek. "Why not?" he asked.

He drafted the papers, and Pinky edited them carefully before they wrote duplicate final copies.

"And now, Mr. Lane," Bayuk said heavily. "How will you get us home? How will you signal the spaceship to come and get us?"

"Won't have to," Pinky grinned. "They'll be here in droves any day."

"They?"

"Sure. Anything that flies. Can't you imagine how Pollux looks from Castor right now? With more than

a fifth of the surface covered with that black growth? Somebody'll catch on pretty quick. They'll be thick as flies."

IN little more than a week Pinky sat across the table from Freddy in the Holland House Casino, killing the last hours until his ship left for Berius IV. He had wound up his affairs in the Dutch Cluster. Bart had been paid for his advance from the funds that finally arrived on Three. Pinky had registered his purchase of the lichen process and had valid title to it. Nothing more remained than to break the news to his father.

The screaming swirl of water-filled air to the east, as the tide ran swiftly toward its flood, bulged and sagged the silica gel walls. The floor rippled and fluttered in unbroken tremors heralding the approaching crest of the land tide.

Freddy beat him with twenty, the sound of the card on the baize soft in the quiet Casino. Pinky bet another guilder. He heard the sound and turned to see that Bart had taken the stool next to him.

"Deal me in, Freddy," the gambler said softly, lifting a stack of chips from the rack.

"Hello, Mr. Bartalucia," Pinky said unenthusiastically.

"Going home, kid?" Bart asked, rapping a knuckle on the baize for a bit.

"Nothing to hang around here for," Pinky confessed.

"They took you, did they?" Bart asked acidly, turning up twenty-one. Freddy went bust trying to match it. He paid them both.

"You could call it that," Pinky said, barely audibly. "They got my stock, if that's what you mean."

"That's what your old man will call it," Bart reminded him.

"Probably."

"So it cost you fifty thousand to find out that they had conned you for fair?"

"Uh huh."

"You must be an awful sap, Pinky, that's the truth," Bart growled huskily. "I hear those two crooks fell into something good up there, and are cleaning up."

"So they say," Pinky admitted, thinking earnestly about how Bart knew Bayuk had been the brains of the swindle.

"And with all that dough floating around, you couldn't find a way to make a little stick to you?" Bart insisted.

Freddy dealt again. Pinky had fourteen. "Hit me," he said tonelessly. Freddy's eyes flickered to Bart's for an instant. Somehow Pinky felt that a signal had passed between them. Freddy gave him a seven.

"Twenty-one," Pinky said. "I couldn't find any way to get rich dealing with those birds," he admitted, in answer to Bart's question. "I just can't see getting in a league with people you know are crooked, Mr. Bartalucia."

"What the hell," the gambler protested, as Freddy dealt again. "You were partners with them two weeks ago."

"Mr. Bayuk sort of took me since then," Pinky pointed out. He turned up the ace and queen of spades. "Black Jack," he said. Freddy paid him one and a half for one.

"You're lucky tonight," Bart told him. "Don't pinch down. Let it ride." Pinky restrained his finger.

"Okay," he said. He caught another black jack. Bart lost.

After his seventh straight win, Pinky felt his face redden. Freddy was dealing from the bottom, only with a difference. He made Pinky win every time. When the dealer took his stack of one-guilder chips and gave him hundreds instead, Pinky knew he had a pile.

"Very lucky tonight," Bart said with the soft insouciance of the professional gambler. "Sometimes a guy can't lose."

"Like you, eh, Bart?" Pinky asked.

"You're taking my shirt," Bart told him without emotion, as Pinky won another hand. He let the stack ride. He knew there were sixty thousand guilders in it. One more win and he'd have recouped all that he had lost on Castor and Pollux.

Freddy dealt again. "No," Pinky said. "That's not what I meant. I mean about things on Castor. And Pollux. I guess you figure to skim.

a little off the top of what Hoek and Bayuk are making, eh?"

Bart smiled slightly. "Some," he admitted. "Although you are draining away what I might call a fair share of it right now."

Pinky looked at his cards. He had the ace and queen of clubs. Black jack again. He raised his blue eyes to Freddy. "Hit me," he said.

The dealer started in spite of his professional composure. Pinky turned to look at Bart, smiling slightly. Without looking at the card Freddy dealt him he said, "That breaks me," and turned them all face down. Freddy slowly drew the chips to himself.

Bart frowned. "I've seen everything," he said.

"I don't want a piece of that outfit, no matter how I get it," Pinky said. "Anyway, Mr. Bartalucia, you don't have to worry about me. I'll make out all right. I'm really only worried about you. Something tells me this is one time you don't cut in on somebody's grit."

Bart's laugh rustled in his throat. "Forget it, kid. I *always* make out."

Pinky shook his head doubtfully.

"Bayuk's laundry marks were Dutch," Bart said. "Barney turned that up. Terrestrial! Why that shifty grifter has a record in the Cluster as long as your arm!"

"I'm glad you said it for me, Mr. Bartalucia," Pinky grinned. "No, I guess you'll make out." He picked

his slicker off an unoccupied stool. "Time for my ship," he said. "It's been a real experience."

Bart eyed him thoughtfully. "I hope I'm not underestimating you, kid," he said. "When I see a guy hit twenty-one, it makes me think. Maybe you should stick around a while, too."

"You mean like Hoek and Bayuk?" Pinky asked.

"They're not going anywhere until I get mine," Bart confessed.

Pinky laughed. "If you figure you can buy any drinks with ten percent of what I got," he told the gambler, "It'll be a long dry summer."

"Okay, Pinky," Bart grinned. "Better luck another time."

PINKY did not begin to relax until the Interstellar ship blasted away from Berius IV toward Centaurus. He had not been sure how far Bart's arm reached in the Cluster. Bayuk and Hoek were trapped, he knew. Bart would not let them out of his sight until the lichen had proven itself. That would be long enough for the swindlers' intended victims to discover Polux's eventual fate and get their money back.

He decided that he was the only winner in the game of double-cross. Fondly he removed the official registry document from his pocket. The lichen process was absolutely, incontestably his!

"Fifty thousand credits," he

mused, "What a price!" He grinned at the recollection of what Hoek had said about the solution of lichen acid.

"Put bauxite in it, and it would strip off the hydroxyl to make more water!"

He could see it now. A big steel tank. Load it with crushed bauxite. Cover it with the solution. Heat. Drain off the liquor when the reac-

tion had ended. Save what was left.

What was left? Oh, yes. Metallic aluminum. Freed from its hydroxyl radical by the formation of water, the virgin metal would be produced at a third the cost of the electrolytic process. He had the unmistakable feeling one of the great fortunes of the Galaxy was about to be founded.

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