



World Beyond Pluto

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About Marlowe:

Stephen Marlowe (born Milton Lesser, 7 August 1928 in Brooklyn, NY, died 22 February 2008, in Williamsburg, Virginia) was an American author of science fiction, mystery novels, and fictional autobiographies of Christopher Columbus, Spanish author Miguel de Cervantes, and Edgar Allan Poe. He is best known for his detective character Chester Drum, whom he created in the 1955 novel *The Second Longest Night*. Lesser also wrote under the pseudonyms Adam Chase, Andrew Frazer, C.H. Thames, Jason Ridgway and Ellery Queen. He was awarded the French Prix Gutenberg du Livre in 1988, and in 1997 he was awarded the "Life Achievement Award" by the Private Eye Writers of America. He lived with his wife Ann in Williamsburg, Virginia.

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They loaded the over-age spaceship at night because Triton's one spaceport was too busy with the oreships from Neptune during the day to handle it.

"Symphonies!" Pitchblend Hardesty groaned. Pitchblend Hardesty was the stevedore foreman and he had supervised upwards of a thousand loadings on Triton's crowded blastways, everything from the standard mining equipment to the innards of a new tavern for Triton City's so-called Street of Sin to special anti-riot weapons for the Interstellar Penitentiary not 54 miles from Triton City, but never a symphony orchestra. And most assuredly never, never an all-girl symphony orchestra.

"Symphonies!" Pitchblend Hardesty groaned again as several stevedores came out on the blastway lugging a harp, a base fiddle and a kettle drum.

"Come off it, Pitchblend," one of the stevedores said with a grin. "I didn't see you staying away from the music hall."

That was true enough, Pitchblend Hardesty had to admit. He was a small, wiry man with amazing strength in his slim body and the lore of a solar system which had been bypassed by thirtieth century civilization for the lures of interstellar exploration in his brain. While the symphony—the all-girl symphony—had been playing its engagement at Triton's make-shift music hall, Hardesty had visited the place three times.

"Well, it wasn't the music, sure as heck," he told his critic now. "Who ever saw a hundred girls in one place at one time on Triton?"

The stevedore rolled his eyes and offered Pitchblend a suggestive whistle. Hardesty booted him in the rump, and the stevedore had all he could do to stop from falling into the kettle drum.

Just then a loud bell set up a lonely tolling and Pitchblend Hardesty exclaimed: "Prison break!"

The bell could be heard all over the two-hundred square miles of inhabitable Triton, under the glassite dome which enclosed the small city, the spaceport, the immigration station for nearby Neptune and the Interstellar Penitentiary. The bell hadn't tolled for ten years; the last time it had tolled, Pitchblend Hardesty had been a newcomer on Neptune's big moon. That wasn't surprising, for Interstellar Penitentiary was as close to escape-proof as a prison could be.

"All right, all right," Pitchblend snapped. "Hurry up and get her loaded."

"What's the rush?" one of the stevedores asked. "The gals ain't even arrived from the hotel yet."

"I'll tell you what the rush is," Pitchblend declared as the bell tolled again. "If you were an escaped prisoner on Triton, just where would you head?"

"Why, I don't know for sure, Pitchblend."

"Then I'll tell you where. You'd head for the spaceport, fast as your legs could carry you. You'd head for an out-going spaceship, because it would be your only hope. And how many out-going spaceships are there tonight?"

"Why, just two or three."

"Because all our business is in the daytime. So if the convict was smart enough to get out, he'll be smart enough to come here."

"We got no weapons," the stevedore said. "We ain't even got a pea-shooter."

"Weapons on Triton? You kidding? A frontier moon like this, the place would be blasted apart every night. Interstelpen couldn't hold all the disturbers of the peace if we had us some guns."

"But the convict—"

"Yeah," Pitchblend said grimly. "He'll be armed, all right."

Pitchblend rushed back to the manifest shed as the bell tolled a third time. He got on the phone and called the desk of the Hotel Triton.

"Hardesty over at the spaceport," he said. "Loading foreman."

"Loading foreman?" The mild, antiseptic voice at the other end of the connection said it as you would say talking dinosaur.

"Yeah, loading foreman. At night I'm in charge here. Listen, you the manager?"

"The manager—" haughtily—"is asleep. I am the night clerk."

"O.K., then. You tell those hundred girls of yours to hurry. Don't scare them, but have you heard about the prison break?"

"Heard about it? It's all I've been hearing. They—they want to stay and see what happens."

"Don't let 'em!" roared Pitchblend. "Use any excuse you have to. Tell 'em we got centrifugal-upigal and perihelion-peritonitus over here at the spaceport, or any darn thing. Tell 'em if they want to blast off tonight, they'll have to get down here quick. You got it?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then do it." Pitchblend hung up.

The escape bell tolled a fourth time.

His name was House Bartock, he had killed two guards in his escape, and he was as desperate as a man could be. He had been sentenced to Interstelpen for killing a man on Mars in this enlightened age when capital punishment had been abolished. Recapture thus wouldn't mean death, but the prison authorities at Interstelpen could make their own interpretations of what life-in-prison meant. If House Bartock allowed himself to be retaken, he would probably spend the remaining years of his life in solitary confinement.

He walked quickly now, but he did not run. He had had an impulse to run when the first escape bell had tolled, but that would have been foolish. Already he was on the outskirts of Triton City because they had not discovered his escape for two precious hours. He could hole up in the city, lose himself somewhere. But that would only be temporary.

They would find him eventually.

Or, he could make his way to the spaceport. He had money in his pocket—the dead guard's. He had a guardsman's uniform on, but stripped of its insignia it looked like the jumper and top-boots of any spaceman. He had false identification papers, if needed, which he had worked on for two years in the prison printshop where the prison newspaper was published. He had... .

Suddenly he flattened himself on the ground to one side of the road, hugging the gravel and hardly daring to breathe. He'd heard a vehicle coming from the direction of Interstelpen. It roared up, making the ground vibrate; its lights flashed; it streaked by trailing a jet of fire.

House Bartock didn't move until the afterglow had faded. Then he got up and walked steadily along the road which led from Interstelpen to Triton City.

"Girls! Hurry with your packing! Girls!"

Sighing, Matilda Moriarity subsided. The girls, obviously, were in no hurry. That would have been out of character.

Matilda Moriarity sighed again. She was short, stocky, fifty-two years old and the widow of a fabulously wealthy interstellar investment broker. She had a passion for classical music and, now that her husband had been dead three years, she had decided to exercise that passion. But for Matilda Moriarity, a very out-going fifty-two, exercising it had meant passing it on. The outworlds, Matilda had told her friends, lacked culture. The highest form of culture, for Matilda, was classical music. Very well. She would bring culture to the outworlds.

Triton was her first try and even now sometimes she had to pinch herself so she'd know the initial attempt had been a smashing success. She didn't delude herself completely. It had been a brainstorm selecting only girls—and pretty young things, at that—for the Interstellar Symphony. On a world like Triton, a world which played host to very few women and then usually to the hard types who turned up on any frontier in any century, a symphony of a hundred pretty girls was bound to be a success.

But the music, Matilda Moriarity told herself. They had listened to the music. If they wanted to see the girls in their latest Earth-style evening gowns, they had to listen to the music. And they had listened quietly, earnestly, apparently enjoying it. The symphony had remained on Triton longer than planned, playing every night to a full house. Matilda had had the devil's own time chaperoning her girls, but that was to be expected. It was their first taste of the outworlds; it was the outworlds' first taste of them. The widow Moriarity had had her hands full, all right. But secretly, she had enjoyed every minute of it.

"They say the bell means a prison break!" First Violin squealed excitedly. First Violin was twenty-two, an Earth girl named Jane Cummings and a student at the conservatory on Sirtus Major on Mars, but to the widow Moriarity she was, and would remain, First Violin. That way, calling the girls after their instruments, the widow Moriarity could convince herself that her symphonic music had been of prime importance on Triton, and her lovely young charges of secondary importance.

"How many times do I have to tell you to hurry?"

"But these gowns—"

"Will need a pressing when you return to Mars anyway."

"And a prison break. I never saw a prison break before. It's so exciting."

"You're not going to see it. You're just going to hear about it. Come on, come on, all of you."

At that moment the room phone rang.

"Hello?" the widow Moriarity said.

"This is Jenkins, ma'am, desk. The spaceport called a few minutes ago. I'm not supposed to frighten you, but, well, they're rather worried about the prison break. The escaped convict, they figure, will head for the spaceport. Disguised, he could—"

"Let him try masquerading as a member of *my* group!" the widow Moriarity said with a smile.

"All the same, if you could hurry—"

"We are hurrying, young man."

"Yes, ma'am."

The widow Moriarity hung up. "Gi-irls!"

The girls squealed and laughed and dawdled.

House Bartock felt like laughing.

He'd just had his first big break, and it might turn out to be the only one he needed. On an impulse, he had decided to strike out directly for the spaceport. He had done so, and now stood on the dark tarmac between the manifest shed and the pilot-barracks. And, not ten minutes after he had reached the spacefield a cordon of guards rushed there from Interstelpen had been stationed around the field. Had Bartock arrived just a few minutes later, he would have been too late, his capture only a matter of time. As it was now, though, he had a very good chance of getting away. Circumstances were in his favor.

He could get so far away that they would never find him.

It was simple. Get off Triton on a spaceship. Go anyplace that had a big spaceport, and manage to tranship out in secret. Then all the police would have to search would be a few quadrillion square miles of space!

But first he had to leave Triton.

From the activity at the port, he could see that three ships were being made ready for blastoff. Two of them were purely cargo-carriers, but the third—Bartock could tell because he saw hand-luggage being loaded—would carry passengers. His instinct for survival must have been working overtime: he knew that the third ship would be his best bet, for if he were discovered and pursued, hostages might make the difference between recapture and freedom.

Bartock waited patiently in the darkness outside the pilot-barracks. The only problem was, how to discover which pilot belonged to which ship?

The cordon of police from Interstelpen had set up several score arc-lights on the perimeter of the field. The spaces between the lights were patrolled by guards armed, as Bartock was, with blasters. Bartock could never have made it through that cordon now. But it wasn't necessary. He was already inside.

The barracks door opened, and a pilot came out. Tensing, ready, Bartock watched him.

The three ships were scattered widely on the field, *Venus Bell* to the north, *Star of Hercules* to the south, *Mozart's Lady* to the east. *Venus Bell* and *Star of Hercules* were straight cargo carriers. *Mozart's Lady*—what

a queer name for a spaceship, Bartock couldn't help thinking—had taken in hand luggage. So if the pilot who had just left the barracks headed east, Bartock would take him. The pilot paused outside, lit a cigarette, hummed a tune. The scent of tobacco drifted over to Bartock. He waited.

The pilot walked east toward *Mozart's Lady*.

"Ready, girls?"

"Ready, Mrs. Moriarity. But couldn't we—well—sort of hang around until we see what happens?"

"You mean the escaped convict?"

"Yes, ma'am." Hopefully.

"They'll catch him. They always catch them."

"But—"

"Come on."

"Aw, gosh, Mrs. Moriarity."

"I said, come on."

Reluctantly, the hundred girls trooped with their chaperone from the hotel.

Bartock struck swiftly and without mercy.

The blaster would make too much noise. He turned it around, held it by the barrel, and broke the pilot's skull with it. In the darkness he changed clothing for the second time that night, quickly, confidently, his hands steady. In the darkness he could barely make out the pilot's manifest. The man's ship was *Mozart's Lady*, all right. Outbound from Triton City for Mars. Well, Bartock thought, he wouldn't go to Mars. Assuming they learned what ship he had boarded, they would be guarding the inner orbits too closely.

He would take *Mozart's Lady* daringly outward, beyond Neptune's orbit. Naturally, the ship wouldn't have interstellar drive, but as yet Bartock wasn't going interstellar. You couldn't have everything. You couldn't expect a starship on Triton, could you? So Bartock would take *Mozart's Lady* outward to Pluto's orbit—and wait. From the amount of hand luggage taken aboard, *Mozart's Lady* would be carrying quite a number of passengers. If that number were reduced—drastically reduced—the food, water and air aboard would last for many months. Until the fuss died down. Until Bartock could bring *Mozart's Lady*, long since given up for lost, in for a landing on one of the inner planets... .

Now he dragged the dead pilot's body into the complete darkness on the south side of the pilot-barracks, wishing he could hide it better but knowing he didn't have the time or the means.

Then he walked boldly across the tarmac, wearing a pilot's uniform, toward *Mozart's Lady*.

Fifteen minutes later, House Bartock watched with amazement while a hundred pretty young women boarded the ship. Of all the things that had happened since his escape, this came closest to unnerving him, for it was the totally unexpected. Bartock shrugged, chain-smoked three cigarettes while the women boarded slowly, taking last-minute looks at dark Triton, the spaceport, the cordon of guards, the arc-lights. Bartock cursed impotently. Seconds were precious now. The pilot's body might be found. If it were...

At last the port clanged shut and the ground-crew tromped away. Since even an over-age ship like *Mozart's Lady* was close to ninety percent automatic, there was no crew. Only the pilot—who was Bartock—and the passengers.

Bartock was about to set the controls for blastoff when he heard footsteps clomp-clomping down the companionway. He toyed with the idea of locking the door, then realized that would arouse suspicion.

A square woman's face over a plump middle-aged figure.

"I'm Mrs. Moriarity, pilot. I have a hundred young girls aboard. We'll have no nonsense."

"No, sir. I mean, no ma'am."

"Well, make sure."

"Yes, ma'am."

"And I want an easy trip, without fuss or incidents. For half of our girls it's the second time in space—the first being when they came out here. You understand?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"What happened to the pilot who took us out?"

"Uh, pressed into service last week on a Mercury run. I'm surprised the control board didn't tell you."

"They didn't. It doesn't matter. You do your job, and that's all."

"Yes, ma'am," House Bartock said. "Just my job."

A few moments later, *Mozart's Lady* blasted off.

"Stop! Hey, wait!" Pitchblend Hardesty bawled at the top of his voice. But it didn't do any good. The police rushed up behind Pitchblend, not daring to fire.

Moments before, they had found the dead pilot's body.

They knew at once what it meant, of course. They had been not more than a minute too late.

"Call Central Control on Neptune," a police officer said. "We'll send a cruiser after them."

"Won't do any good," Pitchblend Hardesty groaned.

"What are you talking about, fellow?"

"Unless the cruiser's brand new."

"On Neptune? Don't be silly. Newest one we've got is ten years old."

"Like I said, won't do any good. I worked that ship over, mister. I know what she's like inside. She may look like an over-age tub on the outside, but don't let that fool you. She's got power, mister. She's probably the fastest thing this side of the Jovian moons, except for those experimental one-man rocket-bombs down at Neptune Station. But chasing a big tub in a one-man space-bound coffin—" here Pitchblend used the vernacular for the tiny one-man experimental ships—"ain't going to do anybody any good. Best thing you can do is track *Mozart's Lady* by radar and hope she'll head sunward. Then they could intercept her closer in."

But *Mozart's Lady* did not head sunward. Radar tracking confirmed this moments later. *Mozart's Lady* was outward bound for Pluto's orbit. And, with Pluto and Neptune currently in conjunction, that could even mean a landing, although, the police decided, that wasn't likely. There were no settlements on Pluto. Pluto was too weird. For the strangest reason in a solar system and a galaxy of wonders, Pluto was quite uninhabitable. More likely, *Mozart's Lady* would follow Pluto's orbit around, then make a dash sunward... .

The radar officer threw up his hands. "I give up," he said. "She's heading for Pluto's orb all right. Call Neptune Station."

"Neptune Station, sir?"

"You bet. This job's too big for me. The brass will want to handle it."

Seconds later, sub-space crackled with energy as the call was put through from Triton City to Neptune Station.

Whatever else history would write about him, it would certainly call Johnny Mayhem the strangest—and literally most death-defying—test-pilot in history. Of course, testing the sleek experimental beauties out of Neptune Station and elsewhere wasn't Mayhem's chief occupation. He was, in a phrase, a trouble-shooter for the Galactic League. Whenever he had a spare few weeks, having completed an assignment ahead of

schedule in his latest of bodies, he was likely to turn up at some testing station or other and volunteer for work. He was never turned down, although the Galactic League didn't approve. Mayhem was probably the galaxy's best pilot, with incredible reflexes and an utter indifference toward death.

For the past two weeks, having completed what turned out to be an easier-than-expected assignment on Neptune, he had been piloting the space-bound coffins out of Neptune Station, and with very satisfactory experimental results.

A few minutes ago he had been called into the station director's office, but when he entered he was surprised to see the Galactic League Firstman of Neptune waiting for him.

"Surprised, eh?" the Firstman demanded.

"I'll bet you want me to quit test-flying," Mayhem said with a smile which, clearer than words, told the Firstman his advice would be rejected.

The Firstman smiled too, "Why, no, Mayhem. As a matter of fact, I want you to take one of the coffins into deep space."

"Maybe something's wrong with my hearing," Mayhem said.

"No. You heard it right. Of course, it's up to you. Everything you do, you volunteer."

"Let's hear it, Firstman."

So the Firstman of Neptune told Johnny Mayhem about *Mozart's Lady* which, six hours ago, had left Triton for Pluto's orbit with an eccentric wealthy widow, a hundred girls, and a desperate escaped killer.

"The only thing we have out here fast enough to overtake them, Mayhem, is the one-man coffins. The only man we have who can fly them is you. What do you say?"

Mayhem's answer was a question, but the question didn't really require an answer. Mayhem asked: "What are we waiting for?"

The Firstman grinned. He had expected such an answer, of course. The whole galaxy, let alone the solar system, knew the Mayhem legend. Every world which had an Earthman population and a Galactic League post, however small, had a body in cold storage, waiting for Johnny Mayhem if his services were required. But of course no one knew precisely when Mayhem's services might be required. No one knew exactly under what circumstances the Galactic League Council, operating from the hub of the Galaxy, might summon Mayhem. And only a very few people, including those at the Hub and the Galactic League Firstmen on

civilized worlds and Observers on primitive worlds, knew the precise mechanics of Mayhem's coming.

Johnny Mayhem, a bodiless sentience. Mayhem—Johnny Marlow, then—who had been chased from Earth, a pariah and a criminal, eight years ago, who had been mortally wounded on a wild planet deep within the Saggitarian Swarm, whose life had been saved—after a fashion—by the white magic of that planet. Mayhem, doomed now to possible immortality as a bodiless sentience, an *elan*, which could occupy and activate a corpse if it had been frozen properly ... an *elan* doomed to wander eternally because it could not remain in one body for more than a month without body and *elan* perishing. Mayhem, who had dedicated his strange, lonely life to the service of the Galactic League because a normal life and normal social relations were not possible for him... .

"One thing, Mayhem," the Firstman said, now, on Neptune. "How much longer you have in that body of yours?"

"Five days. Possibly six."

"That doesn't give you much time. If you're caught out there when your month is up—"

"I won't be. We're wasting time talking about it."

"—it would mean your death."

"Then let's get started."

The Firstman stared at him levelly. "You're a brave man, Mayhem."

"Let's say I'm not afraid to die. I've been a living dead man for eight years. Come on."

One of the so-called coffins, a tiny one-man ship barely big enough for a prone man, food concentrates and water, was already waiting at the station spacefield.

Ten minutes after hearing about *Mozart's Lady*, without fanfare, Mayhem blasted off in pursuit.

Maintaining top speed all the way, House Bartock brought *Mozart's Lady* across almost two billion miles of space from Neptune's to Pluto's orbit in three days. He was delighted with the speed. It would have taken the average space-tub ten days to two weeks and, since as far as Bartock knew there were nothing but average space-tubs on Neptune, that gave him a considerable head-start.

It was Jane Cummings-First Violin who discovered Bartock's identity. Bartock was studying the star-map at the time and considered himself safe from discovery because he kept the control door of *Mozart's*

Lady locked. However, Jane Cummings had established something of a liaison with the pilot outward bound from Earth and Mars, so she had been given a spare key which she'd kept, secretly, all the time the symphony was on Triton. Now, curious about the new pilot for the same reason that the miners on Triton had been curious about the symphony, Jane made her way forward, inserted her key in the lock, and pushed open the control door.

"Hello there," she said.

House Bartock whirled. The turning of a key in the lock had so unnerved him—it was the last thing he expected—that he forgot to shut off the star-map. Its tell-tale evidence glowed on the wall over his head.

"What do you want?" he managed to ask politely.

"Oh, just to say hello."

"You already said it."

Jane Cummings pouted. "You needn't bite my head off. What's your name? Mine's Jane, and I play the violin. It wouldn't hurt you to be polite."

Bartock nodded, deciding that a little small talk wouldn't hurt if he could keep the girl from becoming suspicious. That was suddenly important. If this girl had a key to the control room, for all he knew there could be others.

"My, you have been hurrying," Jane said. "I could tell by the acceleration. You must be trying to break the speed records or something. I'll bet we're almost to Earth—"

Her voice trailed off and her mouth hung open. At first Bartock didn't know what was the matter. Then he saw where she was staring.

The star-map.

"We're not heading for Earth!" she cried.

Bartock walked toward her. "Give me that key," he said. "You're going to have to stay here with me. Give me that key."

Jane backed away. "You—you couldn't be our pilot. If you were—"

"The key. I don't want to hurt you."

Bartock lunged. Jane turned and ran, slamming the door behind her. It clanged, and echoed. The echo didn't stop. Bartock, on the point of opening the door and sprinting down the companionway after her, stopped.

It wasn't the echo of metal slamming against metal. It was the radar warning.

Either *Mozart's Lady* was within dangerous proximity of a meteor, or a ship was following them.

Bartock ran to the radar screen.

The pip was unmistakable. A ship was following them.

A ship as fast—or faster—than *Mozart's Lady*.

Cursing, Bartock did things with the controls. *Mozart's Lady*, already straining, increased its speed. Acceleration flung Bartock back in the pilot's chair. Pluto loomed dead ahead.

Johnny Mayhem knew at what precise moment he had been discovered, for suddenly the speed of *Mozart's Lady* increased. Since this had occurred an hour and a half after Mayhem had first got a clear pip of the bigger ship on his radar, it meant he'd been spotted.

Prone with his hands stretched forward in the coffin-like experimental ship, Mayhem worked the controls, exactly matching speed with *Mozart's Lady*.

He tried to put himself in the position of the escaped convict. What would he do? His best bet would be to swing in close around Pluto, as close as he dared. Then, on the dark side of the planet, to change his orbit abruptly and come loose of its gravitational field in a new direction. It was a dangerous maneuver, but since the escaped convict now knew for sure that the tiny ship could match the speed of *Mozart's Lady*, it was his only hope. The danger was grave: even a first-rate pilot would try it only as a last resort, for the gravitational pull of Pluto might upset *Mozart's Lady's* orbit. If that happened, the best the convict could hope for was an emergency landing. More likely, a death-crash would result.

Seconds later, Mayhem's thinking was confirmed. *Mozart's Lady* executed a sharp turn in space and disappeared behind the white bulk of Pluto.

Mayhem swore and followed.

"He's trying to kill us all!"

"He doesn't know how to pilot a ship! We're helpless, helpless!"

"Do something, Mrs. Moriarity!"

"Now girls, whatever happens, you must keep calm. We can only assume that Jane was right about what she saw, but since none of us can pilot a spaceship, we'll have to bide our time... ."

"Bide our time!"

"We're all as good as dead!"

One of the girls began screaming.

Mrs. Moriarity slapped her. "I'm sorry, dear. I had to hit you. Your behavior bordered on the hysterical. And if we become hysterical we are lost, lost, do you understand?"

"Yes'm."

"Good. Then we wait and see what happens."

What was happening was an attempt at what test-pilots term planet-swinging. Moving in the direction of Pluto's orbit, *Mozart's Lady* swung in very close behind the planet. Then, as the rotation of Pluto on its axis hurled it forth again, as a sling-shot hurls a pellet, *Mozart's Lady's* rockets would alter the expected direction of flight. Unless a pursuing ship followed exactly the same maneuver, it would be flung off into space at top-speed in the wrong direction. It might be hours before the first ship's trail could be picked up again—if ever.

House Bartock, aware of all this—and one other factor—sat sweating it out at the controls.

The one other factor was closeness to Pluto. For if you got too close, and the difference was only a matter of miles covered in an elapsed time of mili-seconds, Pluto might drag you into a landing orbit. If that happened, traveling at tremendous speed, there'd be the double danger of overheating in the planet's atmosphere and coming down too hard. Either way the results could be fatal.

His hands sweating, Bartock struggled with the controls. Now already he could see Pluto bulking, its night-side black and mysterious, in the viewport. Now he could hear the faint shrill scream of its atmosphere. Now... .

Trying to time it perfectly, he slammed on full power.

A fraction of a mili-second too late.

Mozart's Lady stood for an instant on its tail, shuddering as if it were going to come apart and rain meteoric dust over Pluto's surface. That had happened too in such a maneuver, but it didn't happen now.

Instead, *Mozart's Lady* went into a landing orbit.

But its speed was still terrific and, lowering, it whizzed twice around Pluto's fifteen thousand mile circumference in twenty minutes. Atmosphere screamed, the heat siren shrilled, and a cursing House Bartock applied the braking rockets as fast as he could.

Pluto's surface blurred in the viewport, coming closer at dizzying speed. Bartock stood *Mozart's Lady* on its tail a second time, this time on purpose.

The ship shuddered, and struck Pluto.

Bartock blacked out.

When Mayhem's radar screen informed him that *Mozart's Lady* had failed to break free of Pluto's field of gravity, Mayhem immediately went

to work. First he allowed the tiny scout-ship to complete its planet-swing successfully, then he slowed down, turned around in deep space, and came back, scanning Pluto with radar scopes and telescope until he located the bigger ship. That might have taken hours or days ordinarily, but having seen *Mozart's Lady* go in, and having recorded its position via radar, Mayhem had a pretty good idea as to the landing orbit it would follow.

It took him three-quarters of an hour to locate the bigger ship. When he finally had located it, he brought it into close-up with the more powerful of the two telescopes aboard the scout.

Mozart's Lady lay on its side in a snow-tundra. It had been damaged, but not severely. Part of the visible side was caved in, but the ship had not fallen apart. Still, chances were that without extensive repairs it would not be able to leave Pluto.

There was no way, Mayhem knew, of making extensive repairs on Pluto. *Mozart's Lady* was there to stay.

The safe thing to do would be to inform Neptune and wait in space until the police cruisers came for House Bartock. The alternative was to planetfall near *Mozart's Lady*, take the convict into custody, and then notify Neptune.

If Bartock were alone the choice would have been an easy one. But Bartock was not alone. He had a hundred girls with him. He was desperate. He might try anything.

Mayhem had to go down after him.

The trouble was, though, that of all the worlds in the galaxy—not merely in Sol System—Pluto was the one most dangerous to Johnny Mayhem. He had been pursuing House Bartock for three days. Which meant he had two days left before it was imperative that he leave his current body. This would mean notifying the hub of the Galaxy by sub-space radio to pull out his *elan*, but Pluto's heavyside layer was the strongest in the solar system, so strong that sub-space radio couldn't penetrate it.

And that was not the only thing wrong with Pluto. It was, in fact, an incredible anomaly of a world. Almost four billion miles from the sun at its widest swing, it still was not too cold to support life. Apparently radioactive heat in its core kept it warm. It even had an Earth-type atmosphere, although the oxygen-content was somewhat too rich and apt to make you giddy. And it was a slow world.

Time moved slowly on Pluto. Too slowly. When you first landed, according to the few explorers who had attempted it, the native fauna seemed like statues. Their movement was too slow for the eye to register. That was lucky, for the fauna tended to be enormous and deadly. But after a while—how long a while Mayhem didn't know—the fauna, subjectively, seemed to speed up. The animals commenced moving slowly, then a bit faster, then normally. That, Mayhem knew, was entirely subjective. The animals of Pluto were not changing their rate of living: the visitor to Pluto was slowing down to match their laggard pace.

Two days, thought Mayhem. That was all he had. And, hours after he landed, he'd start to slow down. There was absolutely no way of telling how much time elapsed once that happened, for the only clocks that did not go haywire on Pluto were spring-wind clocks, and there hadn't been a spring-wind clock in the solar system for a hundred and fifty years.

Result? On Pluto Mayhem would slow down. Once he reached Pluto's normal time rate it might take him, say, ten minutes to run—top-speed—from point A to point B, fifteen yards apart. Subjectively, a split-second of time would have gone by in that period.

Two days would seem like less than an hour, and Mayhem would have no way of judging how much less.

If he didn't get off Pluto in two days he would die.

If he didn't land, House Bartock, growing desperate and trying to scare him off or trying to keep control of the hundred girls while he made a desperate and probably futile attempt to repair the damaged *Mozart's Lady*, might become violent.

Mayhem called Neptune, and said: "Bartock crash-landed on Pluto, geographical coordinates north latitude thirty-three degrees four minutes, west longitude eighteen degrees even. I'm going down. That's all."

He didn't wait for an answer.

He brought the space-bound coffin down a scant three miles from *Mozart's Lady*. Here, though, the tundra of Pluto was buckled and convoluted, so that two low jagged ranges of snow-clad hills separated the ships.

Again Mayhem didn't wait. He went outside, took a breath of near-freezing air, and stalked up the first range of hills. He carried a blaster buckled to his belt.

When he saw the scout-ship come down, Bartock didn't wait either. He might have waited had he known anything about what Pluto did to the time-sense. But he did not know. He only knew, after a quick inspection, that the controls of *Mozart's Lady* had been so badly damaged that repair was impossible.

He knew too that the scout-ship had reported his whereabouts. He had, on regaining consciousness, been in time to intercept the radio message. True, it would take any other Neptune-stationed ship close to two weeks to reach Pluto, so Bartock had some temporal leeway. But obviously whoever was pursuing him in the one-man ship had not come down just to sit and wait. He was out there in the snow somewhere. Well, Bartock would go out too, would somehow manage to elude his pursuer, to get behind him, reach the scout-ship and blast off in it. And, in the event that anything went wrong, he would have a hostage.

He went arearships to select one.

Went with his desperation shackled by an iron nerve.

And a blaster in his hand.

"... very lucky," Matilda Moriarity was saying, trying to keep the despair from her voice. "We have some cuts and bruises, but no serious casualties. Why, we might have all been killed."

"Lucky, she says! We're marooned here. Marooned—with a killer."

Before the widow Moriarity could defend her choice of words, if she was going to defend them, House Bartock came into the rear lounge, where the entire symphony and its chaperone was located. They would have locked the door, of course; they had locked it ever since they had learned who Bartock was. But the door, buckled and broken, had been one of the casualties of the crash-landing.

"You," Bartock said.

He meant Jane Cummings.

"Me?"

"Yes, you. We're going outside."

"Out—side?"

"That's what I said. Let's get a move on."

Jane Cummings didn't move.

The widow Moriarity came between her and Bartock. "If you must take anyone, take me," she said bravely.

"The girl."

Still the widow Moriarity didn't move.

House Bartock balled his fist and hit her. Three of the girls caught her as she fell. None of them tried to do anything about Bartock, who had levelled his blaster at Jane Cummings.

Trembling, she went down the companionway with him.
A fierce cold wind blew as they opened the airlock door.

It looked like a sea-serpent floundering in the snow.

Only, it was caught in the act of floundering, like an excellent candid shot of a sea-serpent floundering in snow.

Its movements were too slow for Mayhem's eyes to register.

Which meant, he realized gratefully, that he hadn't begun to slow down yet.

He had to be careful, though. If he were Bartock he would make immediately for the scout-ship. It would be his only hope.

Realizing this, Mayhem had gone through deep snow for what he judged to be fifteen minutes, until he had reached a spine of rock protruding from the snow. Then he had doubled back, now leaving no footprints, along the spine. He was waiting in the first low range of hills not four hundred yards from the scout-ship, his blaster ready. When Bartock prowled into view, Mayhem would shout a warning. If Bartock didn't heed it, Mayhem would shoot him dead.

It seemed like an airtight plan.

And it would have been, except for two things. First, Bartock had a hostage. And second, Pluto-time was beginning to act on Mayhem.

He realized this when he looked at the sea-serpent again. The long neck moved with agonizing slowness, the great gray green bulk of the monster, sixty feet long, shifted slowly, barely perceptibly, in the snow. Mountains of powdery snow moved and settled. The spade-shaped head pointed at Mayhem. The tongue protruded slowly, hung suspended, forked and hideous, then slowly withdrew.

The neck moved again, ten feet long, sinuous. And faster.

Faster? Not really.

Mayhem was slowing down.

Then he saw Bartock and the girl.

They were close together. Bartock held her arm. Walking toward the scout-ship, they were too far away and too close together for Mayhem to fire. Bartock would know this and wouldn't heed any warning.

So Mayhem didn't give any warning. He left the spine of rock and rushed down through the snow toward the space-bound coffin.

A low rumble of sound broke the absolute stillness.

It was the monster, and now that his own hearing had slowed down, Mayhem was able to hear the slower cycles of sound. How much time had really passed? He didn't know. How much time did he have left before death came swiftly and suddenly because he had been too long in his temporary body? He didn't know that either. He sprinted toward the scout-ship. At least it felt like he was sprinting. He didn't know how fast he was really moving. But the sea-serpent creature was coming up behind him, faster. No place near what would have been its normal apparent speed, but faster. Mayhem, his breath coming raggedly through his mouth, ran as fast as was feasible.

So did Bartock and the girl.

It was Bartock, spotting Mayhem on the run, who fired first. Mayhem fell prone as the raw *zing* of energy ripped past. The sea-serpent-like-creature behind him bellowed.

And reared.

It didn't look like a sea-serpent any longer. It looked like a dinosaur, with huge solid rear limbs, small forelimbs, a great head with an enormous jaw—and speed.

Now it could really move.

Subjectively, time seemed normal to Mayhem. Your only basis was subjective: time always seemed normal. But Mayhem knew, as he got up and ran again, that he was now moving slower than the minute hand on a clock. Slower ... as objective time, as measured in the solar system at large, sped by.

He tripped as the creature came behind him. The only thing he could do was prop up an elbow in the snow and fire. Raw energy ripped off the two tiny forelimbs, but the creature didn't falter. It rushed by Mayhem, almost crushing him with the hind limbs, each of which must have weighed a couple of tons. It lumbered toward Bartock and Jane Cummings.

Turning and starting to get up, Mayhem fired again.

His blaster jammed.

Then the bulk of the monster cut off his view of Bartock, the girl and the scout-ship. He heard the girl scream. He ran toward them.

Jane Cummings had never been so close to death. She wanted to scream. She thought all at once, hysterically, she was a little girl again. If she screamed maybe the terrible apparition would go away. But it did not go away. It reared up high, as high as a very tall tree, and its fangs were hideous.

Bartock, who was also frightened, raised his blaster, fired, and missed.

Then, for an instant, Jane thought she saw someone running behind the monster. He had a blaster too, and he lifted it. When he fired, there was only a clicking sound. Then he fired again.

Half the monster's bulk disappeared and it collapsed in the snow.

That was when Bartock shot the other man.

Mayhem felt the stab of raw energy in his shoulder. He spun around and fell down, his senses whirling in a vortex of pain. Dimly he was aware of Bartock's boots crunching on the snow.

They fired simultaneously. Bartock missed.

And collapsed with a searing hole in his chest. He was dead before he hit the snow.

The girl went to Mayhem. "Who—who are you?"

"Got to get you back to the ship. No time to talk. Hurry."

"But you can't walk like that. You're badly hurt. I'll bring help."

"... dangerous. I'll take you."

He'd take her, flirting with death. Because, for all he knew, his time on Pluto, objectively, had already totalled forty-eight hours. If it did, he would never live to get off Pluto. Once his thirty days were up, he would die. Still, there might be danger from other animals between the scout-ship and *Mozart's Lady*, and he couldn't let the girl go back alone. It was almost ludicrous, since she had to help him to his feet.

He staggered along with her, knowing he would never make it to *Mozart's Lady* and back in time. But if he left her, she was probably doomed too. He'd sacrifice his life for hers... .

They went a hundred yards, Mayhem gripping the blaster and advancing by sheer effort of will. Then he smiled, and began to laugh. Jane thought he was hysterical with pain. But he said: "We're a pair of bright ones. The scout-ship."

Inside, it was very small. They had to lie very close to each other, but they made it. They reached *Mozart's Lady*.

Mayhem didn't wait to say good-bye. With what strength remained to him, he almost flung the girl from the scout-ship. The pain in his shoulder was very bad, but that wasn't what worried him. What worried him was the roaring in his ears, the vertigo, the mental confusion as his *elan* drifted, its thirty days up, toward death.

He saw the girl enter *Mozart's Lady*. He blasted off, and when the space-bound coffin pierced Pluto's heavyside layer, he called the Hub.

The voice answered him as if it were mere miles away, and not halfway across a galaxy: "Good Lord, man. You had us worried! You

have about ten seconds. Ten seconds more and you would have been dead."

Mayhem was too tired to care. Then he felt a wrenching pain, and all at once his *elan* floated, serene, peaceful, in limbo. He had been plucked from the dying body barely in time, to fight mankind's lone battle against the stars again, wherever he was needed ... out beyond Pluto.

Forever? It wasn't impossible.

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