

# **A Zloor For Your Trouble**

**By Mack Reynolds**

**Prescott stood to make a young fortune if  
he could capture a martian zloor—dead or alive!  
Was there a catch to it? Only for the hunter!...**

## A Zloor For Your Trouble

I was sitting on the cot in the little room at the rear of my hangarage, where I keep my equipment and most of my trophies, and cleaning my .257 Roberts when the knock came at the door. It was a sharp, decisive knock. Then the door opened and I saw Westley Marks for the first time. It didn't excite me.

He said, "Mr. Napoleon Prescott?"

I began to say, "Everybody calls me Nap," but then I didn't. There was something about this guy that didn't click with me. Say what you will against snap judgments, I still take my love at first sight and enmity often the same way.

For one thing, he gave me the impression of *looking* for trouble; he was about six foot two and he had what he obviously thought was an aristocratic face. His nose was the type that used to be called Roman—and looked like it'd be a honey to punch. He was dressed like a million, which didn't particularly impress me either. I'm on the rugged side myself, red headed and homely to boot.

He took in the rifle I was cleaning, and his eyebrows went up questioningly. "Collector?" he asked. Somehow or other he managed to put over the impression that he thought I didn't have the intellect to have a hobby.

"Not exactly," I told him. "This is a tool, not a collector's item."

There was almost a laugh in his voice now. "You mean you use that relic in your work?"

I put the gun down, told myself to take it easy, then said, "They've made a lot of developments in weapons since this rifle was popular, but it still has advantages on certain types of jobs. For instance, if I was after a Kodiak bear, up in the Alaska National Park—"

He snorted, "I'd take a Bazook-rifle and be sure who came out on top."

"Sure you would," I told him, "and there wouldn't be enough bear left to feed your dogs. *I* usually work for a zoo or a museum; they either want the animal alive, or in good mounting condition. I admit that they've got guns now that one man can carry that'd sink one of the old time battleships; okay, but in my line I seldom need one."

He didn't like my tone of voice, but he dropped the point and began looking around for a place to sit.

I hadn't asked him to sit down, and I didn't now.

I said, "Was there something I could do for you?"

"I wanted to hire you for a rather lengthy period," he told me.

"I'm all booked up for the next six months."

"This is something rather special."

"It always is when somebody wants you to cancel a job with a regular client."

He didn't like me any better than I liked him, that was obvious. He said, "This comes under the heading of work for the government."

I told him, "There are other professional hunters. Some of them nearly as good as I am." The last was sarcastic.

"Possibly better," he said, "but none of them are your size."

I could feel my face approaching the color of my hair at that one. "Keep my size out of it," I snapped. I indicated with a thumb a little statuette on my desk. "The guy my mother named me after was pint size too. He got along all right."

He looked over at Bonaparte. "Ummm," he said. "Napoleon was a big name once—but he's only a bust now."

"Listen," I told him, "you're asking for a bust yourself. Why don't you run along? I'm busy."

He ignored me, found a chair that had nothing but a few magazines on it, tossed them to the floor and sat down. "Your name was brought up because you're the smallest professional hunter on Earth. It'd save a few thousand credits in getting you to Mars and back."

That stopped me. "What in kert are you talking about?" I growled.

"The government wants a specimen, at least one, of a zloor."

"A what?"

"A zloor," he repeated. "A small Martian animal."

I scowled at him. "And just why does the government want a zloor?"

"That's a secret."

"Okay. I'll tell you another secret. Somebody else can catch the government a zloor. I've never been off Earth and I haven't any particular hankering to go now." I picked up the .257 Roberts again and reached for my oil can.

He got to his feet, something just this side of a sneer on his face, and said, "I doubt if you could have got one anyway."

I said easily, "If anyone else could catch it, I could."

He reached for the doorknob, "I'd lay a thousand credits against *that*," he said. He began to leave.

"Wait a minute, buddy," I snapped. "Are you just sounding off or have you got a thousand credits you don't care what happens to?"

He turned and faced me. "I am willing to wager a thousand credits that you can't capture a zloor."

"How big are they?"

"About the size of a rabbit."

I glowered at him. "They very fast, or very poisonous, or what?"

He shrugged. "They can't run quite as fast as a common Terran hare, and I understand they're quite gentle."

"Then why haven't they been captured?"

"Among other things, Napoleon," he rolled my name over his tongue as though he got a big laugh from it, "there have been only a few hundred persons in all that have gone to Mars. Few of them, to my knowledge, have been interested in the life forms there. The expense of freight in space is much too high for Terran zoos to

transport Martian life forms—particularly alive—considering the cost of duplicating in the space craft the living conditions necessary to—"

"All right," I snapped, "just a minute." I picked up the viso-phone and dialed rapidly. In seconds, Jerry Mason's friendly pan lit up the screen.

"Listen, Jerry," I said, "Have you ever heard of a Martian zloor?"

His eyebrows went up. "Sure, what—"

"Are they particularly fast?"

"No, of course not. But—"

"Are they dangerous?"

He grinned, but he was still puzzled. "I'd say they were about the least dangerous animal I ever heard of. But, Nap—"

"Just one more question, Jerry, I'm in a hurry. Do you think I could catch one?"

"I can't think of anything you could catch easier." He started to give one of his short bursts of laughter. "But—"

"Thanks, Jerry," I told him. "See you later." I snapped off the set and turned back to Westley Marks.

"All right, answer just one question and I'll take up that bet of yours. What's secret about this?"

"If I tell you, you'll take on the job?"

"The job, *and* the thousand credit bet," I grated.

"Very well. It is suspected that the zloor is an alien life form."

I stared at him. "Are you around the corner?" I demanded. "Of course it's an alien life form. Didn't you just say it's a Martian animal?"

"Ummmm. But some authorities think it is alien to this solar system. At least they suspect so—that's why the government wants a specimen to dissect and thoroughly investigate. They haven't the facilities on Mars, of course, so it will be necessary to bring one back here."

I still stared at him. "Alien to the solar system? Your roof *must* be leaking. How would it get here?" A sudden suspicion hit me. "You mean it's intelligent? I thought there wasn't any intelligent life forms on Mars."

He shook his head. "It's a stupid herbivorous animal." He shot a glance down at his watch. "The shuttle for the space station leaves in three hours. Can you make it?"

I glared at him. "You give me plenty of time, don't you?—I'll make it all right. But first I want this bet down in writing."

"Of course," he said smoothly.

I had to hustle plenty. The zloor wasn't any bigger than a rabbit, and I knew that life forms on Mars were in general small, so I took nothing larger than my little carbine size .22 Hornet, another gun that Westley Marks probably would have sneered at but which I wouldn't have traded for all the automatics you could shake a stick at.



I didn't take much else; no clothes except the shorts I wore when I climbed into the shuttle rocket for the space station. When Marks said freight rates in space were high he just wasn't whistling, *Terra Forever*. I could buy clothes and any other equipment I needed a good deal cheaper on Mars than the cost of transporting them there would come to.

For one thing, when anybody left the colony planet to come back to Terra, they invariably left behind everything in the way of clothing and personal equipment; for another, a certain amount of these things were being manufactured on Mars from native raw materials in an attempt to escape the murderous space rates.

After the four G's acceleration had cut off and we were in free fall, I took the opportunity to read the contract I'd hurriedly signed with Westley Marks. On thorough reading, the contract didn't seem *too* bad. All my expenses to and from Mars were paid by Marks. I also got five credits a month in the way of salary—no fortune, but average pay for a Terran worker. If I caught a zloor and brought it back alive, I got a five hundred credit bonus; if I brought two back alive, a seven hundred credit bonus. If I brought a dead one back, I got a three hundred bonus. Westley Marks didn't seem to be interested in getting more than one dead one since there wasn't any provision for a larger number.

He'd given me to understand that this job was for the government, but from the way the contract read I was working for the Marks Enterprises. That irritated me for a minute or so, but I finally shrugged it off. He probably had a government contract to secure one of the things. I still couldn't figure out what his angle was—but I knew there must be one; too much money was involved to make this a routine assignment such as I usually work on for the zoos.

Evidently Marks ran some sort of an expediting outfit which took on off-trail contracts.

At this point I might do a little in the way of describing my trip to the space station which circles Terra and is used as a take-off point to Luna and the planets. I might go on and tell of my journey from there to the space station in orbit about Mars, and then, further still, of my shuttling down to Fort Mars and my first impressions of landing there, of the one-sixth gravity, the thin air, the plastic dome which covers the whole little city. But the trouble is that a hundred people a lot quicker with a dicto-typer than I am have already done the job. I'll just leave that part of it and take up with my first contact with my fellow Terrans on Mars.

One of the old gags is to the effect that when Greek meets Greek they start a restaurant. Okay, maybe, but I do know this, that when man in general starts up a new colony one of the first buildings he puts up is a bar.

At any rate, as soon as I was settled at the Biltless Hotel—the name, of course, is a gag, but the place lived up to it—I made my way to Sam's.

Now, there's something that invariably happens to people who get around. It's happened to you, if you're one of us. Maybe you're walking through the Congo Game Preserve, figuring there isn't another man, white or otherwise, within a hundred kilometers. Suddenly you run into another party and somebody yells, "Hello Nap! What in kert are you doing here?" The last time you saw him was in San Francisco. Or maybe you're doing some solitary drinking in some obscure bar in Guatemala. The guy next to you

looks over and says, "Say, aren't you Nap Prescott, the brother of—" and, of course, you are.

Well, that was it. I hadn't any more got up to the bar and told Sam, "Let me have some of this Martian *woji* I've been hearing so much about," when I heard somebody yelp, "It's Nap! I'll be a grinning *makron* if it isn't Nap!"

I turned around and there was Mike Holiday, as big as life and twice as drunk.

He waddled his bulk over to me—Mike always waddles when he's soused—from the table where he'd been sitting.

"By the Holy Jumping Wodo," he crowed, "I'll bet my left arm you came to get a zloor."

I'd been grinning and holding out my hand to clasp his, but that stiffened me.

He saw it and began to laugh uproariously. "Another joiner of the club!" he yelped. "Come on over and meet your fellow members. You got one of them Westley contracts too?"

That did it.

I went over and met the boys. Mike Holiday wasn't the only acquaintance of mine in Fort Mars. In fact, it was like a convention of the outstanding professional hunters of Earth.

They all shouted their greetings, some of them laughing so hard tears rolled down their cheeks. Evidently they got a big kick every time a newcomer was added to their ranks. I shook hands with some, but most were too hilarious to go through the ceremony.

Blackie Conover yelled, "I'll bet anybody two to one he brought a .22 Hornet to shoot himself a zloor. Two to one!"

"Do we look like suckers?" Mike yelled back at him.

I sank into a chair and took it for awhile. "I can wait," I growled at them. "Sooner or later somebody'll get around to telling me what goes on."

"He can wait, he says," Doughbelly fairly yelped in delight. "Brother, he ain't just a whistlin' *Terra Forever*, he can wait! Bring on the woji! Start the initiation!"

I woke up in the morning in Mike Holiday's apartment. I groaned and told myself that I was sworn off of woji for all time.—I didn't know then that Terra-side liquor sold for ten credits a bottle.

Mike was grinning down at me. "You'll get used to woji," he said.

"I should live so long," I moaned. Then I sat up suddenly in the bed. "You guys wouldn't tell me anything last night," I said. He was still grinning. "That's part of the initiation into the Zloor Club. What'd'ya want to know, Nap?"

I swung my feet over the side of the bed and came to a sitting position. I groaned and shook my head in an attempt to clear it.

"What are half the professional hunters I know doing on Mars?"

He spun a chair around so that the back faced me, and straddled it, his arms resting on the top rung. "Same thing you are, Nap. Being suckers for that *makron* Westley Marks."

I started to say something there but he interrupted me with a wave of a hand. "This is what it boils down to. Marks has a contract with

some branch of the government to bring back one or more zloors. And don't ask me why he doesn't go out and catch one himself—he's tried."

"He has, eh?"

"Yeah, he has. Had a whole crew up here. What makes it nice for him is that he's on a cost plus basis. If he never succeeds, it'll still be money in his pocket; if he does, he gets a whopping big bonus. Every time he sends another man up here to take a crack at getting a zloor, he makes money. No doubt the way he told *you* the story, you'd think you were the only one trying."

I snorted, "He told me I'd been picked because I was the smallest pro hunter in the game."

Mike Holiday grinned. "He picked me because I was so big.—I could stand the rigors of life on Mars, he said."

"Well, if it's a racket, why doesn't everybody go home on the next ship?"

"Probably for the same reason you won't. That sharper made me so sore I bet him five hundred credits I could catch a zloor."

"I bet him a thousand," I groaned.

Mike whistled. "Where'd you ever get a thousand credits, Nap?"

"I broke into my piggy bank," I growled. "It's every cent I had in the world."

"Well, we're all in the same boat. He made bets with all the boys. If we go back, we lose. As long as we stay here we make five credits a month, plus expenses.—And, besides, all of us are just conceited

enough to think we can figure out eventually how to get one of the things home."

"Now we're getting to the point," I told him. "What's so hard about catching a zloor?"

He began to grin again. "Nothing," he said. "And that's all I'll tell you now. Go out and find the gruesome details yourself."

I went over to the wash basin and filled the bowl and dipped my head into the water. I didn't say anything else to him until I'd dried myself and climbed into my clothes.

"All right," I said then. "Where do I go to see about getting equipment and men for an expedition to the zloor country?"

He laughed. "All you need in the way of equipment is your feet, that is, besides a plastic oxygen mask when you leave the dome." He pointed out the window. "Just head for the nearest rocky area, there's lots of it; you won't have any trouble finding a zloor. In fact, they're numerous—no natural enemies."

I scowled at him. "What keeps them down then?"

"Insufficient forage, I guess. You'll see."

I picked up my .22 Hornet rifle and started for the door. "No time like the present to—" I began to say.

Mike was still grinning in the irritating manner he'd been displaying ever since the night before. "You won't need that gun," he told me.

"I'll just take it along anyway," I snapped.

After leaving the dome through one of the airlocks, I headed out onto the surface of Mars, weighted down with my leaded boots, standard equipment for cutting down some of the effect of the one-sixth gravity of the planet.

Over to the westward, possibly three miles away, seemed to be a barren, rocky area. I knew that Mike Holiday wouldn't have deliberately lied to me, that was where zloors were to be found. I made my way in that direction.

"About the size of a rabbit," I muttered. "And half the hunters on earth can't bring one back."

I made the rocky area and found myself a suitable prominence from which to look around. In less than fifteen minutes, I'd spotted one of the things. They were about the size of a rabbit all right, and what was more they looked considerably like one of the earth type rodents—long ears, nub of a tail. I watched it for some time through the small glass I'd borrowed from Mike.

It was evidently eating the bark, and possibly the wood as well, of a stunted, rugged looking Martian tree which seemed to be growing out of almost solid rock.

The boys had said that there were a lot of zloors around so I didn't have to worry about conversion. I took up the rifle, aimed carefully through the scope and squeezed the trigger. I was interested, eventually, in getting a live zloor, but it wouldn't hurt to have a closer look at one of the things to help me in planning my campaign.

The gun snapped and I could see the tiny bullet spank into the little animal's side. I'd got him!

But something didn't look right. I took up the telescope again and peered through it. The zloor was still eating.

That stopped me. I could have sworn that I'd hit it, right amidships.

I aimed even more carefully this time, for its head, and squeezed gently. That shot, too, hit dead center.

But the zloor didn't bother to stop its feeding.

I sat there a long time staring at it. Finally I snorted inwardly. Obviously, this was what had been stopping the others—this animal had some very effective natural body armor. Well—there is more than one way of skinning a zloor, as well as a cat.

I picked up the rifle and headed down toward the tree and the animal that was devouring it, figuring to get as close as possible with the idea of getting a really good look at the bulletproof beastie. I wished, now, that I'd brought my .257 Roberts instead of the .22 Hornet.

At first I was careful in my approach, slipping from cover to cover; but as I got closer it became evident that the zloor wasn't particularly timid and that as far as it was concerned I could come as near as I wanted.

I stood off about five feet and watched it for a long time. Once it looked up and over at me, but then went back to the tree in which it was making a respectable hole.

I tried once again with the rifle, aiming carefully right behind its ear. The gun snapped, and the bullet thudded—but the zloor ignored it.





"Holy Wodo," I snorted. "He's *really* bulletproof."

In fact, he was more than just bulletproof. The *shock* of the impact of the high powered twenty-two hadn't even bothered him, it wasn't just a matter of the bullet's inability to penetrate the hide.

"Well," I told myself. "Let's see just how close I *can* come before it runs off."

I walked up to him cautiously. He didn't move. In my surprise, I even prodded him gently with my shoe. He still didn't move. He looked up at me again, his eyes a wistful yellowish color, then went back to his meal.

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