

MYSTERY
OF THE
THIRD
MINE

LOWNDES

Mystery of the Third Mine

By ROBERT W. LOWNDES



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WINSTON

A SCIENCE FICTION NOVEL

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Jacket Illustration by Kenneth Fagg

ONE of the most fascinating areas in the solar system—the Asteroid Belt—gives this tale of mystery, intrigue and excitement a unique background. In this “orbit of danger,” where rugged space frontiersmen risked their necks in a sea of swirling rock, teen-age Peter Clay and his father were faced with the possibility of having their small claim to Asteroid mining rights wiped out.

In the shaky system of justice that had grown up between Mars and Jupiter to protect the individual miner, the Ama (Asteroid Miners' Association) played an important part. It policed the Belt, spotted claim jumpers and was expected to aid any individual unlucky enough to get lost or disabled. When events led the Clays to suspect the Ama of invalidating claims for criminal purposes, they could only look to themselves and the sketchy Martian-sponsored government for help.

From the moment the Clays heard a miner signaling for help from a tiny asteroid until they, with a group of honest men, band together to protect their claim from the Ama's marauding ships, action and suspense color every page of this unusual story. How Peter Clay unraveled a maze of false clues; his narrow brush with desperate men who had a mining empire within their grasp; the details of life on the Asteroid frontier create, in MYSTERY OF THE THIRD MINE, a vivid world of drama and danger unique in the annals of science fiction.

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The Author

ROBERT W. LOWNDES is editorial director of Columbia Publications. He plays a vital part in producing such magazines as *Future Science Fiction* and is well acquainted with the writing being done in the fast-growing fantasy field. In writing *MYSTERY OF THE THIRD MINE* he considered all the unique forces that will affect man in outer space. Readers will see examples of how mankind may change when succeeding generations are born and raised on worlds with low gravity. The author has filled his story with details of how people, millions of miles away from Mother Earth and her comparatively warm and friendly environment, will live, think and feel. An engrossing story about people, as well as events, *MYSTERY OF THE THIRD MINE* is evidence of Robert Lowndes' talent and ability in a demanding creative field.

The Editors

CECILE MATSCHAT, editor of the Winston Science Fiction Series, is recognized as one of this country's most skillful writers and editors. She has sixteen books to her credit, including the highly praised *Suwannee River* in the "Rivers of America" Series. Nationally known as a lecturer, an artist of great ability, Cecile Matschat is also an expert historian. With this varied background, she is perfectly suited to select top science fiction authors and books to make this a balanced and well-rounded series.

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Endpaper Design by Alex Schomburg



Cecile Matschat, Editor
Carl Carmer, Consulting Editor

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FIRST EDITION

Made in the United States of America

L. C. Card #52-12901

*To my wife, Dot, who wanted
me to write a book; and to Scott,
Lester, and Sal, who made it possible*

Mining on Ceres

WHEN WE TRY TO picture the way in which human beings may live on other planets in the future, there are three main sources for our background. Our picture of the planets themselves comes from what science has learned of them after centuries of studying the sky. In some cases there is not very much to go on; in others we have learned a great deal. We can be reasonably sure about such matters as gravity, atmosphere, general climate, and about how much light there would be on some of the planets. From there on, we try to sketch in a more nearly complete picture.

Our ideas of how man may reach another planet come from present-day development in rockets. There are countless details that have been established or suggested by years of making tests. We know what has been done, and can imagine what may be only one or two steps beyond. After this, we try to figure

out what will be needed and what seems to be the most likely way to fulfil those needs. It's the same system used in picturing how people may solve the problem of keeping alive and healthy once we arrive safely on another world.

As soon as you have a group of people living together, pretty well cut off from everyone else, then a society begins to take form. This is where history comes in. You've heard the old saying, "History repeats itself." That is partly true. It's a useful saying if you remember that it does not mean, "The *same* things keep on happening over and over." We couldn't make any sense at all out of what we learn about people who lived hundreds, or thousands, of years ago, if they were *completely* different from us. But if they were exactly the same, we wouldn't have to study history, either. We'd know that the past was just like the present.

So our picture of a future society on another planet can't be exactly like any picture we have of the present. It can't be exactly like any record of the past.

Many science fiction stories have been written about people colonizing the planet Mars and going on from there into the Asteroid Belt. It's reasonable enough to imagine that once people are living on Mars, it won't be hard to get a little farther out. What we know of the Belt tells us that it's made up of thousands of chunks of rock and metal. Some are little more than boulders; some are as large as houses; some are little worlds in themselves. The large ones are usually called planetoids. Ceres, for example, is 480 miles in diameter.

The Belt lies between Mars and Jupiter, and the

majority of the asteroids are in one orbit around the sun, following approximately the path a planet would if it were there. Few of them are round, and we'll probably find some very peculiar shapes among them. Over three thousand have been discovered to date, and the chances are that there are many more which we haven't seen from Earth.

In most of the stories that have been written about mining on the asteroids so far, authors have decided that life out there will be much like frontier days on Earth. They've pictured Mars in a state of civilization like that of the Middle West of 1848 (as compared to the East Coast), and the asteroids like California in the Gold Rush days. They describe people living in "boom towns" and working out on the "frontier."

This is one point of view, but perhaps the difference will be so great that the similarities won't seem very important.

Let's look into some of these differences; let's picture, first of all, the differences between someone's going to California in 1848, and someone's going to Mars in the near future.

If you weighed 100 pounds when you started out for California, back in '48 or '49, the chances are you'd lose some weight getting there. But if you took 100 pounds of baggage, and arrived with all of it, that baggage would still weigh 100 pounds. If you start out for Mars, at the same weight, and with the same amount of baggage, that 100 pounds will be only 38 pounds when you arrive. Everything on Mars weighs 38 per cent of what it weighs on Earth.

What effect will this have on the way you live? Well, for one thing, you'll have to learn to move

slowly and carefully. If you do not—zoom!—up you go into the air. You'll find that you can lift a great deal more, and work harder without feeling tired. But you can still strain yourself. After awhile, you'll learn not to hurry. Life will move along at a relaxed, easy pace—very different from the hurried manner we all live today.

If you went over the mountains on your trip to California, you would find that the air became thinner. You might have a bit of trouble breathing until you became used to it.

But on Mars, if you just stepped out of the ship without special equipment, you'd find you could not breathe at all. You've heard about deep-sea fish which explode when they are brought up to the surface of the water. Where those fish live the pressure is so great that a man (or even a submarine) would be crushed—but they are used to it. We are used to living under about 15 pounds air pressure bearing down on each square inch of us. Now the difference between air pressure on Earth and on Mars isn't so great that we'd explode like a deep-sea fish. But it's large enough so that we couldn't breathe.

The air on Mars is thin, too, and extremely dry; you'd injure your lungs seriously with the first breath if you managed to get a breath in. Before we can breathe Mars air, we have to have pressure and moisture. That means you'd have to go around in some kind of air helmet.

Our newcomer to California would find that there were many natural sources of food, water, and shelter in most parts of the state. He could learn to get along, "living off the land," once he was away from towns.

But the best knowledge of Mars we have, so far, shows that there are no natural food sources. There is little or no water handy, and most likely nothing which could be used to build shelter. Science has made it possible to do wonders in converting materials into products we can use. We can make plants grow in all kinds of deserts and get water out of unlikely-looking places. There is probably plant life on Mars.

Our adventurer will have to bring his food with him, and all manner of equipment for growing and converting what he needs.

Now you can begin to get an idea of what kind of society we are likely to have when Mars is colonized. It will have to be a society of highly skilled technicians of all kinds. Everyone must contribute; everyone must work with everyone else. There can be no place for a "lone wolf" or glory-grabber.

In '48 you didn't have to pass any tests or get a permit to go to California. All you needed was the ability and courage to get there. But the people who go to Mars will have to pass many different kinds of tests, and one of them will be the ability to get along with other people. Co-operation, thrift (not in money, but in avoiding waste of all kinds), and consideration for the other man will become a part of their way of life.

Such a society has already grown up on Mars in the present story. Alan Clay, and his son, Peter, have lived all their lives in this new world. We would find it astonishing. We'd be amazed at the scientific progress in just about every field that has to do with food, clothing, shelter, health, communication, and so on. But at the same time we would marvel at the lack of

comfort, and the absence of many things which we take for granted here.

Alan and Peter have never breathed "fresh air"—although the air they do breathe is purer than most of us have known. Peter has never seen a tree, a brook, a sunset, or a bird. He has never eaten meat or fish. He's never seen a book such as you are reading. He can read—but his "books" are spools of tape, or films run through projectors. He probably knows much more about television than we do, although he's never known it as a means of entertainment. He's seen movies, but they have been "educational" and "documentary" films.

He's studied history and art, but Martian art is on the "practical" side. He learned music as a child, can play an instrument, and often composes music. He goes to concerts—music sessions, he calls them—but not to sit and listen. He takes his violin with him and plays in a group with others. They may play an arrangement of something Peter wrote for violin and cello—his father's instrument—or compositions by someone else in the group. Or it may be arrangements of Haydn, Mozart, or some other famous composer of the past.

He likes baseball and other sports where you try to outwit or outplay the other fellow, but not to knock him out or injure him.

He judges people he meets by the way they act after he's met them. He would never think of forming an opinion of a man beforehand.

We find him on Ceres, one of the large asteroids. It's much smaller and colder than Mars, though; there's far less light; and the gravity is very low. It's as new

to him as settling on another continent, where few other people already live, would be to us. And here, some bits of "history" do begin to take shape in ways that are familiar to us—though not as much so to him.

If this book should be read by anyone in the future, who is actually mining out in the Asteroid Belt, I'm sure that—for all the care and thought that went into it—he'll find my picture amusing. But I hope that such a reader will find Peter and the other men and women interesting, and even believable people!

R. W. L.

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*Mystery of
the Third Mine*

Chapter 1 Claim Jumpers

SOMEWHERE IN THE DARKNESS, a metallic-sounding voice was repeating: "20-47 Clay! 20-47 Clay! 20-47 Clay!" over and over, as if nothing would ever stop it. Peter Clay seemed to be floating out of the depths of sleep, as the voice cut into whatever dream it had interrupted. Yes, he was floating, but something bound him too. He could feel the tightness of straps around him, and it seemed that this was all that kept him from drifting away into the darkness.

Then he heard sounds that became familiar as sleep vanished. He heard his father slowly loosening straps that held the elder Clay, as they did Peter. He listened, and heard Alan Clay's feet slide into weighted shoes as he arose slowly from his bunk and shuffled over to the communicator. There was a short snap as Clay switched on the lights before plugging in the two-way circuit, and all the haziness vanished from Peter's mind.

It wasn't a dream. This was Cerestown, the asteroid-miners' domed city on the surface of the 480-mile planetoid that swung in its orbit in the Asteroid Belt. The mysterious Belt lay between Peter's home world, Mars, and mighty Jupiter, where no human being had landed. This was the frontier he'd heard of since childhood and dreamed about visiting—the outpost of human civilization which had come from Luna, Earth's moon, and Earth itself in his grandfather's time to settle on Mars.

Peter smiled as he remembered that his presence here was no visit, but an adult's choice of occupation. Most kids weren't cleared for such a choice until they were eighteen, Earth style, and Peter was only a little over seventeen, by the old reckoning. You had to pass tests, no matter what your age. Peter had come through, saying he wanted to join his father in Cerestown and work with him in his lead mine.

When I go back home to vote, he thought, I'll vote against the New Reckoning Bill. There was a strong movement to throw out Earth-style reckoning for people's ages where birthdays were celebrated every twelve months—and go by the Martian calendar—which had twenty-four months in the year, twice as many as Earth. Why, he thought, that would make me only eight and a half. Who wants to be a child so long?

Slowly he loosened the straps around him, and let one leg out of the bed as his toes felt for a magnetized shoe. You had to be careful on Ceres, or you'd go sailing into the air and slam into something. Peter smiled as his fingers crept to a bump on his head. That was a reminder of the last time he'd forgotten. He'd shot up to the ceiling of the small room one morning, when he tried to jump out of bed as he would have on

Mars. There was hardly any gravity at all on Ceres, and unless you were wearing special shoes you'd sail up into the air at the slightest sudden motion.

He heard his father say, "20-47 Marlene," and knew that the speaker on the other end would be either Glen or Barbara Abend, neighbors on Asteroid 20-47. They worked a copper mine there. Having friends on one of the many rocks in the sky that made up the asteroids was something to be grateful for—even if Glen Abend did see a claim jumper in every shadow, as Alan Clay said. Well, you had to take some precautions, of course. Voices on a communicator sounded pretty much alike, except for very high or low pitches, so people who knew each other had their own private signals. This week, when either the Clays or the Abends got a call starting out "20-47," the answer had to be "20-47 Marlene." The next time they got together, they'd decide on a new countersignal—to guard against deception, Abend insisted. Clay thought it was a bit overdone, but Peter like the idea.

Pete shuffled over to the food cabinet, took out a can of dehydrated soup, switched on the electric stove and started to add the necessary water. It was a new thing to have all the water you wanted, and more. He still felt uneasy when he wasted more than a few drops.

A voice came from the communicator. "Have you seen Glen, Alan?"

Clay shot a glance in Pete's direction, and frowned slightly, his blue eyes tightening under his ruddy forehead. "No—I sort of expected to see him at the music session last night. Hasn't he come in yet?"

Pete looked into the mirror, and decided it wouldn't be long before his skin was as tanned as that of his father. He wouldn't look as striking as the elder Clay,

whose blue eyes made such a contrast with his white hair and his skin. Pete was now well over six feet, and still growing. A six-foot-tall Martian was just average. Well anyway, they wouldn't be calling him "Whitey" much longer. All the lights here contained ultraviolet, as they did on Mars. Ceres-dwellers needed the ultraviolet even more than Mars-dwellers, for this planetoid received far less sunlight. When they stopped calling you "Whitey," that meant you looked like one of them.

"He's two days overdue already," Barbara's voice was saying, "and I've asked all the officials, but they don't know anything. If I could get out myself . . ." Barbara had been laid up for over a week, after a blaster-cap exploded too soon, slamming her against the rocketside. "Glen has been talking so strange, and not his usual gloom; I think maybe something might be wrong."

"Didn't say what, did he?"

"No—you know Glen. He talks by the day when he's worrying about something just in his head. But let real trouble come up and you can't get a word out of him until he's positive. He has to argue it all out with himself first. Alan, have you or Petey ever heard of 'Ama'?"

Clay turned around. "Pete, have you heard of any new claims? Any new asteroids?"

Peter snapped off the stove and picked up the two heated cans of soup, placing suction tubes into the openings. "Nope, I haven't. Golly, partner, they sure dream up strange names for them, don't they?"

"Yeah. . . . No, Barb, the name doesn't mean anything to us. Look, we're going out to work pretty soon. We'll look in at your mine. Maybe he's just working overtime and has forgotten to call."

"Maybe. I'll be ready to go out myself in a week or so. Sorry to bother you."

"No trouble; we'll let you know as soon as we find out anything." Clay cut the connection, and turned to breakfast. "Well, Pete, my trick for cooking starts tomorrow, then you can sit around and get served. Don't rightly see that there's anything to worry about unless Glen's had an accident. Our mine and Glen's put together wouldn't be worth a claim-jumper's time. We'll make the first one who comes along a present of it next year—if it pans out the way it's going now. That'll give us enough for a grubstake; then I'll show you what the rough life is really like, fellow—prospecting." He grinned. "You've been living in sheer comfort, in case you didn't know it."

It was always "night" outside the dome, or so close to it that you might as well call it night. Ceres rotated slowly, but the Cerean "day" was but a matter of a few hours, and the difference was one between a faint glow and inky blackness. You had to have a spacesuit once you left domed Cerestown—a suit with lights, air supply, heating unit, and a communicator.

The Clays shuffled along the icy surface soundlessly, their lights illuminating a small area about them as they headed toward the rocket field which lay a half-mile away. Pete had tried to hurry it up by taking big jumps the first time—only to find that his father was well ahead of him when he landed with a thump that jarred him from head to foot.

"Lesson number one, partner," Clay had said, grinning. "Loss of weight doesn't mean loss of mass or inertia, and it's mighty slow sailing."

They felt a faint vibration in their feet, and turned slowly to wave at an approaching tractor. Miners' cargoes were hauled from the field into the dome for assay, refining, and sale by the public transportation department. The tractor chuffed up to them, and a deep, friendly voice sounded in their suit receivers. "Going out to the field?"

It was a question that needed no answer. Without waiting for a reply, the driver continued, "Climb aboard and save your strength."

Clay and Pete scrambled up to a resting place as the tractor moved on. "Hi, Whitey," the suited driver said to Pete, "getting a good look, eh? Well, some folks say it gets dull after a while, but don't you believe 'em; there's always something to see here if you watch the sky." He pointed up to a faint flash in the distance above them. "There goes an iceman."

Peter stared, but couldn't make out anything in what seemed like millions of pin-point lights in the sky over his head and beyond the short horizon. "You'll get the hang of it after a while," the driver said. "Took me some time, too, but I caught a glint of ice on that fellow's ship. Can't see the ship, of course; it's buried inside a chunk the size of a mountain. . . . First miners here were icemen; people didn't get to looking for metals until later. Now all the icemen work for Marsupply, so no one else bothers."

On a sudden thought, Peter asked, "Say, have you ever heard of Ama?"

"Ama? Nope—not unless it's a new asteroid, and folks come in with those so fast you can't remember 'em unless you have a claim or something."

"Aren't going to pick up a copper cargo, are you?" Clay asked.

"Nope again; haven't unloaded any copper this week, only zinc, iron, nickel, silver, and manganese. Expecting a friend in?"

"Yeah. Thought we might have missed him."

"Sorry I can't help you there—but maybe someone else took it. I'll ask Dick and Jerry, and have them scout around if you like."

"I'd appreciate that," Alan put in. "The name's Clay, and this is my partner, Pete." (Peter still got a thrill out of being referred to as "partner," rather than "my kid," when he was introduced to strangers.) "If you hear anything, could you call me? I'm looking for Glen Abend."

"Sure, I'll do what I can." The driver waved to the Clays as they climbed down off the tractor and shuffled away toward their rocket. "If you want to call me, I'm Ben Black—and I sure felt funny when I first came here and they called *me* Whitey!" He waved and turned the tractor toward the other end of the field.

The *Claymore* was a 50-foot cylinder of bronze copper, with a circle of tubes at either end and a row of single-holes around her circumference, fore and aft. Like all the rockets here she blasted with beryllium fluoride, an easily stored powder. Her hull could be magnetized by putting on a knock-down metal covering and running a powerful electric current through it. Iron, nickel, silver and other magnetic minerals were carried thus. A ship would come back to port looking like a huge ball of ore. Nonmagnetic cargoes had to be stored inside.

She was as fully equipped for living as was possible, because miners had to allow for weeks—sometimes months—in space, even when they worked claims on

asteroids not far from Ceres. There were frequent "storms"—passage of thick clouds of asteroids scarcely larger than meteorites—during which no rocket could hope to travel in safety. If you were aspace when the "storm warning" came through, you sought the nearest landing place. If you were on the surface of some lonely little world, you stayed there until the "all-clear" signal came.

Clay nodded approvingly as Pete made a check of the instruments and stores. "Good, so far," he said, "but you overlooked one thing."

"What is it?"

"Pellets for the shortguns and longmen. It wouldn't be wise to be low on ammunition if there were trouble." He smiled faintly and picked up a shortgun—a small, long-barreled weapon with a powerful beryllium spring. The longmen were larger, more cumbersome versions of the same thing, and had to be mounted. The only difference was range. Both fired pellets which exploded on contact with enough force to crack the helmet of a suit, or knock out the heating unit, cut off the air supply, smash the communicator, and so forth. Any damage to a suit was dangerous, and a lucky hit could prove fatal. The explosion didn't hurt the man too much, although it could knock him out. But he didn't count—his suit was life or death to him.

"You haven't told me much about this 'trouble' business," Peter said.

Clay smiled as he finished checking the ammunition. "Back on Earth, in my grandfather's time and before, they used to print books and magazines full of stories picturing what things might be like out here. Pretty fantastic, some of those stories were, too. They had Mars and all the other planets full of strange and

hostile people—critters that weren't intelligent, but dangerous. Well, when men got to Mars, then came out here, they found that there was only one really dangerous critter around."

"What was that? I never heard of any."

"Yes, you have; the dangerous critter was man himself. That's why we have to have guns and ammunition. It's not as bad as it was back on Earth—as you've seen in historical films—but there're still some men who're dangerous to the majority.

"Out here, partner, the law's good, and your rights are good, as long as the other man recognizes it. Most do. But a few try to pay no attention. They get away with it if you can't prove your rights or your legality with explosive pellets. That's the way someone takes to question you. Back on Mars no one could get away with it. In Cerestown your rights are respected. But out here—who's going to see what you do and stop you from doing it, or prove you did it if you destroy the evidence? Some claim jumpers have been caught when they tried to pass off their stuff on Cerestown or Mars, but there are others who've gotten away with it—and as long as one succeeds, another is going to try sometime."

Clay pressed the kicker-stud, producing a rocket blast that was more like a "pop," and the ship lifted off the surface of the iceworld. They'd wait until they were well clear of Ceres before starting to build acceleration on their course toward Asteroid 20-47. Already, the miniature world was a globe beneath them, and they seemed to be motionless on a dark field dotted with lights.

They were alone in space now, in the soundless gulf between worlds, where the countless masses of rock

and metal that made up the Asteroid Belt followed endless orbits around the sun. Sometimes tiny pebbles of rock and metal traveled in courses around the larger masses. Faint beeps of sound came from the "finder"—a vibration instrument miners used to assist in direction out here. Anything like a complete chart of the asteroids was a project for years to come. Vibrator units were sunk into a miner's claim and tuned to his finder set. The strength of the signal gave him some idea of the distance. It was still very much of a hit-or-miss matter, much like the way the ancient sailors had navigated by guesswork. A man had to learn by instinct and experience about how long acceleration should be built up, and to what strength.

Clay started a series of directional blasts, none of them powerful. The trip to Asteroid 20-47 was a matter of hours at best, but in these short hops—short compared to the four-month, Marstime voyage from the red planet to Ceres—it wasn't hard to overshoot the mark.

"You see, Pete, there are only two things that can slow a ship in space: counterblast or gravitational drag," Clay said. "You can't stop her like a tractor, by cutting off the power, then turn around and go back. You're going in one direction at full speed, say, and you want to make a turn Jupiterwise. What'll happen if you just blast in the opposite direction to where you want to turn?"

"Well, the ship *will* turn, won't it?" Peter asked.

"Sure will. But you'll still keep moving in the same direction, only sidewise instead of nose-on. Oh, if you've got enough distance, you'll notice a very small curve eventually, and the blast will cut your acceleration a little. But if you're actually going to change your

course, you have to cut down the acceleration before you try turning. Many's the miner who's overshot himself and spent days getting back to where he wanted to be. That's why we have to carry several times as much fuel as we figure we ought to need for each trip."

"What about something running into us?"

"The detectors will do for most bodies. You see, nearly all the asteroids follow one general level. We get above it or below it. There're some erratic ones, and they're always a possible danger. We don't turn the ship for them. We just shove it out of the way, then ease back onto course once it's past."

Abruptly, the communicator on the general band, kept open at all times, burst into sound. "Miner's aid! Miner's aid!" That was the signal no honest miner ignored. It meant that a human being was in trouble somewhere out here, and no man knew when his own turn would come. "Dave Ogden calling from 34-91. Claim jumpers attacking me. I'm cut off from my ship without a gun!" This was followed by a series of coordinates, and Clay set to work.

"Is he anywhere near us, Dad?" Peter asked excitedly.

Clay looked up from his charts. "Not far, and on course." He said, "Ogden, what kind of weapons do they have?"

"Only shortguns; there're six of 'em. I've got pellets in my suit pouch, and I'm holding them off. They're taking time to creep up on me—figure they'll surround me and pick me off when they're in perfect range, but short of the distance I can throw."

Explosive pellets could be thrown far enough on these little rocks, but not accurately, and not always with enough momentum to explode when they hit.

Often as not they'd go up and never come down. Used this way, they were good only for very close range.

"Okay, Ogden," said Clay. "Hold 'em off as well as you can, and we'll be around. . . . Well, Pete, this is our party. There's no one else nearer than we are—no one else around, or we'd have heard someone else answer. This may be the kind of trouble Glen's been muttering about—large-scale claim jumping. We'll burn a lot of fuel getting there, but it can't be helped. Strap yourself solid, partner; we'll be in for a lot of jolting!"

Chapter 2 *The Miners' Guard*

ASTEROID 34-91 LOOKED pretty much like a tabletop, with a relief map of mountains and depressions set upon it, as the *Claymore* approached. Peter had heard of planetoids this shape, but he'd never seen one before. The trips out to 20-47 had been uneventful. There hadn't been any side excursions, such as this, to break the routine. Still, as Ben Black had said, there was always something to see no matter how often you looked, if you just watched the sky.

"We're lucky he's in a lonely section," said Clay. "Right now, 34-91 is the only body around, so it won't be too difficult to land."

"They'll know we're coming, won't they?" Pete wanted to know.

"Ought to. What they were shooting for first, I'd say, was his suit radio. Since they couldn't prevent him from calling for help, they'll try to finish him off before we arrive." He fixed his eyes on the gravity meters and

started the careful deceleration blasts they needed to maneuver into the plateau-like asteroid's orbit.

"The shape of that one means it hasn't much gravity—less than Ceres by far, and less than 20-47. That's in Ogden's favor. You have to move awful slow on a world like that unless you're anchored down—otherwise, you'll find yourself falling off and out into space."

"Are people ever marooned aspace that way?"

"They sure are!" Clay chuckled. "Happened to me once. There's no telling how many got lost completely that way, back in the early days, before miners realized how easy it was and how serious it could be. I'd have been in a bad fix if Glen hadn't been around to rescue me. He let me float and drift quite a spell before coming out after me too—said I'd learn more if I sweated a bit, than if he dropped everything and came blasting after me right away."

"How did you get on his ship? Did he throw a line out to you?"

Clay grinned again. "Nope. He took up an orbit around 20-47, then shot candles at me with his long-man. Told me to get down by myself. Like an idiot, I hadn't brought any candles with me."

Peter frowned and picked up one of the safety devices that a wise miner always carried with him. "Candles," he said. "I thought those were things made from wax that people used to burn for light."

"You're right. But they had toys they called 'Roman Candles' too. You lit the far end and pointed it away from you, then little flares of colored light shot out. Very pretty in the dark."

Peter looked at the long, slender plastic tube that was the "candle." You loaded it with small flat discs of thin plastic filled with chemicals.

"When you press that firing-stud," Clay went on, "it punctures the front disc, so that the chemicals inside come together. They explode, and shoot the works out of the tube. It's a very small explosion—not enough to break any of the discs behind. What you have is just a small-scale rocket. You can shoot off all the discs, one after another, if you want to, but the best way to use a candle is one charge at a time. You'll be going so slowly that you can change your direction with a couple of shots."

Asteroid 34-91 no longer looked like a tabletop—now it was a sizable plain extending beyond their range of vision lengthwise, although they could still see the rim of space straight across. It was thicker in depth than Peter had imagined, and didn't look quite so much like a piece out of a jigsaw puzzle. It would be odd, he thought, to have a mine around the borders, though; there you'd see the rim just about all the time.

A brief flash of light caught their eyes. "That's them!" Clay said.

"Won't they see us coming?"

"Sure, if they look. Most of our lights are shielded. Only the nose spot is on—we keep that on so we can find the ship in a hurry if the need comes. Strap in for landing now."

The terrain was quite uneven here, Peter realized, as the *Claymore* came down in its slow landing-curve and Asteroid 34-91 rose up to meet it. An unobserved approach was possible, but they'd have to fire a few final pop-blasts for landing. Without these the ship would clear the surface and continue on into space. There was little chance of even small rocket blasts not being seen. Along the far rim of the planetoid, a faint haze outlined the rim. Otherwise, all was dark

save for two faint spots of light that came from Ogden's ship and the claim-jumpers' rocket. Now and then a pellet exploded. The explosions flared briefly like a match, outlining shapes and shadows boldly for a second, then died.

"Saw a miner try to save fuel once by aiming his ship lower from a distance, then coming right in," Clay said. "He did—yep, he saved fuel. He also tore the hull out of his ship and got a broken leg in the bargain. He was still fuming when a rescue rocket came."

To an outside observer the *Claymore* floated down to the surface of Asteroid 34-91 as light and easy as a feather. Inside, it wasn't quite like that. They were cushioned against the violent thumps of landing, but a miner's rocket couldn't have all the fancy trimmings of a space liner. You strapped yourself into heavily padded and sprung acceleration seats, but there was still a big jolt when the ship landed, at best.

"Sweet as climbing into bed," sang out Clay, as he started to unstrap himself. Peter gulped, but managed a grin. "Sure was, partner—didn't even know we'd landed." Well, after he'd made a few more trips he *wouldn't* notice it. And I wasn't sore all over like the last time we came home, he thought.

The spot at the *Claymore's* nose shot out like a shaft, and everything within that area was outlined sharply in black and white. No atmosphere meant no diffraction of light, no soft, golden spilling of illumination or soft tones. The light extended until it struck surface, reflecting in a few places which indicated ice.

"Into your suit, Pete," Clay said. "We'll open up longmen on them from the port."

Pete climbed into his spacesuit, attaching candles,

hand-flash, and shotgun to the hooks around the belt. He checked his equipment: the battery that powered the blowers (for pressure), moistener, heating unit, and communicator; the oxygen tank and escape-valve mechanism. You'd suffocate quickly if that clogged—choke on your own dead air. All was in order. He picked up his helmet, and followed Clay into the air lock.

Peter caught his father's eyes and blinked, "Now?" The elder Clay nodded, and the two put on their helmets, turning on their suit-communicators at the same time. Back on Mars, "blinking" usually meant signaling with a light in some sort of dot-dash code. Here in the Belt, it could mean blinking your eyelids in the same way or any other manner of making signs. There was a standard code, but small groups of people usually had their own personal codes too. After all, there were many times when there was no other way you could communicate secretly—either no one could hear you, or everyone could hear you.

"Are you going to call Ogden?" he asked.

"Soon's we open up on them. We don't know Ogden's private band, if he has one, so talking to him will be talking to them too."

They set up the longmen on tripods, then Clay pressed the exit-button and the port swung open. There was no *whoosh* of escaping air; the air in the lock had been pumped out when they shut the inner door.

"Guess you were wondering how there was any hope of our helping Ogden after all this time, eh?" Clay indicated the darkness outside. "There's your answer. This isn't a battle; it's a siege. They just fire at him every once in a while to let him know they're

waiting for him to run out of air. You can be sure they have ample supplies. With luck, a pellet *might* hit him."

Peter shook his head. "It doesn't seem to make much sense to me, our trying to get the jumpers. What do I shoot at?"

Clay swung the barrel of his longman swiftly, as an explosion flared, and pressed the trigger. An instant later another flare showed as the pellet struck. He took the general speaker off the clip of his suit belt and spoke into it. "All right, you thugs, clear out before you're the ones to be hurt! This is the *Claymore*." Then to Ogden: "Are you okay, prospector?"

"They ain't got me yet, friend," came back the reply.

"Try for your ship then, while we snipe at them," Clay answered.

Pete could listen in either on the general band or his private communicator, but the latter was for personal conversation. Only Clay was tuned in.

"Did you hit anything?" Peter asked his father.

"I doubt it. See anything in those light-flashes?"

"Nothing moving, but I thought I saw a suit."

"Good. Shoot in the direction you think you saw it, then watch for the flare and fire again if you see anything moving."

"Why don't they try to spot Ogden with hand-flashes?"

"Right now, that would be foolish. They'd be perfect targets for us—we're out of their range, unless they work up close, and we can see anything moving so long as we keep making flares. Keep firing, partner, but let a second or two go by before each shot. That'll

keep them from trying to make a break for their ship, and won't waste ammunition." He sent another pellet out into the darkness.

This time Pete was sure he saw a suited figure. He snapped a shot quickly and saw the suit itself in the flash—saw it knocked to the planetoid's surface before the light died. "I hit one of 'em!"

"Good shooting. That one'll be out for a little while."

"Is that all these things do—knock a man out?"

"They aren't rightly things to hurt a man directly, Pete. It's much more to the point to wreck the suit. Try to crack the helmet, ruin the blower, or knock out the air and heating unit. That finishes the man inside unless he can get to his ship in time. A hit anywhere else won't do much more than stun him for a while—but sometimes that's all you need to do, too. Even if they hit us, all we have to do is close the port and get out a spare suit. These pellets won't hurt the ship."

He sent another tracer pellet outside. "Looks like they're going to be stubborn. Well, I've got a trick up my sleeve." He went over to the outer panel and pressed a stud. A moment later, the shielding plates slid back from the vision-ports of the *Claymore*, and shafts of light shot out.

"They're running!"

Clay looked out to see five suited figures, one assisting a sixth, making short jumps that carried them just far enough without sending them off the asteroid's surface.

"Danged if they aren't." The Clays watched as the suited figures passed out of the cones of light. Alan picked up his speaker. "Looks like they've had enough, eh, Ogden?"

"Not any too soon, either," came back the answer. "They were inching up on me, and the further I backed, the further I was from my ship. . . . There they go!"

A brief spurt of rocketfire indicated that the attackers had gained their ship and were losing no time in clearing out. Clay walked to the edge of the exit-port and jumped down easily, motioning Peter to follow. "Let's see how our friend is."

"Well!" came Ogden's voice. "Would you look at that? There's your explanation, friend. No wonder they ran!"

The Clays swept their eyes around the sky, then gasped at sight of a large, fighter-type rocket nearing the asteroid. "Must have seen it before I did," Ogden said.

"Is it going to land?" asked Pete.

"Don't think so. Fighters usually don't bother on asteroids this size. They just take up orbits around an asteroid, and the men come down with candles. . . .

"I sure appreciate your help, friends," Ogden's voice went on. "I was one danged fool to get caught in a spot like this—better luck than I deserved to have someone near enough to help. . . . Ever see that ship before? It's new to me."

"Looks as if we'll find out soon," Clay said. The exit-port on the fighter opened, and they saw a single, suited figure framed in the opening. Lights from behind him shot down to the surface, sweeping around until they played upon the Clays and the approaching prospector. Then the figure stepped off the edge of the port into space, floated easily for an instant. A faint spurt of light came from a point near the figure's gloved hand, then it was moving downward toward

the surface, now seeming as if it were sliding slowly down one of the spotlights.

"Hello! Hello!" came another voice in their suits. "Dave Ogden, are you all right?"

"Sure, I'm okay now. These folks came and held 'em off until they saw you coming; you sure scared them plenty. Who are you?"

"Captain Harry Ezzard of the Asteroid Miners' Association Guard. Who's with you, Ogden?"

"Alan and Peter Clay, from 20-47," answered the prospector. "What's this here Asteroid Miners' Association, Ezzard? Never heard of it."

"Let's go to your ship where we can talk, Ogden, and I'd like to see you, too, Messrs. Clay. I want to get as much information on those claim jumpers as possible, and I'll be glad to answer any of your questions there."

Ezzard turned out to be a short, stocky man with a crisp manner of speaking. He declined Ogden's offer of refreshment, although the Clays were happy to accept. Pete saw that the prospector's ship was just about the same as the *Claymore*, both inside and out.

Pete sucked chicory through a tube and decided that the rescue had been something of a letdown. Somehow, shooting longmen out into the dark, and hoping you'd see something to shoot at eventually, didn't seem very exciting. Ogden had congratulated him upon his hit, but seemed to feel that it had been more good luck than anything else. The prospector added that it *did* require skill to take advantage of the opportunity.

"The Asteroid Miners' Association," Ezzard was

saying, "is a protective society which, we hope, will cover the entire Belt. Our headquarters are in Ceres-town, but only the paper work is done there. So far we have a half-dozen fighting ships like this, and about twenty scout-rockets in the guard. The scouts patrol the Belt, help out in accidents, or follow leads when we're on the track of jumpers. There's a scout following that rocket which just left here. We want them to think they're getting away and see if they lead us to something bigger."

"You mean you're a police force, then," Clay said.

"The guard is," Ezzard amended. "That's only part of the Association. There has been quite a bit of shady work afoot. I can't go into details, but a number of miners have been defrauded of their claims by thieves posing as businessmen. Others have had 'accidents' which laid them up long enough for claim jumpers to take possession of their mines. In many cases the jumpers could afford expensive legal action where the miners could not.

"The Asteroid Miners' Association offers free legal aid to any member, and there is no limit to this help when a fraud is being attempted. We do what we can for any miner in a jam, of course. We aren't choosy on that score. The Association is also keeping as full and accurate records on all aspects of asteroid mining as we can get. We're trying to cover more territory than the Claims Office."

Ogden was a lean, sad-looking man. He rubbed his chin. "It sounds like good sense to me," he said, "and I, for one, am sure glad something like this has sprung up. How does a man join—and what does it cost him? You can't do all this for nothing."

"The guard is working with the Martian Patrol,"

Ezzard replied. "It's to Mars' advantage not to have to send out ships and men herself when an emergency comes up. Anyone can join the Association. Dues are low, but there's a small tax on your profits. The Association has taken over the assessment office, and the tax on each cargo is taken care of at the time. If you don't have any luck, don't bring in anything you can sell, there's no tax, and your membership is still good."

"Hey," said Peter, "is the Association called 'Ama,' for short?"

Ezzard grinned. "Yes, we do call it that; I thought you hadn't heard of us."

Peter explained about Glen Abend, and Clay added information on his neighbor. Ezzard nodded seriously and took a notebook and stylus out of his pocket. "We'll get after that, Mr. Clay, and I'd appreciate your giving me any information you uncover. This isn't a new thing, I regret to say."

"What do you think happened?" Clay wanted to know.

"I couldn't hazard a guess without investigating further. We're a bit new at police work. One of the first things we learn is not to start spouting theories on what happened to whom, and so forth, before we have as much information as we can get. All that you have told me only suggests that Abend is missing. As to *why* he's missing—my job isn't to make guesses but to uncover facts."

"Well, dang it," said Ogden, "this is good enough for me. I'd sure like to join the Association. How do you do that?"

Ezzard took some plastic tickets out of his pocket. "Just fill out one of these and give me a chit for your dues. I peel off the bottom to turn in to headquarters,

and seal the stub on your chit. That seal will establish your membership in case anything happens to me before I can turn in your card."

Ogden took the guardsman's stylus and started to fill out the plastic ticket, which was in the shape of a circle with a hole in the middle. "Most miners prefer to wear it around their necks," Ezzard said. "Next time you're in Cerestown go to headquarters. They'll need more information. Right now, your thumbprint on the ticket—both sides—will do."

Clay was about to speak, but Peter caught his eye and blinked rapidly. Alan Clay's eyebrows lifted slightly as he read "*Stall*," but otherwise his expression remained the same.

"You two ought to join up," Ogden observed.

"We'll drop around to headquarters as soon as we get back to Ceres," Clay told him. "Right now, we have to be on our way, if we're going to get to our mine in time to do any work."

Peter was glowing inside as they took their leave. Clay hadn't questioned his message—he'd accepted it the way a partner does in a situation like that. He wondered if his father had noticed the things that he, Pete, had—things that just didn't seem to add up right. And there was something else that he couldn't put his finger on. . . .

Chapter 3 What Are You Doing Here?

THE CLAYMORE CURVED into the orbit of Asteroid 20-47, a bread crumb of a world, somewhat more than five miles in diameter. It didn't rotate on its axis like a planet, so there was no "day" or "night." The faint glow that passed for daylight slowly crept across its jagged surface, the deeper shadows of "night" creeping along behind. It took a full "year" for the light and shadow to run its course. There was a difference—as Peter, whose eyes were becoming accustomed to twilight-vision, was beginning to notice. You *could* see a few things outside the range of your own lights in the "daylight" area, the side that always faced the sun. In the "night" section all was darkness—only the stars and the great bulks of Jupiter and Saturn were visible, with their moons. At this time of the year, he could see both planets, the "gas giants," as they were called.

He was getting used to the acceleration and de-

celeration blasts, too—those moments when it felt as if a monstrous hand was squashing him into his seat. He turned his head slowly toward his father, as Clay jabbed the button for the last smoother-shot.

Clay smiled. "You'll always feel it, Pete, but the time will come when you don't notice it so much."

The *Claymore* settled down onto the surface of the asteroid, scraping a bit, but the landing was reasonably smooth. On a world this size you could only pick an approximate location. Your ship's lights carried to the rim and continued on out into space. They outlined rock formations which you had to learn to recognize. Clay and Abend had fastened signs at important points all around the little world—highly polished little plates of metal that would reflect lights.

Peter and his father cut the lights, except for the nose lamp, and climbed out, looking around until they saw a sign. One arrow pointed in the direction of the Clay mine; a double arrow showed the way to Abend's claim.

"We'll take a look over Glen's layout, first," said Clay. "Don't jump; we want to get a good look all along the way." He started forward in a slow shuffle, which took him but a few inches off the surface at each step, training his hand-flash on the ground.

Pete followed, wondering exactly what they were looking for. He realized, though, that Clay might not be able to tell until they found it. It was slow going, almost as slow as the shuffle from Cerestown to the rocket field. Ordinarily, they would have jumped from highpoint to highpoint.

Beyond the second sign was a fairly level area, a valley about a half-mile long. "Here's where we'll find it, I suspect," said Clay, as they moved along.

A little while later he stopped, trained his hand-flash on the surface and pointed. "A ship's been here."

Peter looked in the direction of Clay's pointing finger, then bent down to examine the cold, rocky surface.

"Ships can't land without making marks," said Clay, "and they're distinctive marks. They aren't like any other kind you'll find here. A meteor hitting will make a solid dent, but a ship scrapes along. You follow those scrapings, then look for sear-marks of the smoother blasts."

"But you can't tell how long ago the signs were made," Pete objected.

"That's true; but I came this way last week when I went over to see Glen—while you were loading. These marks weren't there then. You see, Pete, I'm on the lookout for any unusual signs all the time."

"Could be the *Abendland*, though, couldn't it? Couldn't Glen have come back?"

Clay studied the sear-marks again—a wide area that showed up distinctly in the bright light of their hand-flashes.

"Nope," he declared, "look there." He pointed to another seared area. "The two are too close together. These were made when the ship took off. It had two rear underside tubes—that means a rocket larger than the *Abendland* or the *Claymore*. We only have one rear tube underside."

"Well," said Peter, thinking rapidly, "suppose someone were going by close, and found they were too close. Couldn't a ship our size fire its forward tube twice to get clear, and leave the same kind of marks?"

"Not on this asteroid. Just one blast would lift them off far enough so that the second, even if it were

fired immediately after, wouldn't show as strongly. You might see it, but you could tell the difference right away. These two blasts look pretty much alike to the naked eye. It'd take magnification to tell the differences. You'd find differences, because no two rocket blasts are exactly alike. No two of anything are exactly alike right down to the last detail, even if they look the same on the surface. . . . Nope, this wasn't the *Abendland*; it looks as if Glen's had visitors."

They made their way to Abend's claim, where a large cavern gouged out of the fissure-rock showed that more tons of Asteroid 20-47 had been carted away. Both mines were on the daylight side of the little world. A newcomer might not be able to say that what the Clays now saw wasn't the original form of the asteroid's surface at this point—unless he noticed telltale drill holes, and so forth. There was no rubbish; used containers and other items were popped into the miner's sack and taken back to Ceres-town for reclamation. In this civilization, no scrap of metal, plastic, or anything else was thrown away. These people came from Mars, where the first rule for survival was "Waste Nothing!" Alan Clay and Peter learned that when they were children. It was part of the Martian way of life. On Ceres waste *could* be a life-and-death matter; out here there was no doubt. Many a miner found salvation in his "junk-pile" when the unforeseen happened.

Claim jumpers and pilferers—men who worked others' mines for short periods in the owners' absence, gradually building up a cargo—were no exception to the rule. Pilferers had an extra reason for being careful—they didn't want to leave any evidence.

Peter's eyes caught a small piece of metal. He bent

down, picked it up and put it into the pouch of his suit, thinking that Glen *had* overlooked something this time.

"Nothing here," Clay said. "I'll call Barb and see if she's heard anything."

Peter listened as Clay started calling, "20-47 Abend, 20-47 Abend, 20-47," then pausing and repeating the signal. It was some time before he heard another speaker reply, "20-47 Marlene." Alan reported their findings briefly, mentioning the episode on Asteroid 34-91.

"I heard from Ama," Barbara Abend told them. "They say a search is being made, but they have nothing to report yet."

"Let us know if he shows up," Clay said, by way of good-by. He cast a final glance around the rocks, lined with veins of copper ore, then started off toward his own claim.

The guide of the asteroid miners was Lee Tung's *Mineral Occurrences*, issued in a loose-leaf folder. It was revised annually on the basis of reports from the miners. Each year, purchasers of the book were sent revised pages which they inserted into their folders, returning the outdated sheets.

Alan Clay had studied Tung's volume, as well as market reports sent out by the Metals Department, which outlined present needs. At the time he started prospecting in the Belt, the list of metals noted as "in short supply" included lead. Tung informed him that on Earth the occurrence of lead in metallic state was so rare as to be of little more than scientific interest. On Earth, lead was usually found in various compounds, the most common being lead sulfide, or

galena, which contained 86.6 per cent of lead to 13.4 per cent of sulfur. Less rich compounds were cerussite (carbonate of lead, 77.5 per cent rich) and anglesite (the sulfate, 68.3 per cent rich).

Out here, pure mineral lead did occur; miners had found it. But Clay looked for the three usual forms, and on Asteroid 20-47 he found limestone filled with galena crystals. It wasn't the richest occurrence of galena, either, but there was enough to make a living and accumulate a reasonable profit. Within a few months, he'd been able to send for Peter.

The limestone cliff which was the Clays's claim jutted up at a crazy angle, and Peter would have felt dizzy working on it had they been on Mars. Here the gravity was so low that he could stand upside down in relation to another man without noticing any particular difference. He'd carved out a wide enough shelf to give himself ample standing room. Now he worked an electric drill into the rock around him, cutting at sharp angles, and breaking off chunks which floated slowly down to the "floor" at the bottom of the cliff. A few hundred feet away, Alan Clay worked in much the same manner.

It was no longer a temptation to Pete to see how fast he could get a hopperful of crystal-filled rock to take back to the ship. He grinned wryly as he remembered his first day's work.

Clay had shown him the simplest way to handle the drilling and breaking, then left him on his own, saying to call out if anything went wrong. Pete went to it with a will. He had taken two hopperfuls back to the ship, and was on his third, before Clay filled one.

By the time they knocked off for lunch, he was still leading Clay two-to-one. His father looked at the

smile on Pete's face and grinned. "Think you can show the old man up all through the shift, partner?" He chuckled. "We'll be here for two more days. Bet you an E-string that I finish leading you by a dozen hoppers."

Music was an important thing in Martian social life. Everyone learned to play an instrument as a child; many were amateur composers. The "classical" period of Earth's Western music history, with its emphasis on structure, was just suited to the practical-minded tastes of Mars. Publishers on Earth found Mars a steady market for microfilm scores of eighteenth-century chamber music. On Ceres, "sessions" took place nearly every night, in the apartments of miners or in public areas. Peter played the violin, while Alan Clay was a cellist.

Pete agreed enthusiastically, though he was somewhat puzzled. It wasn't like Clay to make a bet unless he thought he had a fair chance of winning. Yet he noticed that his father kept going at the same easy pace, and was just as far behind when they quit for the day—a rather short one, Pete thought.

But the next morning he opened his eyes feeling as if he'd fallen into a stamping machine. He managed to get out of bed without groaning, but couldn't help wincing when Clay patted his shoulder and said, "Let's go, champ."

Clay hadn't paid any attention to Pete's discomfort, but as he was taking his suit down from the wall, he observed, "Low gravity's a very deceptive thing, partner. Lots of folks come out here thinking they can go twice or three times as fast and hard as they could on Mars—and they're right in a way. You *can*. But gravity or no gravity, muscles strain when you put

too much of a load on them. The difference is that you feel it quicker in normal conditions."

Peter staggered out to the cliffside that day with but one thought in mind: to move as little and as slowly as possible. After what seemed ages, he had his hopper filled and found that it was lunchtime. That night Clay rubbed him down with liniment, and Pete spent the following day in his bunk.

Clay's voice broke into Pete's thoughts now. "Ship coming!" He looked around the sky and saw the lights of a rocket somewhat larger than the *Claymore*. Perhaps this was the ship that had made the signs they'd found. They watched it land, over in the same area.

"Claim jumpers or pilferers?" Peter asked.

"Wouldn't be pilferers; they know someone's here. Might be jumpers, but I doubt it. Never heard of them attacking unless a man was alone. Anyway, they'd come up with their lights shielded, and make for the other side. . . . Might be prospecting, though."

"Can they do that here?"

"Yup," said Clay, "perfectly all right. We don't own this whole asteroid, partner. What we have is a galena claim in this area, and that covers any other minerals in the same location. Same thing with Glen's mine. If Glen's fissure-rock extended into this area, or our limestone reached into his, we wouldn't argue over it. We have an agreement on that. But they're wasting their time prospecting here. Glen and I searched the whole asteroid, and there're only two mines here."

"Shall we go over and meet them?" Pete asked.

"May as well; it might save misunderstandings." He switched on "general" and called, "Hello the ship! Hello the ship!"

There was no answer.

"Probably getting out now, and haven't their communicators on." He started off toward the valley in short jumps that, nonetheless, took him in long curves over the surface. Peter followed.

"Hello! Hello!" repeated Clay.

"Hello!" came an answer in their suit radios. "What are you two doing here?"

"Alan and Peter Clay," Alan replied. "We have a galena claim over yonder. You fellows looking for something?"

"Joseph Vincennes and crew," came back the answer. "You're off-base, Clay. I have the claim on this entire asteroid."

It was possible to claim an entire asteroid, Clay knew. This was done in the cases of very small rocks in the sky, although not usually with asteroids more than a few miles in diameter. Clay might have claimed all of 20-47, had he and Abend not met each other while prospecting here.

"No good, Vincennes," he answered. "The section you're on right now is open. I've got no kick coming whatever you find there, although I'm sure you won't find anything. These limestone rocks are mine, and my friend Abend has the copper veins two miles yonder."

Another voice cut in, one of the men behind Vincennes. "Don't argue with the pilferer; he's got no right here."

"Don't call me 'pilferer'!" snapped Clay. "I've got a galena claim here, properly filed, and I can prove it."

"He's being stubborn," came that other speaker again. "Shall we shove him off?"

"I'll handle this," answered Vincennes. "You, Clay—

I'll apologize for the 'pilferer' since you say you're not. I'll take your word that you've made an honest mistake. But the fact remains, mister, that you two have no right here and you'll have to leave. You're on my property, and it's my right to put you off by force if you refuse to go quietly."

"You're not bluffing me," said Clay. "I don't know what kind of fancy claim jumping you birds have worked out, but whatever it is, you're not fooling me."

Vincennes called, "All right, Halley." To the Clays, he added, "If you two will look up at the port, you will see that you're covered by a longman. . . . Saul, I think these men need a lesson; throw their ship off, and throw their equipment after them."

Peter was puzzled. "What does he mean?"

"Never see this happen before, kid? You'll find out. It will be somewhat inconvenient, I'm afraid. Three men can easily lift your ship in this gravity and give it a push—enough to start it floating off into space. Once it's clear, we'll pick you up and send you after it. You have candles, I see. Well, you'll pick up some experience in spacesuit navigation getting your equipment and making it to your ship.

"And remember this, Mister Clay. I have every right to do what I'm doing. In fact, I could have shot you down, had I wanted to, and still been in the right. All right, fellows, get going."

"How long will it take?" Peter asked his father, with a sinking feeling in his stomach.

"Not too long, I'm afraid—no more than fifteen minutes."

"I'd say that was a good estimate," agreed Vincennes. "If you want to reconsider, and leave in an orderly manner on your own, I'll call my men back."

"We don't have to stand for this," Pete burst out suddenly, as a thought struck him. "We can call Ezzard—the Miners' Aid!"

"That's right, partner," Clay answered. "I'm a fool for forgetting. . . . Vincennes—we'll go quietly, since you have the jump on us, but we're calling the Ama Guard."

"Which will do you no good whatsoever," replied Vincennes. "The guard enforces legal claims."

"Which ours is!" retorted Clay.

Vincennes called out: "Saul! Come back, all of you. Never mind their ship. . . . Clay, I apologize if I've appeared arbitrary, but I have had a bit of unpleasantness with jumpers recently. If you're willing to call in the guard, that tells me you believe you're in the right. I won't try to force an honest man. Will you wait for the guard before you do anything further?"

Clay laughed. "You're a smooth one, Vincennes. Will I wait for the guard? You're right I will! Well, since you give me credit for being honest, I'll return the compliment."

"Agreed, then. Do you want to call them, or shall I?"

"I'll call them," Clay said. He sent out the signal, repeating it and waiting, catching Pete's eyes and signaling with his eyelids. Peter read in the blinks, "This strange. Hard to believe so simple. Why guard handy?"

Clay stopped blinking as a voice sounded in his communicator: "Miners' Aid, Captain Ezzard speaking. Where are you?"

Clay started to blink again as he gave their location. "Gets stranger. Keep eyes peeled. Vincennes too willing about we call help. Why guard so near right now? Looks like trick!"

Chapter 4 Protection

PETER WAS BEGINNING TO THINK that perhaps Glen Abend wasn't as much of an alarmist as he'd seemed. The very existence of the Asteroid Miners' Association Guard proved the need for it. That meant there must be a great deal more illegal activity going on than most people suspected.

As if Clay had been reading Pete's thoughts, he said, "Maybe there's some sort of organized claim jumping and pilfering going on."

They were talking now, which meant that Vincennes and his crew would overhear.

"You're right about that, Clay," confirmed the other man. "No one is sure yet, but all the evidence points to some sort of organization. That's why I was so touchy when I found you here."

"But I don't see how they could get away with it," Peter protested. "Every time we bring in a cargo, we have to identify ourselves and our claim." He paused

as a thought struck him. "That proves us right, Mr. Vincennes—the records back in the assaying office."

Vincennes' whole tone had changed. He said, not unpleasantly: "No, my young friend, I'm afraid it doesn't prove as much as you think. The most it could prove was your honest belief. The assaying office hasn't been as careful as it might be; I've noticed that. I was there a few days ago when a miner brought in his first cargo of manganese. He identified it as coming from his claim on 29-82, and the clerk only checked for the existence of a manganese claim on that asteroid. He didn't ask for proof on the owner's name or filing date. I watched, and saw him enter the claim on his asteroid chart. The next time that miner comes in, the clerk will look at his chart and see that a manganese claim is listed for 29-82. As long as the same person keeps coming back—or someone saying he's working for that person—the only check will be by that incomplete record."

Peter stared, and gasped, "But . . . why any pilferer could say he was working for the man he stole from! So could a jumper."

"That," said Vincennes, "is just what has been happening, I believe."

"Don't see how things got so sloppy," objected Clay. "Do you suppose the clerk could be getting something on the side?"

"This is possible, but there's a better explanation for the easygoing way the office operates. I've been out here nearly twenty years, Mr. Clay. Things were much different then. There were fewer miners; Ceres-town was brand new; and there was plenty of easily found mineral for everyone who came along.

"In those days, there was no such thing as pilfering

and claim jumping. You see, people usually don't become dishonest unless they feel they have to be. So long as there was more than enough to go around, and not too much trouble finding it, then a man's simple word was good enough.

"But it's become rougher in twenty years. There's still unguessable wealth out here, still bonanzas up in the sky. I don't think they'll be played out in a couple of hundred years—not even if there's a hundred times as many people out hunting them. The ships and the equipment we have today are better than they were, but not enough better so that prospectors can start out with minimum equipment and find a good strike on the fringes of the Belt. The heart of the Belt is still unsafe, to say the least.

"I have with me," he indicated his ship and crew, "equipment for depth mining. It took me a number of years, working the way you two are working, to get this equipment. If there hadn't been galena right on the surface of this asteroid, you two would have kept on going."

"Yes, I see your point," Clay agreed. "So I guess that's a good part of the explanation. These here pilferers and jumpers started out honest, but they couldn't find anything. I guess they didn't want to give up, so they decided to—well, at first maybe just borrow a little mineral from someone who had plenty. They probably felt sorry about it and figured they'd make a strike with what they got this way and pay it all back somehow."

"That sounds very likely, Clay. In some cases, one little theft or two was all that was needed. But some still had bad luck; or perhaps they found that this was much easier than grubbing around, looking for a claim

of their own. However it happened, it *has* happened, and now we've had to set up a police force."

"20-47! 20-47!" came a voice in their suits. "Ezzard speaking. We're coming in for a landing. Signal me."

"I'll signal," said Vincennes, and spoke to the crewman still on his ship.

"Is he going to land?" asked Peter.

"Looks that way," Clay said. "We have a buzzer in our mine, you know. Well . . . Vincennes probably has an extra one on his ship. He'll turn it on and tell Ezzard which band to tune to. Then the ship will be able to come down in this area, if they can curve in right."

"They must have been pretty close, from what you've told me about big ships landing."

"Yeah. They must have been. Had they been far away, they'd have arrived here quicker, but they couldn't slow down enough to land. The best they could do would be to take up an orbit the way they did on 34-91. The closer you are to your destination, the slower you have to travel if you aren't going to overshoot your mark. They've probably been coasting along on little more than a kicker-blast."

The guard ship came down like a feather, but even so it scraped along for quite a few lengths. Lights blazed from all the ports, illuminating most of the area. Vincennes and the Clays started over to the guard ship, and arrived just about the time that Ezzard and three others came out.

There was no heated argument now. Clay and Vincennes made their statements quietly, matter-of-factly, and Ezzard made no comment until both had finished.

"Since you have agreed to accept the guard's decision, gentlemen," he said, "I shall simply ask you to display your markers. Shall we proceed to your ship, Mr. Clay?"

The sealed, buried "marker" was the first sign that claim jumping and pilfering had become part of the asteroid-miners' background. When Alan Clay first went to the Claims Office upon his arrival at Ceres-town, he was given an unsealed marker and "finder." They told him that a copy of his filing should go in each after he'd made a claim. Both units would then be sealed. The marker should be buried on location, a few feet beneath the surface.

Within the marker was a small vibrator unit, which would be activated by a second unit he carried with him—the finder. The Claims Office also had a record of the wave length of his finder, so that another could be made in case of loss or damage to the original. Finders were kept on the miner's ship when not in use.

Clay was cautioned not to bury his marker within too easy reach. Markers could be tampered with or stolen.

Vincennes and Captain Ezzard accompanied the Clays back to their ship. The miner turned out to be a stocky man with a quiet manner belying his initial curtness. He looked around briefly, as Clay took down the black metal box that was his finder, and said, "A neat ship, Mr. Clay."

Alan Clay didn't answer; he nodded shortly and pressed the finder's activating-stud. The gadget operated pretty much in the manner of a Geiger counter. It gave forth a clicking sound which became stronger as the marker was approached, and should become a steady buzz when directly over or beside it.

Pete looked at Vincennes carefully and thought: I'll bet he could draw a map of this room when he leaves. Dad seems to be warming up to him, but I don't like him any better now than I did when he was going to throw us off.

His thoughts broke off as he realized that no clicks were coming out of the finder. Clay took his hand off the instrument.

"Is it heating?" asked Ezzard, bending forward with a frown. "Turn it off—quick!"

"Of all times for the consarned dingus to act up!"

"It had better be opened," Ezzard said. "It must have been damaged, or might be defective. Have you used it before?"

"Just once, testing," replied Clay. "That was when I buried my marker. It worked all right, then."

"And it didn't get hot?"

"Just sort of warm; I figured that was natural."

"What?" snapped Vincennes. "Didn't they tell you at the Claims Office to return it if it heated?"

Clay looked at him for a moment. "No—no one said anything at all about that."

Ezzard looked at the big miner for a moment, and Peter wished he could have seen the guardsman's face. Could some sort of signal have passed between them? Somehow, this all seemed prearranged. Ezzard sighed, and said, "We'll have to drill it open."

The finder was shielded with tough plastic which only a drill could dent, but once punctured, the covering peeled off easily. Peter watched the operation with a tight feeling in his stomach. He wasn't surprised when he saw that the vibrator was now a partially fused lump of metal. Clay poked into the pocket on the inner surface of the shielding where

the duplicate of his filing was carried. A sheet of plastic he'd filled out in stylus, and which the Claims Office had stamped, was still there; but the surface of the sheet was blistered. Nothing was readable.

Ezzard's breath whooshed out between his teeth as he turned to Vincennes. "What about your marker?"

With a dazed feeling, Peter followed the others to Vincennes' ship. His thoughts were too numbed by the blow of what had just happened to appreciate the larger rocket's furnishings. He scarcely remembered putting on his suit, shuffling over to a larger rocket, then entering and accepting Vincennes' sympathetic hospitality. They took off their spacesuits, and Peter looked at Clay. Alan blinked briefly, "Easy, partner; have to sit this out."

Vincennes' crew, all of them ordinary-looking men, stood around and watched while the man activated his finder. Peter touched the instrument as it started clicking; there was no warmth.

Vincennes opened his finder, took out his duplicate filing and handed it to Ezzard.

"This is in order, gentlemen," he said quietly, handing it to Clay. The entry showed that the entire Asteroid 20-47 was claimed by Joseph Vincennes. It was duly stamped by the Claims Office.

"Just a moment," objected Clay. "It says here that you filed on 18/7/48—seventh day, of the eighteenth month, in the forty-eighth year of the Martian Commonwealth. But I filed five months earlier—13/11/48. That gives me a prior claim. You can still claim anything but my galena mine, and Glen Abend's copper mine. He filed the same day as I did."

"Gentlemen," interrupted Ezzard, "I do not wish to give offense, or call anyone dishonest, but this state

of affairs cannot be accepted. We have all seen that Mr. Vincennes has made a filing; we have not actually seen proof of Mr. Clay's. Under the circumstances, however, it is only just to accept Mr. Clay's good faith and give him a chance to produce evidence."

"I agree in principle," replied Vincennes, smiling faintly, "but getting down to actual cases, what does this mean? Suppose you had a situation where the party who could not produce his evidence on the spot was trying to pull a bluff? Clay's good faith is all right with me, but what about *my* evidence?"

"It is possible, Mr. Vincennes, that there was an error when you filed. Until we have more evidence, gentlemen, I suggest we assume that Clay and Abend have valid claims. We are trying to find Glen Abend, who has been missing for several days. You have an undisputed claim to the rest of the asteroid, Mr. Vincennes. If Clay cannot prove his claim, then yours is good as it stands.

"In the meantime, you are all free to work on your respective areas, once you have given your bond not to trespass upon each other."

Vincennes struck the control panel with his fist. "No! I cannot accept this proposal. Put yourself in my position. If I am right, then Clay is working my claim. No matter how honest he is, that doesn't alter the fact that he would then be taking my property. What do you say, Clay? If it was the other way around, would you agree to my working your claim while you waited around for me to prove I had the right?"

"That cuts both ways," Peter broke in. "We can just as well say that we have the rights, and you're trespassing on our property."

"Then, gentlemen," declared Ezzard, "since you cannot accept a compromise, I shall have to put 20-47 under the protection of the Asteroid Miners' Association. This asteroid will be closed for a six-month period, and you will have to cease operations. I might add that no one else will be permitted to trespass, and we'll patrol it regularly to see to it that there is no trespassing. If the disputed claims are settled before six months, then the protection will be withdrawn."

"And suppose they aren't?"

"Six months should be ample. You would have to show excellent cause for an extension. This measure has been used before, gentlemen. So far, it has never been necessary to renew—in fact, most cases have been settled well within the deadline."

Peter looked at Vincennes, expecting the man to object vigorously, but the stocky miner's next words surprised him.

"This sounds reasonable enough to me, Captain Ezzard. As I said before, I agree in principle that the Clays should have a chance to prove what they say. But I could not accept a situation where unproved filings were taken for valid."

Clay said quietly, "You wouldn't have happened to have run in with Glen Abend, would you? There's also his claim on 20-47." Then, to Ezzard: "What about this protection, Ezzard? Does that mean that Abend can't work his mine, either?"

The guardsman paced up and down the control room. "You saw Mr. Vincennes' filing—it covers the whole works. Abend will have to prove priority on his copper mine too. We can't prove anything until we get back to Cerestown, unless Abend should turn up before we leave."

"It would be rather strange if his finder should turn out to be defective too," mused Clay.

Vincennes smiled gently. "Really, Mr. Clay, you aren't accusing me of tampering with your finder and your friend's finder, are you? I realize that you aren't. I just wanted to point out that this sort of thing couldn't be done by anyone without your noticing that it had been opened."

Peter glanced around the room, trying to find some pattern in the conversation, some undercurrent which would make sense. His eyes fell on a flake of metal; it looked like the one he'd discovered at Glen's mine. If he could pick it up, unnoticed, when they were leaving . . .

There was a little more small talk, then the party broke up. Ezzard took Clay aside and spoke to him briefly. Peter couldn't hear what they were saying, yet Ezzard behaved in a worried manner.

Six months! But that was absurd—it couldn't take that long to get proof of a filing from the Claims Office. Or could it? Was there something else that miners weren't being told about when they filed?

Chapter 5 *Judas Goat*

CLAY SUCKED IN CHICORY through his tube thoughtfully. "Danged if I can make that Vincennes fellow out; he's as tricky as a rogue." Peter looked up from the chart he was studying, calculating the return trip to Ceres. "What's a 'rogue'?"

"Out there, partner." Clay pointed toward the nearest port. "One ought to be visible not too long from now. They are asteroids with very accentric orbits. They don't follow the general line of the Belt, but cut way in toward the Sun, then far out. Some of them pass pretty close to planets. This one goes near Mars.

"They travel along at a terrific velocity, which is the only thing that keeps them from being captured by a planet or falling into the Sun. . . . Might be a good idea for you to take a turn at the controls, Pete—keep you from worrying about other things."

Pete shook his head. "I still don't understand it.

First, Glen disappears. Then we hear about Ama and meet the guard. Then this Vincennes tries to pull a fast one and kick us off 20-47. How is it that Ezzard was right there when this came up—and what does Vincennes want with a whole asteroid? You said yourself there're only two mines on 20-47, and that our claims aren't worth jumping."

He started to set up the firing-course, as Clay had shown him on previous trips. They didn't bother to strap themselves into acceleration seats as yet. The initial blast would be only kickers to get them off the asteroid.

Clay looked over Peter's figures and blast-layout. "This looks right," he observed. "Just one thing, partner. Always allow for a slight error—even if you're sure—and assume that Ceres is a little farther along her orbit than where the figures show she should be. The important thing is to cut her orbit ahead of her position, so she'll be coming toward you. If you cut in, find you've miscalculated in the other direction, and you've missed her, then you're in a mess."

Peter looked puzzled. "How come? We can make up the difference if it's a slight one, can't we?"

"Nope. Ceres travels faster than any ship made so far. You'd never catch up. You'd have to plot a new, wide curve that would bring you ahead of her again. And you might find there wasn't enough fuel or supplies to carry you that far or that long."

Peter concentrated on the chronometer, which was set to show firing-times for the course he'd plotted. Once the main direction was established, he wouldn't have to stay in the pilot's seat. The *Claymore* would continue in the same direction for many hours before deceleration and final steering blasts were required.

Outside of storms, and an occasional meteorite which their instruments would handle, their course was clear. The ship was still coasting. He'd need a side-tube blast in a few minutes after the next quarter-hour; then came the real acceleration build-up.

"There's something I want to show you," he said. He'd managed to pick up the little flakes of metal back on Vincennes' ship when no one was watching. He'd taken them out of his suit pouch after they got back on board the *Claymore*. Pete took the two specimens out of his pocket and handed them over.

In the light of the control room, the flakes were clearly a soft, grayish-white metal. Clay picked them up, looked carefully, then took them over to a microscope. A few moments later he looked up and whistled softly.

"This clears up part of the mystery, if it means what I think it does. The only question is whether these came from 20-47, or were brought there. The way Vincennes acted pretty much proves that these came from 20-47." He looked at the chronometer. "Better get back to the board, partner—bad business to leave before the ship's ready to go on automatic."

"Is this what Vincennes is after?"

"I'd lay odds on it—and it explains why he claims the whole asteroid too. No wonder Vincennes wanted us off, no matter how it came about. Glen and I were wrong; there's a third mine on 20-47. . . . Pete, don't say anything about this to anyone until later. I've got some checking to do, and it might be a good idea if they don't suspect we know about it."

Peter nodded and pressed the firing-stud for the side-tube. His hands were suddenly thrown off the board and he found himself flying out of his seat.

Without thinking, he reached up and caught hold of a stanchion—a small loop of nylon that extended from the wall. He felt a wrenching in his shoulder, but held on as his feet kept going. He pulled up his knees so that the soles of his shoes hit the wall, and heard a thud to one side of him.

"Meteorite!" he gasped.

Pete looked around to see Clay picking himself up slowly, his face white. "No . . . tube exploded. You'll have to . . . cut acceleration and make wider curve . . . take a little longer to . . . get there." Clay managed a faint smile. "Just banged up a bit, partner. . . . Doesn't feel as if anything's broken. . . . Bit of shock. Let's see how well you remember your first aid, after the course is reset." He staggered back to his acceleration seat, sank into it, and closed his eyes.

Cracked ribs were not quite as uncomfortable in Ceres' low gravity as they were on Mars, but Clay still had to be taped up. He was ordered to move around as little as possible for a few days. The accident didn't seem to have dampened his spirits. When Peter left for shopping, Clay was making a bet with Barbara Abend that he'd be around again before she was.

After a shift on the asteroids, domed Cerestown seemed flooded with light—a little bluer than the lights in Port Syrtis, Mars, but that was all.

It was good to be able to walk, instead of shuffle or hold yourself to little hops which still carried you far off the ground. The streets and apartment floors were coated with a thin, tough sheeting of metal, through which a mild electric current ran. Similar metal lined the inhabitants' shoes. You could still sail right up

into the air if you jumped, but at least you didn't have to worry about making the slightest sudden move.

The town was laid out in blocks, allowing for maximum convenience in traveling, without crowding, and as much building space as possible. Apartment buildings went right up to the top of the dome. The rooms inside were not very large, but spacious compared to rooms in the underground cities on Mars. Streets were wide, undersurfaced with magnetic web-work which powered the tractors bringing cargoes of minerals in from the miners' ships. Outside the dome they ran on batteries.

In recent years Cerestown had set up refineries. There was no smoke, as smelting was done with electric arcs. Only gases, sulfides, sulfates, and oxides developed as unwanted by-products. These went out through escape vents in the dome, where they lost heat rapidly in the cold, and fell in a continuous rain of tiny blue, yellow, and whitish crystals. It was snow, but nothing like snow on Mars or Earth. The crystals fell slowly, but they came straight down—there were no air currents to make them swirl and flurry.

On either side of the main street lay the business section and government offices—"Central," as they were called. Around the borders of the dome were hydroponic gardens, metal refineries, and laboratories. The rest of the dome was residential; apartment buildings were separated by parks and public areas. Here shrubbery and bushes pleased the eye as well as furnishing necessary chemicals.

The Cerestown miners were not the rough-and-unlettered lot that had made up bonanza towns of

Earth's history. They were men and women skilled in living under alien conditions, where a thorough education in many arts and sciences was vital. They had studied history, and they avoided such mistakes as trying to live in claptrap, mushrooming towns.

As a newcomer fresh from "civilization," Peter had an advantage he didn't fully recognize; he could see differences sharply. Out here, a man took guns with him when he left town. The guardsman's ship was called a "fighting ship," even though there was little about it to compare with films of Earth's battleships, and so forth. People didn't need guns on Mars.

They recognized the existence of claim jumpers and pilferers. They had formed an association to protect "honest" miners.

But this sort of defense didn't happen until the threat had become far more serious than most people realized. Most miners *were* safe on their claims; a good part of the guard's activity was simple assistance to a miner in difficulties that did not come from the doings of his fellow man. Now, however, there was increasing talk about "legality" and "rights"—another clue, Pete thought, to the change that was going on.

Was Vincennes right about claim jumpers and pilferers working in some sort of organization of their own?

No word from Glen Abend yet; no news about him. Barbara Abend had been over to see them the night before, and Pete could see her viewpoint. She still had hope, but she was ready to accept what might soon be obvious—Glen had been lost with his ship. She would accept the fact as calmly as Alan Clay accepted the accident that had laid him up, and the

accident that had ruined his finder. He should have realized something was wrong the first time he used it, Clay said, and shrugged it off to experience.

But were all these things accidents?

Peter had seen Ben Black on the street, waved to him, and walked out to climb aboard the tractor for a talk. Ben had nothing to offer. "A man doesn't come back when he's due, kid, and that's all you can say then and there. Might be a dozen reasons. Might be he'll show up months later—that's happened often enough when a man's had an accident. It makes you feel uneasy at first, I guess, wondering each trip if this time you won't come back. But after a while you stop thinking about it. There wouldn't be any Cerestown if people didn't take this sort of thing in their stride."

Accident . . . accident . . . accident. "But suppose his ship had been wrecked, Ben; suppose he was killed by a claim jumper."

Ben Black frowned and looked thoughtful. "I've been here nearly ten years, now, and in all that time there's only been one case of a miner being convicted of murder. They sent him back to Mars—he was sick. Sure, there's claim jumping and pilfering, but that doesn't make killing necessary from the thief's point of view. It makes for too many complications.

"I know . . . you have guns, and sometimes you use them. There's been a lot of cases where miners have been *shot*. But once they were put out of commission, the winner took care to see that they got to safety. You can shield the interior of your helmet so that no one can see your face. After you've done what you set out to do that way, you just remove the shielding and no one's the wiser. . . . Hear

tell you shot a jumper yourself. Know what happened to him?"

"Why, his friends took him back to the ship."

"Of course. You wrecked his suit, and he had to get to safety; he couldn't hang around and keep fighting. If he'd been alone, your father would have taken care of him and identified him in the process. When we catch jumpers and pilferers, we exile them. Never heard of any exiles coming back to Cerestown."

"Next time you're around the Claims Office, ask them to show you the records. They've got photos and complete files on all convicted jumpers and pilferers."

Cerestown Supply carried all the goods anyone wanted to buy on the planetoid. Food and basic necessities came through Maintenance; the big store carried appliances and luxury items imported from Mars, or Earth and Luna.

Peter remembered that he still owed his father that E-string, and decided to pay his debt. Extra credits would soon be in short supply, since their mining operations had stopped. When the Clays started up again, there'd be a backlog of taxes to be deducted. A miner obtained credits from his cargoes or from maintenance work, Public Duty. Everyone shared in the latter, working a certain number of days a year in regulated shifts, wherever their skills were needed.

A prospector who had a run of bad luck didn't starve. He'd take an emergency shift in Public Duty, and his pay would consist of the excess-value of his work. After a few months his credits would accumulate until he had a grubstake for another expedition. There was a basic staff of men and women, whose

careers were in food production in the hydroponic gardens and chemical laboratories, refining, air supply, transportation, communication, construction, repair, light, administration, and so forth. This staff was assisted by those on annual or emergency shifts.

Peter stood outside the store, watching in fascination as a tractor stopped and the driver got out and picked up a massive-looking calculator unit and set it on the sidewalk.

"Pretty heavy, isn't it?" Peter asked.

"Few tons," said the man. "Going up to the top floor. Got to be careful with these things, even if they are easy to lift. If this slipped and fell on my foot, someone would have to build me a new one."

"You mean it would smash your foot, if it fell on you from a short distance? How come? It wouldn't come down fast."

"That's just the trouble. Things fall so slow, you sometimes forget that they aren't as light as they seem and don't get out of the way. It's the mass that would crush you. You'd feel that as soon as it touched you, and you'd find you couldn't wriggle out from under then."

He called up to a man standing in the doorway overlooking the ledge that ran around each floor of the building. The man fastened a rod with a pulley on its end to the wall, then set in a nylon rope with a hook on the end and let it down. The tractor driver fastened the hook to the unit, and the worker above pulled the calculator up easily.

"Now and then they slip off," the driver observed as he watched. "Doesn't damage anything so long as no one's underneath. If you ever hear anyone yell,

'Ware below!' then look up and see something drifting down at you, don't wait to see if it'll bounce off—it won't!"

Pete stood there until the unit was up on the ledge, and the man above started to take down the pulley, then went into the store.

Steve Menotti—a slim youngster just a few years older than Peter—was alone inside. His partner, Kristov, was on Public Duty. The storekeepers knew nearly all the miners, Pete remembered. Perhaps they might have heard something about Abend.

He repeated his worries to Menotti, but wasn't surprised to get about the same reaction as Ben Black had shown. Steve had something to add, however. "There is something afoot that doesn't look too good, but it isn't jumpers lying in ambush with longmen. Ever hear of the Belt Insurance Company?"

"No, never have."

"Well, it's been going for a short time—sounded like a good thing, at first. You'd sign up, and they'd guarantee full compensation for any kind of accidents. They'd pay your taxes during any period you were laid up, and grubstake you at reasonable rates if you wanted to prospect. The premiums were somewhat high, but not exorbitant.

"But it turns out that there was a catch. If, at any time, you miss a premium payment, Belt Insurance can seize any and all claims you own, or any claims you stake, until the policy is *paid in full*. It means that just a little bad luck—the kind any miner's likely to have—makes you an employee of Belt Insurance. They won't force you out—nothing like that—but you no longer own your mine. You're working for them

on what amounts to a salary, and they make certain that they get the big cut of your profits. That's one of the things Ama is shooting at."

"Ama, huh? What has the Association done?" asked Peter.

"They got a ruling from Central to the effect that any such policy sold to a miner who was not clearly told the full meaning of the contract was fraudulent, and the policy void. Belt Insurance had to refund all payments he'd made. Ama members are urged not to sign any contracts without consulting the Association. I know about this, because your friend, Abend, was nearly drawn into it. An agent was trying to sell him a policy right here in this store. Abend was ready to sign when a member of the Miners' Guard came in. He asked to see the policy, and the salesman objected. It ended with the guard arresting the man and taking him over to Ama headquarters. Don't know what happened to him after that, and I'd never seen him before."

"What did the salesman look like? Was he a miner?"

"Well, let's see." Menotti thought a moment, then gave Peter a very good description of Ogden. Somehow, this wasn't as surprising as it might have been, Pete thought, but it made matters more puzzling than ever.

Each time he had a partial explanation of what was going on, the answer seemed to widen the general mystery. Pete told the storekeeper about the incident on 34-91.

"I'll be danged," Menotti said. He ran his fingers through his black hair, and whistled. "What do you know about that? Hey—I just remembered! About two

weeks ago, a couple of miners were talking about the same sort of thing. They'd had a call for help from a prospector attacked by jumpers—only the guard was already there when they arrived. They signed up with Ama on the spot, and the 'prospector' did too. His name wasn't Ogden, though, and they didn't say what he looked like."

"Glen was telling Barb something about Ama," Pete said, thoughtfully. "The way he was putting it, you couldn't be sure whether he meant that she should go to the Association for help, or she should look out for it. I'm beginning to think that Ama's something to look out for. It's sure suspicious."

"Looks peculiar," Steve agreed. "Yet, the guard has done quite a bit of good work; there's no doubt about that. It could be that someone inside is crooked."

"But what are they getting out of this 'lone prospector' stunt? That sounds more and more like a put-up job every time I think of it."

"Might be some sort of educational campaign, and a drive to get members. Maybe it is an act, just to show people what might happen, and persuade them that Ama's a good thing to have. After all, prospectors have been attacked in earnest by jumpers pretty much the way you saw it on 34-91."

Peter snapped his fingers. "Now I have it! Been trying to think what it was on 34-91 that made me suspicious. It's so simple that I didn't see it at the time. When we answered Ogden's call for help, we didn't say who we were. Dad just identified our ship. Yet, when Ezzard came in and asked Ogden who was with him, *Ogden told Captain Ezzard our names.* How could he know if this hadn't been arranged in

advance for our benefit? Dad and Glen both named their rockets with wordplays on our names, but that isn't usual at all. It's just our own personal touch."

Menotti nodded, his face serious. "That fellow Ogden could be a sort of Judas goat."

"What's that?"

"When they wanted to catch wild animals back on Earth, they'd take a tame one and train it to go out with the wild ones and lead them into a trap."

Peter remembered the reason he'd come in, and purchased an E-string. "I have a feeling there's some kind of trick in this business about 20-47. That Vincennes fellow acted awfully sure that we couldn't prove our claim. I'm going over to the Claims Office right now!"

Chapter 6 Skullduggery

THE CLAIMS OFFICE occupied a suite of rooms on the street floor of the area devoted to government departments. It was one of the few outposts of Mars' authority in Cerestown. As Peter entered, he heard a red-haired man saying to a dark-haired woman, ". . . have to worry about that, Miss. You called us from the asteroid, saying you wanted to stake a claim. As soon as we found there wasn't any other claim on this area, that meant you had a priority. That's why we asked you how long a trip it was—we allow that much time, plus an extra five days, for you to come in and file. If you hadn't shown up, or called again within the limit, then the next person who inquired about that area would be told it was open." He pressed a buzzer on his desk, waited a moment until a series of clicks sounded in reply. "Mr. Lapalme is in that office to your right; he'll see you now."

There was a quiet, unhurried, and efficient air about

the place that made Peter feel considerably better. He looked around as the redhead called over to him, "Be with you in just a moment." The man went back to his desk and picked up a spool of tape, which he started to scan rapidly. One wall of the room was completely covered with filing cases. There were three desks, as well as recorders, communication units, and typewriters. On one of the desks was an instrument which looked something like a typewriter—it had a keyboard—but was otherwise unfamiliar.

The redhead put down the tape spool, got up and came forward. "Sorry to keep you waiting," he said. "I had to finish this tape and see if it needed passing on immediately, or if it could go into the regular routine. It isn't urgent. That means it will be taken care of today, but not within the next ten minutes. . . . What can I do for you?"

Peter told the man his business, and the redhead nodded. "You'll want to see Mr. Kreuder," he said. He turned back to the desk and pressed another buzzer; a similar buzz replied. "He's occupied right now," the clerk explained, "but he'll be free in a few minutes." The man indicated a door to the left. "When you see the light flash on that door, you can go right in."

Pete pointed to the odd-looking instrument he'd been observing. "What's that?"

The redhead chuckled. "That, my friend, is a typewriter—the original kind, as it was used back on Earth. Here, I'll show you." He went over to the instrument, disconnected it and carried it over to his own desk where he plugged it in to a wall socket. "You see, it uses flat sheets of plastic, instead of tape spools the way modern typewriters do. Those spools you see on

it are treated nylon, so that the keys will make a legible impression."

It seemed very wasteful and inefficient, Peter thought—as well as being slow. There didn't seem to be any eraser mechanism and no audio-control—it must be for manual operation only.

"We do find a bit of use for this implement," the redhead explained. He put a sheet of plastic into the roller of the relic and started to operate the keys. "Since it was donated to us, and comes in handy for posting notices on the bulletin board, we don't mind keeping it around." He typed a few lines to show Peter how the machine worked, then drew out the sheet. "This kind of impression is easy to erase, although it holds as long as you want it."

Over on one of the desks, the familiar "modern" typewriter burst into operation. One of the other men in the office picked up the tape that emerged from the machine, reading it as it came out. "They used to have something like our present-day typewriters back on Earth," the clerk said, "in the days when the old-fashioned model was in common use. But those things were completely automatic and had no keyboards for manual use, as well as being pretty primitive all around. They were called 'ticker-tapes,' I think. . . . Hold it! We're getting a report in from the field."

The "field" was the Asteroid Belt, of course. Some prospector was giving general information on an asteroid, describing its particulars and what metals were *not* observed after a thorough search of its surface. This information would go into the General Reports, available to all miners and prospectors. It

would not affect anyone's claim to what he might find, but would save other prospectors wasted effort.

The third man now arose and opened a large loose-leaf book to a particular spot, then took up a stylus. As the tape stopped coming out of the typewriter, the second man tore off the loose end, attached it to an empty spool, wound it quickly, and started to read: "Asteroid 18-05."

The other man looked over the pages quickly, and replied, "Listed and type specified." He flipped more pages, then read, "No iron, copper, or nickel."

"Add: 'No zinc, silver, or aluminum,'" said the one who was reading.

The redhead grinned. "Too bad every miner doesn't go out looking for all the metals on every asteroid. We'd get much more complete dope that way. Wouldn't put it past Old Caution to start suggesting it. . . . Know what? I hear he actually made some definite statements the other day. He told a miner that his filing was unquestionably in order and sent him over to the Administrator with a note." He glanced at the rear door, where a light now glowed. "Cau—er, Mr. Kreuder—will see you now, fellow."

Lon Kreuder was a graying, somewhat harassed-looking man, who gave the appearance that every word he spoke would be tested a dozen ways first. He was tapping a corner of his desk with his finger tips and musing over a spool of tape as Peter entered. There was a faint smile on his lips as he looked up.

"I see you are a newcomer to Ceres," he said. "That puts us on an even footing, although I'm not new to this type of work." His smile widened. "I'm here to help you as much as I can. Unfortunately, many peo-

ple overestimate my authority. The Claims Office can look into cases and make judgments, but we cannot enforce them, so I have to exercise a good deal of care in what I say officially. Let's start with your story. Just tell me everything you know."

He listened attentively while Peter told his story, omitting only the metal he'd found on 20-47, and ending up with, "This Vincennes fellow acts as if he's sure our claim isn't any good."

"Your filing, you mean. The claim is the mine itself; the filing's what is being contested. Well . . . the Claims Office is the authority on that. If your filing is in order, you have nothing to worry about. A note from this office to Central is all you need, and it won't take long unless the filing is doubtful."

"That's what Vincennes says it is."

Kreuder frowned in thought. "From your story alone, it wouldn't appear that way. You say you have filed upon a definite area of 20-47; so has your friend, Mr. Abend. Vincennes has filed a 'blanket' claim, which covers the entire asteroid. He considers your filing doubtful. Hm-m-m . . . what is the date of your filing?"

"Glen and Dad—I mean, my partner—both filed at the same time: 13/11/48."

"13/11/48. Hm-m-m," echoed Kreuder. He turned in his chair and looked out the window into the street. "There were two possibilities from the start, Mr. Clay, as to why Mr. Vincennes filed as he did. One might be that, through an error here, Vincennes was not informed about 20-47. The other was that he knew about you and decided to contest your filing."

"But what grounds would he have for contesting?"

"The date—13/11/48."

"But," Peter protested, "what is wrong with that date?"

Kreuder arose and started toward the files. "There shouldn't be anything at all wrong with that date, or any other date, Mr. Clay. But . . . unfortunately . . . there may be a good deal wrong with it. It falls right into the middle of the 'doubtful period.'" He opened a file, bringing forth an envelope from which he drew a sheet of plastic. "Yes, your memory is correct. That is the date listed here."

"Then what's wrong? And what do you mean by 'doubtful period'?"

Kreuder placed the envelope on his desk and leaned forward earnestly, "What I have to tell you, Mr. Clay, is in strictest confidence.

"The former head of this office, Quentin Yerxa, and his entire staff were recalled to Mars some time ago, under occlusion. . . . You may not be familiar with that term. It means that they were suspected of highly irregular activities. Yerxa returned—and, I'm happy to say, established his honesty. The others disappeared.

"What was discovered was that the clerks in the Claims Office had been tampering with records. The earliest-established forgery was on a filing dated 10/48, and the most recent on a filing dated 15/48. As a result, all claims within those two dates can be regarded as doubtful, *if they are contested*. They have to be certified."

"But isn't that what you do here anyway?"

Kreuder shook his head. "Before these incidents, a report bearing the Claims Office seal was accepted in any dispute. Now original filings are sent back to Mars. Copies bearing the personal seal of the Claims Office chief used to be good. But we discovered for-

geries, so we cannot take any chances. We have to get the information from Mars.

"You see, filings are made on plastic sheets, sent to Mars and placed on film. Up to recently the question of possible fraud never came up. Now, after it's happened, people wonder why precautions were not taken. Very easy to be wise after something has happened. Now do you see why this has to be confidential?"

"Why," said Peter, "I suppose that if I were dishonest, and I knew what claims were in this doubtful period, I'd see if I couldn't jump them and say I had as much right there as anyone else."

Kreuder nodded. "That is part of it, and enough reason for keeping quiet."

"But what could anyone gain by all this? Everyone has two extra copies of his filings. If the miner's own copies show one date, and the copy here shows a different one, then doesn't that prove that the copy here was altered?"

"It probably would—if *the miner can produce his extra copies!*"

Peter jumped up. "So *that* was why our finder was sabotaged!"

"Are you sure it *was*?"

"Well—it's obvious, isn't it? Those crooks changed the copies of the filings here. Then they handed out defective finders to the miners so that they couldn't prove their filings when a dispute came up!"

Kreuder closed his eyes and nodded slowly. "Personally, Mr. Clay, I suspect that is exactly what happened. But suspicion isn't proof, and that is what we have to produce.

"You may not have heard about Central's ruling on disputed claims within the doubtful period. The claim-

ant must present the *original* filing. That means you'll have to go to Mars."

"Can't confirmation be sent on from Mars the way other messages are sent?" Peter asked.

"Again, my personal opinion is one thing, and the facts in the case another. Mars protested—and I protested also—that this was unnecessary red tape. It puts an unjust burden upon a miner whose filing is disputed. But the Asteroid Miners' Association insisted we try this for one year. They claimed that the old method is too open to fraud.

"Mars doesn't agree, but since the Association is trying to restore order here, it was decided to go along with them. We hope they'll see their mistake before too much time has passed. Mars' policy is to co-operate with Ceres, so long as we are not being deceived.

"To put it into a more colorful phrase, Ceres can make thickheaded blunders if it must, but Mars isn't going to certify skullduggery."

Peter's head was swimming. "Skullduggery. There's skullduggery going on all around us, Mr. Kreuder. What about Barbara Abend's accident? What about Glen Abend's disappearance? What about our ship? What about this scheme to send us to Mars for proof? How did Vincennes find out our filing was in the doubtful period?

"It looks to me as if Mars is doing just what these crooks want you to do. Temporary measure—huh! Sure—temporary so long as it's a good way of disposing of legal claims. When they have the loot, they can decide that the system's unjust and change the rules."

"Your finder was defective—proven," said Kreuder.

"You say you were not told about the possibility—*not proven*, I'm afraid, unless you can produce witnesses. Someone must affirm just what he heard Claims Office officials tell you when the units were given to you. Otherwise it is your word alone. That may be excellent in personal relations, but it isn't enough in legal matters.

"Now you see why they call me 'Old Caution.' . . . Oh, I'm aware of it, and I'm not happy about it—but that's my job.

"Mrs. Abend and your fa-partner both had accidents. These seem to have been convenient for parties as yet unnamed. But all we know is that they happened. Have you any evidence that the accidents were not exactly what they appeared to be at the time? If not, then nothing is proved."

Kreuder slapped an open palm upon the desk and arose from his seat. "Suspicion! Suspicion! Suspicion! Yes, I know how you feel, Mr. Clay. I'm in the same rocket. Very irregular activities went on here in this office. That much has been proved—but nothing more. I suspect far more than you and others have told me, but I'm completely blocked. Without evidence to present to Mars, or to Central, my hands are frozen solid."

"But—can't you do anything? Can't the Claims Office investigate?"

Kreuder ran his fingers through his hair. "Can the Claims Office *find* anything? It's a full-time job keeping things in order here and guarding against any further skullduggery in our own cabin."

He started to pace up and down the office. "It's the overall picture that puzzles me, Clay, and it shouldn't. I have the feeling that it is right under my

nose, so to speak, but disguised so that I don't recognize it.

"Take this Vincennes: he filed on the entire Asteroid 20-47. Why? Did he know that earlier filings were doubtful, or didn't he know there were any? How much skullduggery went on before anything began to slip out—and *what was its purpose?* Did Vincennes buy information on filings within the doubtful period?"

He stopped pacing, looked out the window. When he turned back to Peter, his voice was calm, but more intense in its quietness. "But how can Vincennes stop you from certifying? You only have to make a trip to Mars. You see . . . that is the flaw in your case, the one thing that doesn't fit. He can keep you off your claim for a time, *but Vincennes has to stay off too!* Ama won't let him do anything while you go to Mars to get the proof that will beat him. So how could he profit? He stands to lose as much time as you do, and to be no better off when the case is settled. Do you follow me?"

Pete nodded. "Yes, but it isn't as simple as all that, Mr. Kreuder. We can't afford Mars-passage, and the liner comes in next week. We won't have time to earn enough on Public Duty before she leaves. Our ship has to be repaired, and even then it would take four months just to get to Mars. The *Claymore* can't build up the acceleration the liner does. . . ." He paused as a thought struck him. "Could I see a copy of that duplicate?"

Kreuder passed it over to him. "That puts a somewhat different light upon it," he said, thoughtfully.

Peter scanned the small plastic sheet, then looked up. "Is . . . is this all that appears on the copies you have here?"

Kreuder nodded. "Yes. You see, at first miners filed on certain metals in a location. Later, it was found that a given location might have several types of valuable deposit. One of the first requests the Asteroid Miners' Association made was to change the system. Now miners stake a claim on the location alone, and place the second and third copies in finders and markers.

"We saw the justice in the suggestion, but offered a compromise: the original filings would list one specific metal and the area claimed. Our duplicates here would only show the area. We didn't want to help claim jumpers learn just where the most valuable mines could be found, so we revised our files. That is when we discovered the forgeries. So the way matters stand, Mr. Clay, if your filing is valid, you own not only the galena in that area, but anything else there, down to the center of the asteroid. Get it?"

"Uh . . . I think so," Pete said. "But suppose there's more galena outside our area, only the deposits aren't connected. What then?"

"Such a deposit would belong to Mr. Vincennes. You see, he has filed on the entire asteroid. If you can show that you already owned parts of it, he has to respect your claims. But the rest is his."

Peter shook his head. "There's one thing I don't get. How is it that Ama seems to have more authority than Central?"

"The Asteroid Miners' Association is recognized in its own orbit, so long as it doesn't do anything contrary to Central, or try to boss nonmembers.

"If you had not agreed to the Miners' Guard protection, the matter would have been referred to Cen-

tral. They would have come up with the same kind of decision, though."

Kreuder sighed. "I'm very much afraid that this has been an unhappy visit for you, Mr. Clay. It hasn't been any more pleasant for me. I'll do whatever I can, but there isn't very much I can promise." He rose and extended his hand.

Peter took the offered grip and felt a little assured by the warmth of Kreuder's clasp. As he turned to go, his eyes fell upon a man walking along the street.

"Ogden!" he yelled. He started to make a dash for the door and found himself sailing up into the air as his magnetized shoes left the surface.

Chapter 7 What Could Be Fairer?

PETER WAS STILL RED-FACED when he finally reached the street. He'd forgotten about Ceres gravity again, and let himself get caught floating and floundering like the worst whitey. They'd been decent enough about it at the Claims Office. One of the clerks grabbed a long pole with a hook on its end, fished around until he caught Pete's belt, then pulled him down to the floor.

"Don't feel bad, fellow," the redhead said. "You aren't the first who's had that kind of trouble. This old hook gets quite a bit of use; we all go fishing now and then."

Worst of all, though, was the delay. He stepped out onto the street with a sinking feeling as he looked up and down, seeing no trace of the mysterious Ogden. The streets of Cerestown rarely were crowded, although there were nearly always some people about. He buttonholed a Public Duty man, who was check-

ing the magnetic lines beneath the street, and inquired. No, the man hadn't noticed any dour-faced individual answering to Ogden's description.

Maybe I'll see him again, since he's around town, Peter thought.

There was only one thing to do now—see if Ama would help. It didn't look promising, but he could try. The Association layout was across the street from Cerestown Supply, just a little way down.

Peter went in, to find a much larger setup than the Claims Office had, although much of the equipment was similar. The front room, however, was filled with bulletin boards. Recording units and the like were in offices set off to one side. The one man at a desk here was listening to private communication, receiver to his ear. Pete roamed around the room, examining the many charts and bulletins with undisguised interest. Large sections of the Asteroid Belt had been charted, and red circles indicated claims. At the bottom of each chart were notes listing the numbers given to asteroids on the chart and indicating which areas had been claimed. Peter was surprised at the number of asteroids whose numbers were followed by the single word: "Open."

Kreuder had been right, Peter saw. Claims listed did not specify any particular metal. In a few instances, he noted that the listing was "blanket."

He went from chart to chart until he found one containing Asteroid 20-47. It was outlined, but in the column below the chart was written: *Under Ama Protection.*

Pete found a couple of other asteroids on other charts listed the same way before he heard a voice calling to him. He turned to find that the man at the

desk had finished his business on the communicator. A plaque on the desk told all that the occupant was John Wendl.

Wendl was a round-faced individual with a smooth amiability about him. When Peter identified himself, the other nodded. "Clay—the name is familiar. I think we had a report about you from Captain Ezzard just recently. Let me get it out, so we can go over it—then you can add to it, confirm or amend as you wish." He went over to the files and took out a spool of tape, which he started to unroll slowly, reading aloud as he went along.

Surprisingly enough it was a very fair statement of just what Ezzard had seen and heard, and, so far as Pete could make out, made the Clays's side of the affair sound more logical than that of Vincennes.

Pete told about the tube explosion on the *Claymore*, and Wendl let out an irritated exclamation. "That is even more serious than you might think, Mr. Clay." He turned as a man came out of one of the adjoining rooms. "What do you think, Joe? Here's another instance of defective fuel containers. They tried to blast a kicker and the container exploded in their tube." He added, with a nod in Peter's direction, "You don't realize how lucky you were, fellow. Had it been a bow or after-tube, the holes on either side might have been ruined as well."

Peter hardly heard this as he stared at the newcomer. The man Wendl had just called "Joe" was Vincennes!

The stocky depth-operator lifted his eyebrows as he recognized Pete. "Your ship, too, Clay? It looks as if misfortune keeps us together. I have just finished dictating a report. The same thing happened to my

ship, only we were hit by a meteor before we could put about—the explosion must have damaged our automatics. Ezzard had to tow us back. . . . Have you been to the Claims Office?”

“Yes,” Peter said grimly. “That is why I am here. The copy on file shows that our claim was made just when we said it was—13/11/48.”

“Did Kreuder tell you the trouble with that date?”

Pete nodded. “We’ll have to get it certified on Mars. But we need credits for the passage. Dad and I would both take a job in Maintenance to raise the funds, only there won’t be time. Captain Ezzard said that Ama assists miners in all kinds of trouble, and this is one kind, sure enough.”

Wendl nodded. “I quite agree—and I think Mr. Vincennes will agree too. The only hitch at the moment is that you and your partner are not members of the Association.”

“Well,” spoke up Vincennes, “that should be easy enough to remedy. You can sign up any time—and the fact that you signed up because you needed assistance at the time won’t hurt any, will it, Wendl?” The official shook his head. “So you see, the door’s wide open.”

Peter stared at the elder man as if he hadn’t heard. “I don’t get it, Mr. Vincennes; I don’t get it at all. You claimed 20-47—wanted to throw us off—insisted that we be kept off. Now you’re all for our getting help from Ama so we can prove that your filing’s no good.”

Vincennes smiled and chuckled a little. “Sounds odd to you, eh? Well, the answer’s a simple one. You’ve had a tough break, and I’m not trying to cash in on it. If your filing is legal, then I’ll have to be con-

tent with the rest of 20-47—but I seriously doubt that. The sooner this is cleared up, one way or another, the sooner I can start operations on as much of the asteroid as I have a right to.”

“You see,” added Wendl, “during the doubtful period, not only were filings tampered with, but a number were drawn up incorrectly—it was an outright swindle. Those thieves in the office deliberately made errors so that filings would not stand up if contested in court. They’d do this when an especially rich filing was made, then peddle the information so that another party could come in and get a legal filing. When miners began to suspect this skullduggery, it proved the need for Ama.

“The Claims Office was working hand in glove with jumpers and pilferers, taking a generous slice of the loot for their services in making everything appear straight. They couldn’t hope to get away with it forever. They just cleaned up as much as they could and skipped out when it became too hot to sit on any longer, leaving old Yerxa to face the inquiry. Fortunately, his good name has been cleared, and Old Caution has kept things in order.”

“Well, can you help us with passage on the liner?”

“I think,” Wendl replied, “something can be done, but you’ll have to wait until the Director is in. He’s out on a field trip now, but should be back sometime today. You haven’t heard anything from your friend Abend, have you?”

“No.”

“There have been no calls for help in the section between 20-47 and Ceres, and no wrecks sighted. He isn’t on 20-47. It looks as if he may have been kidnapped—that has happened too. If that is the case,

there's little we can do about it, unless we just happen to be lucky. After all, the entire population of Ceres could hide out there in the Belt for years. No one could find them if they were determined to stay hidden."

Pete turned to Vincennes as a thought struck him. "You said a little while ago that you didn't want to cash in on our misfortune. Well . . . what else are you doing? What is it but misfortune if our filing is doubtful because we trusted dishonest officials. We made the claim in good faith.

"I can see that you don't want to do anything illegal—that's fine. But you don't mind taking advantage of the legal business. You can profit by someone else's skullduggery. What's the difference between stealing a claim yourself and getting it through someone else's swindles, when you come down to the real thing?"

Wendl let his breath out with a whoosh. "The kid's got you on that one, Joe."

Vincennes was clearly taken by surprise. He said slowly, "Well, I'll be danged," and looked uncomfortable. "Look here," he continued after an embarrassed pause, "your partner will sure enough admit that his galena claim isn't worth all the expense you're ready to go to in order to save it. You can't clear more than fifty-five to one hundred credits a week apiece from it. Isn't that right?"

"Close enough. But that's no reason for letting it go."

"Of course not; it's a way to build up a stake for prospecting. I've done the same myself in the past, lots of times. So why not consider a simple proposition? I've seen your equipment and the way you handle it. You're both good miners. Why not take a

job with me for the time being? I'll pay you each one hundred and twenty-five credits a week for working that galena claim, if you'll just let the ownership of it ride. You two can mine the galena until it's worked out, or quit any time you want to—just as if it were your own property."

Vincennes paused a moment, then went on in an enthusiastic voice. "Suppose I offer you a contract with these propositions, eh? Why, in six months you ought to be ready to go prospecting for good stakes, instead of finding yourself no better off than you are today. You wouldn't be as well off, as a matter of fact. You'd have back taxes to make up, then.

"I fought a disputed claim through myself, once, and won. You know what I found afterward? Well, I found out I'd been a stubborn fool, because it hadn't been worth all the trouble I went to. The Belt is full of grubstake mines. Why, you and your father could find three more in the time you spend squabbling over one. . . . What do you say—shall I ask Wendl to draw up a contract? What could be fairer, I ask you?"

It was quite a speech, Peter thought. He looked at Wendl, who rubbed his chin and nodded. "I won't take sides in this, Mr. Clay. It's none of my business, but I must admit that Joe's offer sounds like a good one to me. If you want to take him up, I'll be around to see that his contract is in order."

He smiled at Vincennes. "You won't be able to get away with anything, Joe. I heard what you just said, and I have a very good memory. If I draw up a contract, it'll be in line with what you just said now—no afterthoughts or fancy amendments. You made an offer, fellow, and you're stuck with it if they accept."

"I'll repeat it the same way," Vincennes snorted. "I'm not one of your lawyer-breeds, Wendl. Never backed down on an offer or broke a contract yet, and I don't intend to start with this one."

Peter was thinking that the offer *was* a generous one, perfectly fair on the surface. Too generous, and too fair. More than anything else, this latest appeal to reason convinced him that a third mine was on Asteroid 20-47. It must be something extremely valuable, and perhaps it was near the area he and his father claimed.

He remembered the little flake of metal again, and was glad he hadn't brought it with him and shown it to the Claims Office chief. Old Caution might be all right, but the fewer people who knew that *he*, Peter Clay, knew, the better. Perhaps all this talk about the small value of the galena claim was a trick. Maybe they were trying to see if he suspected anything.

If he let on, might the Clays not suddenly disappear, as Glen Abend had?

He stood there, not letting any expression cross his face but a look of careful thinking.

"I'll talk to my partner," he said finally. He turned to Wendl. "When will the Director be in?"

The other looked at a chronometer. "Webster will be around sometime soon, but perhaps not until tonight. You'll find him here tomorrow for sure."

"Thanks," said Pete. "I'll be back."

He nodded to Vincennes and went out into the street. Well, there was nothing more he could do today. He might as well let things go until tomorrow, at that. Peter looked up the street in the direction of Cerestown Supply, and saw Menotti out on the side-

walk talking to a girl. Steve must have a romance building, he thought.

Peter let his eyes wander idly up and down as he stood in the doorway. He glanced up toward the top story where he'd seen the calculator unit hoisted a few hours before. It wasn't there. No, it was being let down—he saw that it was nearly to the sidewalk. . . .

Wait a moment. . . . It wasn't being let down; it was falling! Drifting the way anything drifted from a height here, floating straight down, slowly, soundlessly, toward the two talking on the sidewalk.

For a moment Peter stood frozen with horror, then he found his voice. "Look out!" he yelled, and started across the street. This time he had to make haste slowly. He mustn't let both shoes leave the surface and find himself sailing up again!

Chapter 8 Convenient—For Someone!

IT WAS DOUBTFUL whether they could hear his warning. Steve Menotti and the girl were some distance away, across the street and up a bit. Both of them were completely wrapped up in their conversation. Besides, Peter knew that sound didn't carry very far under the dome—at least anything distinct enough to be understood. He himself could hear faint noises from other distances, and one or more of them could have been someone calling out something. This was so commonplace that you heard without hearing.

The falling unit was now directly over the heads of the pair, and Peter was approaching them as quickly as he could without risking another swim in the atmosphere. Menotti looked in his direction suddenly, and saw Pete's pointing finger. He looked up and grasped the girl's arm as her eyes followed his.

What followed was like a nightmare.

Peter was across the street now, and almost upon

them. He saw the girl start a movement to one side, but too suddenly—saw her lose her balance. Her arms flailed out wildly as she started to topple, as slowly as the mass bearing down upon her. She had twisted to one side and was out of Menotti's reach, although not clear of the unit.

The mass was now touching Steve's head. "Menotti," Peter yelled, "get clear! I can pull her out!"

Steve ducked down, his arms reaching for the girl to push her aside. He caught hold of her feet and started to swing her around, unconsciously straightening as he did so. The movement was too strong. It lifted the girl's legs, but it also sent Steve Menotti's head up squarely against a corner of the mass, now a few inches lower than before. Faint as the sound was, its *thud* was sickening to hear.

Menotti's arms started to fall as his body began to slump. The girl's fall had not been entirely stopped, and her head hit the pavement just as Pete touched her shoulders. He grasped them firmly and started back, steeling himself to move slowly and watching the huge machine that was now grinding Menotti's shoulders downward.

He remembered a phrase from a novel written on Earth—something about the mill of the gods grinding slowly, but grinding exceedingly small. Back on Earth this was a colorful expression. Out here you saw the full meaning. The girl was free now, and Pete tried to grasp Menotti's unconscious form and drag him out from under. He could feel that it was too late. Despite the low gravity, Peter's strength was not enough to pull Menotti free from the crushing mass that bore him downward.

The result was the same as if the unit had fallen

swiftly upon him, as if it had struck him down like lightning.

Pete could feel something wet on his face, and knew that the wetness was tears. He exhaled deeply in sobbing gasps, not caring whether anyone saw him. It wasn't considered unmanly to shed tears, anyway, when you were deeply moved. The man who lived out here in the Belt without showing feeling was looked upon as a misfit—one who would crack up sooner or later.

Steve Menotti hadn't been a close friend to Peter, but he had been a companionable acquaintance. There were some who would feel personal grief at Steve's death. Peter knew that it was the way Menotti died that shook him. Suddenly, all the great science and technology, which had made Cerestown and the Belt a place where man had come and conquered, seemed very feeble. Peter looked up to the top of the dome and thought of how small and weak men's building was in the face of the titanic forces around him.

The moment of terror passed away, and Peter's fear gave way to anger. He hated these blind forces which tried to crush him and his fellow humans, as Menotti had been crushed. He was furious at the thought of this hidden group of men who endangered everyone by their private gambles for quick wealth.

He looked down at the still form of the girl. She'd landed hard and was unconscious, her reddish hair flowing out on the sidewalk. She was about his own age, Peter saw, and he liked the character he could see in her face. She was bleeding slightly from a cut on the side of her head.

"That was quick work, fellow. We thought for sure that they were both done for!"

It was Wendl's voice. Peter turned and saw the Ama official and Vincennes approaching. He saw faces appearing at windows on both sides of the street and people emerging from doors.

He looked at the two silently. There was shock on their faces—it wasn't put on, he was sure. They looked at the girl and glanced quickly to one side where Menotti's arm projected from beneath the unit. Then they returned their eyes to the girl.

Wendl murmured, "Golly—if she'd been under that thing!"

There was horror in his voice, and he was looking at Vincennes as he spoke. The latter showed traces of relief, despite the fact that he was clearly shaken. His eyes traveled again to the dead man quickly.

Was there satisfaction behind that glance? "Poor Steve," Vincennes said simply, his tones regretful.

But what did the regret mean? Was Vincennes sorry that Menotti was dead, or sorry that his death was convenient? Yes, this must have been a convenient accident for someone. Steve Menotti could have identified Ogden as the man who'd been selling those crooked Belt Insurance policies.

Wendl was bending down and lifting the girl's still form easily. "We'll take her into the office. She isn't hurt outside of that bump on the head—thanks to you, Clay." He looked at Vincennes again. "This won't be forgotten, fellow."

Vincennes was looking at the girl now too. "No, it certainly won't. You'll never know how fortunate your presence was." He wiped his brow. "Close," he whispered, "too close. Who would have dreamed . . . ?"

Vincennes stopped himself, as if he'd said too much, and looked at Peter. "Clay, you're right about these

accidents. There have been too many of them, far too many." He wiped his brow again as he turned away and started back to Ama headquarters. There was quite a crowd gathered around now. Peter saw a doctor come up to Wendl, who paused and nodded in Pete's direction. The man glanced briefly at the girl, nodded, then came over to hear Pete's story. A tractor came up as Peter was relating what had happened. Public Duty men started to lift up the huge machine.

Pete said to the doctor, "Let's get out of here. I don't want to see . . ."

How long he'd been walking, his thoughts in a whirl as he tried to tie in this "accident" with what he had learned, Pete didn't know. It *could* have been just what it appeared to be; he realized that. But that calculator unit should have been taken inside. At least, it should have been safe on the ledge. How could it have fallen just in time to catch Menotti?

It was clear that, were this deliberate, someone hadn't known of the girl's presence. But that didn't make sense. A slight push would have sent the machine off the ledge. Only, if someone had seen Steve below, surely they would have noticed the girl too.

Peter shook his head. It was fantastic. How could anyone expect Menotti to stand in one spot obligingly and wait for his doom to strike him? This could be nothing more than an accident. Yet, what was the meaning of Vincennes' attitude?

Or, could it be that some "accident" *had* been planned for Steve Menotti, but not this one? That might explain Vincennes' relief. The girl wasn't supposed to have been involved. Menotti was out of the way. That might be satisfying to Vincennes.

Where was the connection, and who was the girl? Both Vincennes and Wendl knew her. That was plain enough.

He looked up in time to see a figure pass him from an apartment entrance. Another man was stepping back indoors, and Peter heard the second man say, "Tomorrow, then, Gideon."

Something about "Gideon" was familiar. Pete couldn't be sure what it was at first. He followed the man down the street, wondering if he would turn around. If Gideon turned around, all right. If he didn't, all right. What did it matter, anyway? Pete felt tired and somehow spent. He wanted to stop thinking for a while. Walking along after this "Gideon," and wondering whether the man would or would not turn around, seemed as good a move to make as any other.

After a while, Peter noticed that someone else was wandering along behind Gideon. Now that, he thought, is interesting. Is this man following Gideon for a reason?

Gideon stopped and looked in a window; the other man stopped too. When Gideon started in again, the other continued.

"Nope, he's following Gideon," Peter said to himself. "Spying on him, perhaps."

It wasn't a game any longer.

Peter felt that this might be important. Gideon ought to realize that he was being followed after a while, though, if the second man kept it up.

Now the stalker started to cross the street at an angle. He looked around casually, and suddenly faced Peter.

Dave Ogden!

The man's sad-faced features looked startled for a moment, then a crafty-looking smile crossed his face. The smile didn't fit Ogden. He looked as if his face hadn't been made for smiling. He came back to the sidewalk, his hand outstretched.

"Well! If it ain't my friend Clay. How be things going with you and your partner?"

Ogden small-talked for a few minutes, and Peter answered mechanically. If Ogden realized that Peter didn't care about talking to him, he didn't show it. Ogden sighed finally, as if sorry that their conversation had to be broken off. He said he had to see someone and started across the street again. Peter leaned against a window front.

"I must have embarrassed him," he muttered. He went on, turning down a side street and wondering if he could pick up Gideon again. After a short time Peter began to feel that *he* was being followed. He stepped into an apartment doorway, then turned suddenly to face a man not too far behind.

There was suspicion on the man's face, but the expression vanished at once when he saw Peter. His mustache quivered, and his black eyes sparkled as he came forward.

"Hi, fellow," he said happily.

Peter's mouth dropped open, but for an instant no sounds came out. This was one surprise too many. It seemed to be hours before he could make his voice work and whisper, "Glen. Glen Abend."

Chapter 9 You Name Your Price

SHH!" SAID ABEND. "Call me Gideon. Abend is a ghost for the present." He was a small, wiry man by Martian standards—barely six feet tall. His eyes showed pleasure at the moment, but there was still an apprehensiveness about his manner. This was so normal with Glen Abend, however, that Peter didn't notice it.

He frowned in thought; trust Glen to come up with something to puzzle you, no matter what the occasion. "Ghost." He'd heard the word before, of course, but where, and in what connection?

"All right . . . Gideon; you've stumped me. What's a ghost?"

Abend laughed, and most of his nervousness eased away now that he had a chance to explain something. "Old Earth superstition. 'Ghosts' were supposed to be people come back from the dead. They weren't solid. You could see them, hear them, and feel their

presence at times. But if you tried to grasp one, your hand went right through him."

"And what kind of a ghost is Abend supposed to be? I hadn't even heard that he was dead."

"Oh, he's a different kind. Quite solid, I think. I wasn't using the word literally. You'll hear about Abend's fate from official sources soon, I think. I wouldn't be surprised if Ama didn't offer a reward for the capture of his killers, as a matter of fact. . . . Tell you about it later, Pete; I have to see someone right now, but I'll be around. I've already called Alan and told him that Mel Gideon would be over later." He looked up and down the street as if someone might be watching.

"Listen," he said, lowering his voice. "Don't *say* anything to anyone about Abend. Tell Alan if you want to, but blink it. I think your apartment may be wired, mine too. I haven't dared to call Barb, for fear they'll find out I'm alive."

Peter groaned. "They" again. "Don't you know anything definite? If there are ghosts around, the ghosts must be all 'theys.'"

"Nothing much to go on, so far, but suspicion, and . . ."

". . . suspicion isn't proof; we have to have evidence that will stand up. Golly, Gl—Gideon, I'll be reciting that in my sleep if I hear it any more . . . today, at least. Well, do you *suspect* anyone definite?"

"Yes. Ama!"

"You think the whole organization is in this business?"

Abend started down the street, beckoning Pete along. "That's where I come in—comparing notes. I've seen a few miners—quite a few. Tell you all about it

tonight. Stands to reason that everyone in the outfit isn't necessarily crooked. The problem's whether it's the leadership, or whether someone is using Ama for dirty work unknown to the head men. . . . Have to go now. Tell Barb you think she'll hear something definite about me soon, but not to believe the first thing she hears."

"Can I mention your name, Mr. Gideon?"

Abend stopped in his tracks and meditated, his mustache quivering. He cocked his head as he considered one side of the answer, then straightened it to consider another. Peter waited patiently to see if the cocked-head argument would get in a rebuttal. No, apparently the debate was to be a short one. Glen smiled and nodded, as if he had won a victory in sheer logic.

"Yes," he said, nodding emphasis. He started off down the side street, looking as if this decision had taken a great part of the load off his shoulders. Peter watched him for a moment, then shook his head. "Just think how much worse I'd feel about everything if I were an intellectual," he murmured to himself.

Clay reacted as Peter had thought he would, after he'd blinked the message. Condensed to one word, Alan's reply was "Nonsense!" But, Pete noticed, he *did* blink the reply, rather than speak it out. The trouble with Abend was that you usually found yourself going along with him, even though you disagreed.

Yet, when all was said and done, Glen had been right. He'd been muttering about large-scale trouble for quite a while before it all hit them at once.

Pete started to blink the day's events, but Clay suggested they wait for Abend to show up. Pete sat

down facing Clay and blinked, "If Glen right, no speech-talk make giveway; I tell what anyone could hear."

"Okay," Clay agreed. Aloud, he said, "You look sort of beaten around, partner. Me, I've been taking it easy all day, so I'll get the chow. News can wait until after we finish."

"Well, there's some you ought to mull over."

He told Clay a partial version of the day's events, including Vincennes' offer. "Looks as if he's fair enough, as well as being honest," he finished. "The question is—is it worth making the trip to Mars for something we can get without that trouble?"

"Dunno," Clay answered. "So far as our own interests go, Vincennes' offer seems to answer our problems. But there's something else to consider. Fighting this case through, without any ill feeling toward Vincennes, might turn up something valuable on the skullduggery. I think we ought to discuss that angle of it with Ama before we decide. I'd be willing to accept a little discomfort if it can help Ama clean out the crookedness. It would mean a better deal for all of us in the future. . . . Wendl didn't raise that issue, huh?"

"No."

"Well, you say he isn't the head man there. He might not know as much of what is going on. What did you say the Director's name was?"

"Webster."

"Webster, huh?" He paused a moment and blinked, "How I do?" Pete replied, "Fine. Hope someone listen and make our bother worth."

The door buzzer sounded. Clay said, "Answer that, will you? Forgot to tell you . . . someone named Melvin

Gideon called me today. He said he'd heard we knew the Mozart *E Flat Divertimento*, and asked if he could come over for a session. He plays viola."

This was a common enough happening in Ceres-town. Music was often the ground for acquaintances between strangers outside of meetings in the field, or through official business. Invitation to "come on over" was rarely withheld, and then only because of prior engagements.

Peter opened the door to admit Abend, who had his viola and bow under his arm.

"Hello," Glen said, "you'll be Pete Clay, I take it?"

"That's right," Peter replied, amiably. "And you're Mel Gideon? My partner, Alan, is throwing food together. Have you eaten?"

Pete blinked, "We much careful what say speech-talk," as Abend accepted the implied invitation and came in to greet Clay. Conversation was general, as it would be between strangers.

They talked about their common interest—music.

Abend took advantage of a slight lull to blink, "Seen Barbara; all told; OK."

Pete blinked what he had heard from Wendl concerning Abend's possible fate, while Clay was telling about Peter's transcriptions of some of the piano parts in Haydn trios for viola. Nothing personal was touched on. In Cerestown personal questions were not asked unless the party volunteered information.

They finished, and Clay set up the chairs and stands. Each of the trio could watch the other's eyes while they were playing. Conversation would not interrupt.

Abend blinked, "Happen return trip last week . . . no warning . . . suspect nothing. Three strangers . . .

spacesuits with face shields suddenly in control room. Threaten with guns . . . say kill if I not obey."

"How get there?" Pete asked.

"Not know . . . learn later. Make me get into suit . . . say get out . . . disconnect suit-communicator. I get out . . . watch ship go . . . They not know extra tools in suit pouch . . . repair receiver . . . ship communicator open on suit-band.

"Hear strangers talk . . . They set *Abendland* controls . . . full acceleration into Belt . . . leave ship . . . wait for friends to pick up. We near 20-05 . . . they figure I candle there . . . think asteroid empty . . . I die soon no air. Plan guard find me too late."

"What do?" demanded Peter, almost missing a cue.

"They not know 20-05 like us . . . Tom Honoye have copper mine there . . . I look for Tom . . . luck good . . . he there. Come back with him."

Abend's account was interrupted by a voice calling Clay on the communicator. He got up and went over to the set, switching it to private communication. He listened a moment, then said, "Sure, come on over."

"That was Mr. Jeff Webster of Ama," he announced. "He wants to see me."

Glen put down his viola. "I'll run along then," he said. "Perhaps we can try again later in the week."

"Give us a ring any evening you're free, Gideon," Clay said. "I sure would like to play this some more."

"Thanks. They didn't exaggerate when they told me you know the music. Mind if I leave my instrument here?"

"Perfectly all right; we'll take care of it."

Jeff Webster had the look of a visionary with a commanding appearance, but there were lines of strain

about his face. He was large, but built so that his size might not stand out except when he was near another person. Peter had the feeling that Webster didn't know how to rest and had forgotten how to smile.

He was astonished at the warmth of Webster's handclasp and at the emotion in his voice. "Mr. Clay," he said, "my associates were rude to you after what you did today. I ask your forgiveness. They were upset and forgot simple courtesy."

My associates! Then Vincennes was part of Ama!

Webster turned to Alan. "If I have read your partner right—and they say I'm a fair judge—he has not told you the full story of what he did for my niece."

So that was why Wendl and Vincennes were so shocked!

"I didn't know who she was, sir," said Peter. "And I don't think that made any difference."

"No," the man said, "perhaps it wouldn't, to you." His eyes grew harried. "It might to some. I am not universally liked, and not entirely without cause."

He sat down abruptly, and Peter felt an odd mixture of sympathy and suspicion. Webster turned to Clay and said quietly, "I also heard about your trouble with Vincennes and the Claims Office." His eyes fell upon the viola that Abend had left behind. "May I play your instrument while we talk? It relaxes me as nothing else can."

Clay looked at him for a moment, and then nodded. "Certainly. This doesn't belong to either Pete or me, but I think the owner wouldn't mind."

"Thank you," whispered Webster. He picked up the viola and bow, began to play a simple, affecting melody that Peter had never heard before. Webster played

without apparent attention to what he was doing. He sat in his seat almost as if he were listening to someone else. When he spoke, his voice seemed to blend with the music, although his words were entirely clear.

"Laura's parents were lost in the Belt, along with my own wife. The Asteroid Miners' Association came out of conversations the four of us had had many an evening. Originally, it was thought of only as the Miners' Aid."

"How long has Ama been going?" Clay asked. "I never heard of it until this last week."

"Not very long. I tried to organize it here among the miners, as an independent association for Ceres alone. I failed. Many agreed that it was a fine idea, but few wanted to do the initial work. Few could see it was necessary. The feeling was that Central should handle Miners' Aid, and that was enough.

"But I found that there has been a much greater increase in claim jumping, pilfering, and swindling than most others realized. Miners have been lost in space and the Belt. They have had accidents on their claims, and so forth, since the very beginning of Ceres-town. This has been accepted as normal. Hardly anyone has thought of looking to see if there were more such incidents than there should be."

Webster sighed. "I had to start out completely alone. But at last I accumulated enough evidence to convince Martian police that an Asteroid Miners' Association, with guard units comprising what we call the Miners' Aid, was needed. I showed them that a separate organization on Ceres would be to their advantage, as well as to ours. That was half a year ago. Building this organization is my life, and I want Laura to take

my place as director of Ama when I have finished setting it up. Had anything happened to her . . ."

"The organization would go on," said Clay. "If it's worth anything, it's bigger than any one person."

Webster nodded. "Yes . . . Ama will go on. But while *I* live, this is my goal."

His lips curved in the faintest suggestion of a smile. "I'm not merely being ambitious for the girl. She has already proved herself capable. When the time comes, she will be ready."

He stopped and put the viola down, his eyes haunted. "I hate blind, undirected forces," he said quietly. "I want to order and arrange things for human ends. Had Laura escaped just as closely in a danger connected with the work, I should have felt it was different. But . . . this freak accident . . ." He closed his eyes. When he opened them again, the look was gone.

"Clay, I cannot undo the injustice that has been done to you, but I can make amends. Will you sell me your mine—sell it to me, personally, not to Ama? And name your own price?"

Pete had it on the tip of his tongue to ask Webster what part of the organization this "injustice" fitted into, but stopped himself. It was a strange admission for Webster to make. Did he realize what he'd said?

He'd specified Vincennes as an "associate," but what did that mean? Did it mean that Ama backed up Vincennes' actions, such as the business on 20-47? Or was that the man's own personal matter—something he kept secret from Webster?

Clay said, "I appreciate your offer, Webster. But if you really want to help us, I'd rather trouble Ama

for a small loan. We want to take the liner next week, get Mars' certification of our filing. You ought to agree that fighting for our rights will fit in with the Association's aims."

Webster nodded. "Yes, you are right. Unfortunately, I cannot help you there. Oh . . . Ama could lend you that sum and more without trouble. That isn't the hitch. The difficulty is that the loan wouldn't accomplish anything."

He stood up. "You see, gentlemen, Ceres is in a state of crisis. We suspect that a number of filings transferring ownership of claims were obtained through fraud and extortion. The filings themselves are in perfect order, and the Claims Office has approved them. But we have been holding them while investigation was made.

"Everything points to organization behind the skull-duggery that has been going on. These transfer filings have disappeared from our office, and that proves it. Obviously, the thieves will try to deliver these transfers to Mars. They will pass them off as cleared and approved by Ama. They would be the first set of filings delivered since our recognition by Mars."

Webster got up and started to pace the floor. "This is serious. Our recognition, gentlemen, was won by a very small majority in the Martian Council. Were we to protest that the *very first* sheaf of filings cleared by us were actually fraudulent, it would be very damaging. It might cast such doubts upon our efficiency as to reverse that decision. It might set Ama back for years." His voice dropped. "I doubt that Ama could continue against organized opposition here, without Martian support. Those transfers must not get through."

"But," objected Clay, "if you haven't cleared them, can't you advise Mars what has happened and disclaim them in advance?"

"If something like this happened a year from now, that would be all that was needed. At the present, it would raise too much doubt. We cannot afford to be questioned at this point.

"I have appealed to the Martian Patrol, and they are taking emergency measures. The Belt is being patrolled, and all ships heading toward Mars will be stopped and turned back, or spotted for arrest. The liner service from Mars has been suspended. So, you see, the matter is out of my hands now."

"You mean," Peter burst out, "that if we try to prove our filing, we'll be arrested as thieves!"

Chapter 10 Sealed Permit

WEBSTER SHOWED SIGNS of distress at the accusation and raised his hand appealingly. "No, no," he said. "I do not mean any such implication. This measure isn't directed at you, fellow."

"But it might as well be," Peter shot back.

"I'm afraid you are right about that. The fact is that you couldn't get through."

Alan Clay chuckled dryly and stretched his legs. "I don't know about that, Webster. I don't know that we couldn't at all, particularly since we know about the Patrol. As a matter of fact, I don't see what your cordon can do at all, except to prevent honest people from reaching Mars. Most folks will stand by when they hear the trip's forbidden for the time being. But you don't imagine that the crooks will worry about that, do you?"

Webster smiled wryly. "Of course not. I assume the attempt will be made."

"Then how in blazes do you figure it can be stopped? The Patrol and Ama together haven't enough ships to blockade the Belt so that no ship could possibly get through. Only one has to—one ship which won't decelerate when challenged by the Patrol, if they spot it at all."

"You think I haven't thought of that?" Webster sat down and wiped his brow. "I'm in a desperate position; I admit it! I have a personal stake in this business. Ama, and Laura's future in Ama, is all that means anything to me. I'll stop at nothing to secure our position. I haven't any illusions of being indispensable to Ceres. Certainly, if Ama fails now, something like it will succeed again in the future."

"I know what you can say. You can accuse me of sacrificing you and others in order to gain my own objective at my own time. I've thought of that too!"

He picked up the viola and began to play again, his voice becoming more calm. "I couldn't set up ideal conditions. I've had to work with conditions as they were."

"Webster," Clay said, "that excuse has been used by hundreds of men to justify every manner of crime. I'm not talking about scoundrels, but honest, well-meaning men who wanted to accomplish something worth-while. They decided that the end justified the means. You've studied Earth's history. Well, you've let yourself forget that your means shape the end. Once you start trampling on other people, you set up a chain of actions which you cannot break. You have to commit larger and larger injustices to hold on to what you gained by the first small ones."

Webster lifted his shoulders and let them fall. "Injustice. That's a tricky word. You have to make all

kinds of selection, Clay. Look at these claim jumpers and pilferers—do you suppose they consider themselves as ‘evil’ men? Of course not! They see themselves as victims of ‘injustice.’

“When your luck is bad, and all legal means of getting what you want seem to be closed off, then you feel that the law itself is ‘unjust.’ It’s a state of mind, and it isn’t healthy, but you feel it nonetheless. These thieves, as we call them, are victims of the circumstances.”

“They still have to be stopped,” Clay said. “You have to catch a sick one before you can treat him.”

“Exactly. But Ama isn’t only out to capture thieves. We’re also trying to change things here, so that a miner who’s up against it won’t feel that he has to steal.”

Webster sounded completely sincere, as he continued. “As things stand, we don’t have the choice between being completely ‘fair’ to all and being ‘unjust’ to some. The situation’s growing worse. It wasn’t dealt with effectively at the very start. Now it’s come to the point where it can’t be handled without some ‘injustice.’

“I chose to act now, where only a few ‘innocent’ bystanders might be hurt. Should I have waited until the problem couldn’t be solved without many more such casualties?”

Clay sighed. “Well, we’ve reached the point where arguing won’t change anything. You’re determined on the course you’ve taken.”

“I still don’t see how you can hope to block off the thieves,” Peter said. “The Patrol and your guard both have fighting ships, but what can they do in space? Those guns are fine for disabling a ship on

the ground. But I learned in school that about the only time a 'hit' could be made in any space battle, with such weapons as we have, was when ships were passing each other."

Webster nodded. "At times I regret that the arts of warfare haven't advanced much. . . . It's true that the Martian Patrol hasn't had to worry about space-fighting to any large degree. But they have developed a technique which is quite effective." He fished around in a pocket and brought forth a small bit of metal. "I'm going to toss this up into the air. Now, watch it. When it comes down, see if you can hit it with the palm of your hand. Hit it as hard as you can."

Peter watched the little chunk drift down, judged it, then stepped toward it and batted it into a corner of the room.

"Feel it?" Webster asked.

Pete nodded. "Yes. It stung my hand a little."

Clay whistled softly. "So that's the principle. Can you figure it out, partner?"

Pete frowned in thought. "Well . . . it doesn't have much mass or weight, and it wasn't moving very fast . . ."

"But your hand was," said Webster. He smiled. "That's the beauty of it. The faster a ship is going, the more effective this weapon is. You just sow a quantity of small bits of metal in the path of the ship when it's close enough. By then, automatic detectors can't spot the mass and veer the ship aside in time. There's no explosion. The ship's hull will be peppered with tiny punctures, as if it had been caught in a meteor storm."

"Yes, but all this depends upon the Patrol intercepting the ship. That doesn't prevent a ship from

slipping through the cordon. They can't cover the entire area with traps. First of all, the metal will be detected if the ship is far enough away. Second, the stuff could be as dangerous to the fighters as to anyone else." Peter shrugged and looked at the Ama chief.

"We're not banking on this alone," Webster told him. "There are three zones of defense, as it were. First of all, a squadron of the Martian Patrol is on its way to Ceres, and a blockade will be thrown around this planetoid. A second cordon covers the Belt area. A third is around Mars itself.

"Each area is being patrolled, so that any ship going through will be *detected*, if not stopped. If nowhere else, a party will be captured at Port Syrtis. . . . So, you see, gentlemen, the end result is that you would gain nothing by trying to get to Mars . . . even if you managed to get through the Patrol. I'm sorry this hits you personally, but there is nothing I can do about it."

Peter looked at him curiously. "I don't see why not, Mr. Webster. You're Director of Ama, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, since the Patrol is working with you, they'd honor a special permit to let us through, wouldn't they?"

Webster pondered a moment. "I hadn't thought of that," he replied, quietly. He took a plastic ticket and stylus from his pocket and wrote on it. "This should be sufficient, and I apologize for not having thought of it. . . . Hm-m-m, I'd better seal it."

Peter was watching as Webster went over to the table, and noticed that the man did not take off his ring, but used a ring from his pocket. Webster impressed the seal into the plastic, scanned the ticket,

then handed it to Clay. "You'll have to stop for questioning," he said, "but this ought to serve its purpose. . . . You're sure you want to go through with it?"

Clay nodded.

"Well, if you change your mind, please let me know. My offer stands."

The communicator buzzed and Clay went to it, listened a moment, then said, "Yes; he's here." He handed the instrument to Webster. "Call for you from headquarters."

Webster took the receiver, listened, then smiled. "Good," he said. He listened a little longer. "I was afraid of something like that." Another wait, then he added, "Excellent. I'll tell them. Back shortly."

He put the receiver back on its hook and turned to the Clays. "The Patrol has arrived, but something much more important to you has come up. The news is bad, I'm afraid. A miner has reported that your friend Abend was thrown out of his ship into space. He was in a damaged spacesuit and presumably with insufficient air. We know about it, because he managed to turn on his ship-communicator when he was attacked. The attackers did not discover this until after they'd shoved Abend out. The miner who caught the unintended broadcast of that scene was on a near-by asteroid. He says he can identify one of the men. He's sure that man is here in Cerestown now!"

Peter caught Clay's eye and nodded quickly. "But what about Glen? Is there any chance of his being found?"

"The guard is searching the vicinity. We think it happened near 20-05. If so, he may have landed there.

"I promise you this much: if Abend can be found,

the guard will find him. In any event, we'll get one of the men responsible."

Glen Abend showed signs of considerable relief when he returned the following evening. Clay and Peter had spent the day watching repair work on the *Claymore*. It was nearly finished—the ship would be spaceworthy by morning.

"I rigged up an eavesdrop receiver, and checked both of our apartments," Abend said. "They aren't wired for listening in to conversations, so we can talk freely."

He listened as Clay and Peter went over the happenings of the last few days. His head bobbed up and down as each suspicious event was brought up. When Peter mentioned the little flakes of metal, Abend snapped his fingers excitedly.

"That must be it!" he exclaimed. "A third mine on 20-47. But how could we have missed it, Alan?"

"What I want to know," Pete interrupted, "is what kind of metal those flakes are."

"I'd tell you, partner," Clay answered, "but right now I think it's better that neither you nor Glen know. A man can't tell anyone something he doesn't know himself—can't be *forced* to tell. That's what I'm worried about; I'd trust you not to give it away."

Abend nodded. "That makes sense enough." He listened while they went on with the story, then got up excitedly, as they mentioned their suspicions of Ogden. Peter drew attention to the fact that Ogden knew just who the Clays were, although he wasn't supposed to have heard of them before.

"There's a definite lead," Glen said. "I've talked with

three miners who came up against something very much like that. Each one of them got a call for help from some 'lone prospector' in trouble with jumpers. In each case the Miners' Aid showed up, just at the right moment. *And each miner's description of the 'lone prospector' fits Dave Ogden!*"

"That certainly proves something," said Peter. "But what?"

"What I want to know is," Clay put in, "did Captain Ezzard also appear on all these occasions?"

Abend shook his head. "No, the guard officials differed in each instance."

"So what *do* we have?" asked Pete.

"A fair amount. The man who tried to sell me that Belt Insurance policy introduced himself as Carl Harvey. I checked with Central and found that Harvey was supposed to be deported. Belt Insurance was issued a warning. They claimed that there was nothing illegal in their contract, but agreed that Harvey had failed to tell his customers all they should know. There's talk about Ama forcing them to change their policy. At least, members have been warned not to sign."

Clay threw up his hands. "So *what* do we have? We get a lead, follow it a little ways, then it disappears. The most I can see is that someone in Ama may be crooked, or perhaps someone is trying to make Ama appear crooked! It's the same pattern of suspicion without solid evidence. Listen to this now."

He continued the story, ending up with the interview they'd just concluded with Webster. "I've got my own explanation. Ama is a crooked outfit masquerading as supporters of law and order. They do

just enough on the surface to keep up a good front. Underneath, it's a conspiracy for wholesale robbery. And they have Mars behind them."

Abend nodded. "I think you've hit it, Alan. Just where Webster fits into all this, I'm not sure. I've had a very busy time of it since I came back—been working with Kreuder over at the Claims Office. He's trying to gather evidence too. We made a list of miners who have suffered because of the doubtful period, as well as those who were taken in by Belt Insurance. I've located a number of them, and they're all fighting mad. We've gotten up a small organization to fight Ama . . . holding a meeting tonight."

He took a spool of film from his pocket. "Here's another possibility. It may lead to something, or it may not; I don't know. I have here sound photos of all the men who have been banished for pilfering or claim jumping in the last few years. It occurred to both Kreuder and me that some of these persons may have been seen around. I'm going to show the film tonight. Want to see a preview?"

Clay set up a projector and they started running the film through slowly. For several minutes they watched the succession of faces and listened to the voices quietly. Then Peter called out, "Hold it, Glen. Rewind a bit and let me look again."

"I'll work it manually," said Abend. Peter sat at the edge of his chair as the pictures started again, then said, "There!" He turned to Clay. "Haven't we seen that one somewhere?"

The face was that of a gaunt-looking man, but there was something familiar about the way he thrust forth his head when he spoke; the voice itself was unfamiliar.

"Picture more weight on him," Peter whispered; "put him in a new outfit and you have . . ."

"... Vincennes' right-hand man!" breathed Clay.

A few moments later Clay pointed his finger, announcing, "That fellow's in the Miners' Guard. Not even an attempt at disguise." They ran through the rest of the film without making any more discoveries, but this much was a find. Three men, banished from the Belt for proven crimes, supposedly returned to Mars for therapy.

"And the three who jumped me can most likely be added to the list," Glen said.

"How did they do it?" Peter wanted to know.

"Not too hard, fellow. They must have found out when I was coming, first of all. They landed on another part of 20-47 and waited for me. Then, when I went into the mine, they sneaked into the *Abendland*. The rest is simple."

"Have any jumpers or pilferers or whatever come back legally?" Pete asked.

"I looked into that," Glen said. "Yes, a few have, and they've made out all right. Their records aren't kept in the Claims Office. They are in a confidential file at Central, and only the Psych department can open them. It's easy to fall into the 'once a thief, always a thief' reaction if you know a man's been in trouble before. As soon as an exile's treatment is complete, Mars orders his file transferred to Psych, and they handle the case. Everyone goes through that department before coming to the Belt. You wouldn't know that a newcomer is a former exile, unless you knew the man before."

"But can't Psych spot the ones likely to go off?" Peter wanted to know.

"Psych isn't an exact science, partner," Clay put in. "They can guess right in some cases, but they can't predict the future. No man in the Belt has been conditioned to handle *all* the strains you go under here. No one can foresee all the possibilities. Everyone has his own breaking point, but it isn't something fixed, once and for all. A few Earthmen have gotten into trouble, too, though most of them have made out all right, as have Lunarians.

"What I'm curious about, Glen, is how you managed to get hold of these films. I thought they weren't allowed out of the Claims Office."

Abend grinned diffidently. "Old Caution swore me in as a special aide. That's confidential. He's taking a chance, because this is going to be shown to a meeting. But the Claims Office *does* have special authority in emergencies. The hitch is that Kreuder will have to prove that the emergency really existed if he's challenged on his actions later."

"Well, include us in the party, Glen. Just what do you think can be done?"

"I'm not sure right now. Webster's made a surprise move, getting the Patrol in. That's what swung Old Caution over to taking action. It means that Mars is ready to back Ama to the limit. That means we can't afford to make any move that will play into Webster's hands."

The communicator called out, "20-47 Clay!" and Barbara Abend's voice came forth as Clay answered "Marlene" when he opened up.

"Glen," she said, "Tom Honoye just called. He says someone is trying to get them all to start fighting right now. They should raid Ama headquarters. Tom's tried to get them to wait until you show up, but

they're all getting excited. He thinks this may be a put-up job."

"Call him back, Barb," Glen replied quickly. "Tell him to stall for another half-hour. . . . I have it. Say that Alan and Pete Clay are coming over. They've got important news."

He cut the communicator. "The whole idea is to get action, but I don't like this. It sounds like a trap. Look, the meeting is at Central Concert Hall. As far as anyone outside knows, it's a session to play Honoye's *Concerto Grosso*. Take your instruments and get on over there."

Peter looked puzzled. "I don't get it. What's wrong with just holding a meeting and letting it go at that?"

Clay chuckled. "Use your head, partner. Suppose some Ama people happened to wander in right in the middle of things. . . . Glen, do you have anyone posted for lookouts?"

Abend nodded. "It's on the top floor, and we have someone watching each entrance to the building. If anyone we don't know comes in, the signal will be passed up. By the time they get to the hall, all they'll find will be a session.

"I have to get someone now, so you two blast off. Tell them about the Martian Patrol and the blockade—Mr. Webster's fancy three-way cordon. I'm sure the news hasn't gotten all around yet, and it ought to cool them down—I hope!"

Chapter 11 We Have a List

“THINK WE MAY be watched,” Glen said, as the three stepped out into the street. “We’d better split up.” The other two nodded agreement, and they started off in different directions. It wasn’t very far to the building where the meeting would be held, but Peter had an idea. “You go ahead, Dad,” he said to Clay. “I’ll follow Glen for a while to see if anyone’s after him, then come around to the meeting.”

“Good work,” Clay approved.

Peter waited a little while, then started off in the direction Abend had taken. He could see no signs of anyone following Glen, though, and finally saw Abend enter an apartment building. It was rather disappointing, he thought.

The way from this point to the Concert Hall led past a large open area, mostly used as a ball park. There was a game going on as he went by, and Peter wished he could watch for a while.

Baseball was pretty much the same game it had been on Earth, but low gravity made for a lot of differences. The ball was plastic, with a metal core. The current running underneath the ground, through a large metal plate, acted as a magnet. You could hit the ball very high and very far, but it wouldn't go right up to the top of the dome. It would bounce if it hit the ground at a sharp angle, but that was all. Usually, when it touched the surface, it stayed put.

Despite himself, Peter found he couldn't resist watching as a batter came up. Behind the plate, a Public Duty man was calling them as he saw them, and the batter turned around to protest a called strike.

The next delivery was good for a hit. There was a man on first base. Pete decided to wait and see if the runners would shuffle or jump. You could try to make it to a base in one long hop, but you had to land *on* the base; if you missed, you were automatically out. But if you hit it right, then you were safe, even if a fielder caught the fly.

They were going to try to get the runner at second, who was shuffling along, while the batter had made a jump for first. He carried little bits of metal—ball-hawk's pebbles, they were called. He could throw three of them away for correcting his flight. Just the push of one of these hurled from him would start him in a slightly different direction. But it took a real expert to jump bases. The distances were much smaller in games on Earth. Peter thought of films he had seen and wondered how you could enjoy playing baseball when everything was so easy.

The outfielder had made his jump when the ball was hit, and was now correcting his own course. He could use as many pebbles as he wanted to. He'd be

out of luck, though, if he used them all before the play was complete. Pete murmured, "Nice!" as the man intercepted the ball that was traveling at him with a lot of speed, and threw to the second baseman. The runner tried to gain time by taking a short hop, but was tagged when he landed at base. You couldn't tag a man whose feet were off the ground, but you could try to push him so he'd land outside the base paths.

One out. He stayed long enough to see that the batter was going to land safely at first, then started on. The base runner should have started hopping a little sooner.

Pete was still going over the play in his mind when he heard a voice. He couldn't be sure what had been said; it was too far away. It had sounded something like, "There's one of them."

He looked up and around suddenly. Two men were standing in the doorway of the building he approached, and they stepped out now. He recognized Saul Halley, Vincennes' foreman.

"Good evening, Mr. Clay," the man said. "I'd like a word with you."

"It'll have to be short," Peter replied. "I'm late for a session."

"I'll come right to the point. Mr. Vincennes is wondering if you and your partner have made up your minds about his offer."

"I told my partner, and we're both thinking it over," Peter said.

Halley glanced at the other man, a blondish fellow with a long scar on his forehead. "Well, you know how it is with partners. One can decide for both. You think it's a fair offer, don't you?"

Pete snapped, "I'm sorry but I haven't time to talk about it now." He started to brush by Halley, but the other man lifted his hand.

"Easy now, fellow. We wouldn't want to see you lose out on a good thing. Mr. Vincennes might change his mind, and then you'd be out of luck." He paused and looked behind Peter for an instant. "Sorry you haven't time to think about it, but we can help out there. . . . All right, fellows, grab him!"

Peter turned around to see two more men coming toward him. They must have been waiting in the entrance of the building he'd just passed.

That's what I get for second-guessing a ball game when I should have kept my eyes open, he thought.

He twisted away as Halley grasped his arm, but they were ringing him around now. His hands were free; he carried the violin case strapped to his back like an oxygen tank. Out of the corner of one eye, Peter saw the blondish man start a swing at his head with a short club.

He ducked, then shoved forward, head low, and butted the man in front of him. The fellow went in a sidewise sprawl. But the others would have hold of him in an instant.

Jump to base, he thought. He came out of the crouch quickly and leaped straight up. He was clear of them, and above their reach before they guessed his plan. They stood there for an instant, then he saw Halley grin.

Of course! They'd figure out his flight-curve and be waiting for him when he came down. He was close to the side of the building, but not near enough to reach it. Peter was still rising, but he'd reach the top of his jump soon and start to come down—away from

the building. If he only had some of those little objects baseball players used to change flight. . . .

His ring—that would do it. It had taken quite a few credits to have it made with the design he'd chosen for his own "seal," but he could replace it later. He took it off and threw it down at an angle.

That was enough. Now he was moving up again at the same angle, and he'd hit the side of the building. There was a little ledge around each floor. All he had to do was grasp that and . . .

He reached out for it as he came up against the building side, but it wasn't quite within his grasp. Like the player trying to hop to second base, he hadn't figured out the course quite right. He'd come down and be tagged out with a club.

His stylus—that might do it. He reached into a pocket, took out the little rod of plastic with its pointed end and flicked it away from him. It didn't seem as if this could have any effect, but that pushed him the inch or so he needed in order to touch the ledge. He pressed his finger tips hard upon it and pulled himself in slowly.

Down on the street the waiting men started for the building entrance. Peter grinned as he watched them, then looked around. The place he wanted was just a way down the street. He was one story below the top of this apartment. Above him curved the great dome that covered Cerestown.

A pleasant-faced woman opened a window and said, "What's up, fellow?"

Peter laughed. "Just a bit of a game. I can win if I can make it to Central Concert Hall without touching the ground. . . . You wouldn't have any ballhawk's pebbles, would you?"

The woman grinned. "Might have, at that. Hold on a moment." Peter fidgeted, then sighed in relief as the woman came back with a handful of the little lumps of metal.

"Thanks."

"It looks like fun," the woman said. "I've never heard of this game before. What's it called?"

"Don't know," he answered. "I just invented it. Have to think of a name later." He waved as he took a low jump that started him across the area between this building and the next.

Peter estimated there were about twenty-odd people on the stage in the front of the hall when he arrived. All were seated before music stands, sheets of the score propped up on them, and their instruments were ready. They could start playing at any moment.

Ben Black stood at the conductor's podium, and a woman was just finishing some remarks. He didn't get what she was saying.

Several women were in the group, but that was hardly unusual. Anyone who came out to the Belt was judged by the kind of person he or she turned out to be. There was no other basis for deciding about people.

He looked over the group and recognized Tom Honoye. The man was from Earth, but the tag "Earthman" only explained his height, which was somewhat short even by Earth's standards. Ben Black was taller than Honoye, but shorter than Peter. He'd come from Luna, the colony on Earth's moon, and you could see at a glance why he'd chuckle at being called "Whitey."

There was a dark-haired girl he'd seen before. Oh yes, she'd been at the Claims Office yesterday morning. The talk had stopped, as everyone turned to look at the new arrival.

"Now we have two-thirds of the string trio," someone said.

"You missed the excitement, fellow," Ben Black told him as he took a seat next to Clay. "A certain Mr. Ogden was trying to sell us on attacking Ama headquarters. We voted him down, so he got mad and left."

"But—but you shouldn't have let him go," Peter protested. "He'll run right over to Vincennes, or whoever's behind the dirty work, and tell them all about us."

Clay laughed. "Ben didn't say *how* he left. He started a bit of a ruckus, so we carried him into the next room and locked him in. He'll be asleep for quite a while. What kept you so long, Pete?"

"Oh, I had a little excitement too. Did you tell them about the Patrol?"

"Yes," Clay answered. "And about the setup on 20-47. Somehow, the business there seems to be something important to whoever's behind all the skull-duggery."

Peter told of the meeting with Halley, and his escape. Before anyone could start to discuss this, Black said, "String trio's complete now. Here's Mr. Gideon and his guest."

The "guest" was Lon Kreuder!

Glen said, as he came down in front, "We now have an extra clarinet, so we'll have to play a different version of the *Concerto Grosso*. Get out your alternate scores, friends."

There was a small ripple of laughter as Abend continued. "We're here to decide just what we're going to do about Ama and the situation in general. Before we get to that, I think we'd all like to hear from Mr. Kreuder."

"We'd better get ready to join the others if we have to switch to a real session," Kreuder said. He looked somewhat different from the worried official whom everyone called "Old Caution." There was a quiet, confident manner about him now.

"Come on up to the podium when you're ready," Ben invited.

It was very quiet as Kreuder looked over the group from the conductor's stand and started to speak.

"A number of you," he began, "as well as most other people, have suspected that the Claims Office supports the Asteroid Miners' Association. Or, at the very best, you think we can only co-operate with Ama. The time has come when I can tell you openly and plainly that neither one is the case, although I have had to act that way."

Ben Black suggested that he start with making it clear just what the Claims Office's position really was. Peter sighed. It must be the way people became when they had an official position. They couldn't say anything in one word if twenty could possibly be found.

Kreuder nodded. "Yes. When Cerestown was founded, Mars set up the Claims Office. It was to be responsible to Mars only, but was expected to co-operate with Ceres Central, and any other organization set up later, at our discretion. We are *not* under Ama 'protection' or responsible to it. When Ama was founded, our policy was that of co-operation. We gave out information, but it was only the kind

of information we would give to anyone who asked for it.

"The duties of the Claims Office are, mainly . . ." Kreuder continued, and went on for about fifteen minutes. At the end of that time, all he had said was that the Claims Office kept records; and was supposed to tell miners what their rights were, and help them file their claims in the most effective way. In any dispute, the Claims Office would tell you whether you had a claim or you didn't.

". . . to publish current reports on asteroids where no claims have been filed, or are still partly open. We report any irregularities that come to our attention to Mars and to Ceres Central. . . ." There followed lengthy details about how you went about doing this. ". . . and to oversee miners' marker and finder units. . . ." In short, the Claims Office tested each unit before it was handed out.

There was a buzz of comment around the group as Kreuder paused. The man was fully at ease now, even if some of the audience was beginning to squirm.

Peter whispered to Clay, "I hope Old Caution can get to the point before the deadline on our 'protection.'"

Clay grinned and nodded. "You don't know the half of it, partner. Kreuder's pretty direct by comparison. Shh, he's starting up again; you can never tell when he'll come to something important."

"In addition," Kreuder announced, "I have the authority to investigate and report to Mars my findings on any 'irregularity' where . . ." He was off again, and Peter began to notice that the seats weren't too comfortable. They'd never seemed that way when

he was playing music. ". . . when Central has not taken care of it, or seems unable to do anything about it. In such instances I can . . ." (After a few years of explanation, Peter thought.) ". . . enlist as many persons as I need to help me, as special deputies. All such aides are officially working for Mars, and are under Mars' protection—something different from Ama protection, I assure you. At the present time I have a number of such assistants. They have been gathering evidence of just the sort of skullduggery that you are here to fight. We have a list—a growing list—of examples, and we are building up proof."

Clay raised his hand. "What is the Claims Office's position on the Martian Patrol?"

"We co-operate, but we don't take orders from it, unless I'm told by Mars. I've had no instructions, so I can use my own discretion, and the Patrol will take orders from me in certain circumstances. I can't be any more definite than that right now."

"That's good enough for right now," Tom Honoye said.

Peter asked, "But isn't the Patrol backing up Ama?"

"To a certain extent; however . . . shall I say that Mr. Webster doesn't have unlimited credit? The Patrol is here to investigate an 'emergency.' Ama has to satisfy the Patrol that the emergency exists, and that the measures it wants enforced are necessary."

"What about that cordon Webster was talking about?"

Kreuder smiled wanly. "It exists; Mars is satisfied that something is definitely wrong here. So far as Mars is concerned, Ama represents a real need. But, gentlemen—and it's a rather large 'but'—Mars doesn't mind playing 'Old Caution,' either. Ceres is a long

way off, and the Martian Council is quite aware that someone might try to misuse the Patrol for personal advantage.

"The fact is—Mars is suspicious. Not long ago there were serious irregularities in the Claims Office itself. A great deal was discovered about *what* was going on. But we're not satisfied as to the *why*, or as to *who* benefited. Ama has made a big to-do about it, but hasn't been able, so far, to give us any satisfactory answers to the questions we've asked."

Peter got up, "But—but you do have proof of some things, don't you?"

"We have enough to take action on our own. I came here to accomplish two things: to reorganize the Claims Office and discover just what had been going on—to trace the loose ends. It was obvious to all of us on Mars that some sort of organization was behind the skullduggery. We realized that there were at least three possibilities: (1) that Ama was actually an organization of thieves masquerading as a beneficial society; (2) that Ama *was* honest, but is being, or has been corrupted, with or without full knowledge of its director; (3) that a crooked organization exists outside of Ama, but is working with persons inside the Asteroid Miners' Association."

Kreuder went on to explain that he had to work in the dark, at first, and had to be cautious. He could get evidence only if none of the suspected parties knew he was after it. He had to pretend to be much too busy to do any real looking around himself, and unable to do much of anything except tell miners there wasn't any real evidence.

"Had I told any of you what I knew," he said, "you might have taken a firmer attitude, which

would have been a giveaway to the thieves. They'd have known that we were on to them." He looked at the dark-haired woman. "You, Miss Bjornsen, signed a transfer of filing at a price that seemed quite reasonable. I couldn't have done any better for you at the time, but I can tell you now that the matter isn't ended."

"But now . . . you have something on Ama?" she asked.

"I have evidence which might be traced to Ama—which I'm sure will be traced to *someone* in Ama, at any rate. The Asteroid Miners' Association could fill a very genuine need, if it were run correctly. As things stand, we have to fight it. But it may not be necessary to destroy Ama completely. That remains to be seen."

"What about defective finder units?" Pete asked.

"I have delivered evidence to Mars that finder and marker units were not always tested before being given to miners, nor were they given full instruction on operation. . . . I haven't any evidence on your particular case, Mr. Clay. . . . And I also found that a great deal of 'current' information was not published in the regular reports of the Claims Office, although such information apparently was given out to certain parties. Also, the Claims Office delayed making requests for certification of filings that were disputed."

Tom Honoye stood up, shaking his head. "This is as bad as any of us dreamed in our worst suspicions. And you say you have no clue as to who benefited?"

"I have found a large number of facts which point very definitely to one particular party. This man was on Public Duty about a year ago, working for grub-stake credits. Now, within the past six months, he has filed claims or transfer claims on nearly a dozen

rich mines. He was a partner in Belt Insurance, but sold out before Ama started to take steps against the company. He also draws royalties from the sales of an improved-type fuel container and supervises their manufacture. He is a member of Ama and does a great deal of work for the organization, although he isn't listed as an official. I refer to Joseph Vincennes."

Peter called for recognition over the clamor that followed, and told them of his experience at Ama headquarters. "That ought to tie Ama directly into the skullduggery," he concluded.

"Ben," came a voice from a side door. All looked up as a man stepped inside. "Get ready to start playing. I'll let you know when."

"What's up?"

"Martian Patrol unit coming down the street. Looks like they're heading for this building, and you can guess what they'll be after!"

Chapter 12 Tactics

KREUDER RAISED his hand in the well-known, cautious gesture as murmurings broke out again. Someone said, "Let's arrest that crook!"

"Easy, friends," he said. "There is quite a bit of evidence pointing to Vincennes, but he is only one person. To strike at him now would merely warn the rest and give them a chance to cover up."

"But Vincennes is a murderer!" burst out Peg Bjornsen. "At least, he's responsible for miners who were killed when defective fuel containers exploded. You can prove his responsibility, can't you?"

"Ben," called out Honoye, "what about the Patrol?"

"We'll be warned as soon as they enter the building," Black replied. "At that point we start the performance."

"To answer your question, Miss Bjornsen," Kreuder stated, "Vincennes can be held responsible to a certain extent. At Ama's insistence he set up individual test-

ing of fuel containers at the plant. But so far as I know, the containers still in stock at the Supply Department were not taken back. The old stock continued to be sold to miners for some time after these accidents were common knowledge."

"What about Vincennes himself?" Peter asked. "He claims that he, too, had an accident."

Honoye now arose. "That seems to be sound. I saw his ship at the repair center, and they told me there what happened."

"Just one more thing, Mr. Kreuder," said Black. "What is Mars' attitude on an organization like Ama? What are the standards?"

"Well, first of all, membership has to be voluntary; no one can be forced to join. No one can be penalized for withdrawing membership. Second, the members must have a voice in the selection of officials, and in policy decisions. Third, members must have the right to decline the kind of 'protection' Ama offers when filings are contested. And, of course, the organization must live up to its policy of benefits, and so forth.

"We *suspect* that some memberships have been obtained through force and fraud. We suspect that some members have been forced to accept 'protection' over their claims."

Alan Clay got up. "Ben, if no one objects, I'd like to suggest that we adopt a policy of our own. We'll agree to co-operate in resisting Ama. We won't start anything unless we're attacked or are definitely about to be attacked."

"What do you think, Kreuder?" asked Abend.

"It sounds like a sensible policy. You won't accept Ama authority—either to patrol or examine your claims, and so forth. You won't call on the Miners'

Guard for assistance. . . . Yes, I think you have the right idea."

Ben Black looked around. "If there are no objections . . ." he brought his baton down on his stand, ". . . we have our policy. We've already agreed that Mr. Gideon will act as general director of this group for the time being."

"Ben!" the voice from the side door came again, "time to start rehearsal. The Patrol has entered the building."

Black rapped again. "Meeting hereby recessed. Take up your instruments, ladies and gentlemen. You, too, Karkannian; no need for a watch at the door now." He looked at the group, then at the music. "Since we have two clarinets and no bassoon, we'll use the first alternative score. Turn to Section 7, please."

As with most compositions for chamber orchestra, Honoye's *Concerto Grosso* was published in an edition that included several alternate orchestral scorings, particularly among the wind parts. Peter was familiar with his part in the "original" version, but had to keep a careful eye on the music now.

Ben Black rapped the music stand on the podium, went into his downbeat and the first and second clarinets started a dialogue. Then the string trio joined in. The Patrol would enter in a few minutes. By that time they would have gone far enough so that an outsider would have no idea as to how long they'd been playing.

Peter had forgotten the expected interruption and looked up, puzzled at the conductor's double-rap for a halt. Had he made a boner? He hadn't heard anything that sounded wrong.

Several patrolmen confronted Black, looking around

the assembly in half-apologetic manner. "I wish we weren't here on business," the leader said. "I never heard this work before, and it sounds rather good."

"What can we do for you?" Ben asked calmly.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to take away one of your players. A miner by the name of Glen Abend has been reported killed. We've been alerted to look out for a man who's been fingered for questioning."

"And what makes you think you will find the man you want here?"

"We were tipped off that he *might* be here." The patrol leader looked around the assembly, stopping as his eyes rested on Abend. "May I ask your name, sir?"

Abend put down his viola. "Melvin Gideon."

The Patrol leader touched his cap. "Lieutenant Iantosca of the Martian Patrol. I must ask you to come with us on temporary detention, Mr. Gideon."

"May I ask the name of my accuser?"

Iantosca nodded. "You have the right, sir, but I am unable to tell you now. I don't know myself. The order came through Central, and does not list any accuser. You see, you have not been charged with any crime and will not be booked as being under arrest."

"May I ask, Lieutenant, if your orders came through the Asteroid Miners' Association?" Black said.

"I've already told you that Central . . ." began Iantosca. He paused as Kreuder stood up.

"No one is doubting you, Lieutenant. May I see your writ?"

"Certainly. You may see it, as well, Mr. Gideon. As far as I am concerned, you may read it aloud."

Kreuder took the sheet and scanned it. "Hm-m-m. I see. These things usually read, 'At the request of blank, Ceres Central authorizes the temporary detention of blank.' The opening line has been taken out, I see, but the order is sealed properly."

"That happens now and then, Mr. Kreuder. Since there is no formal charge and no arrest, it isn't needed."

Peter listened with a sinking feeling. Ama was acting with its usual caution in observing the letter of the law. Glen couldn't be held long under these conditions, nor would he be booked as a prisoner. But he could be detained where the law would have him if anyone could work out a formal charge during the time limit. The idea behind "temporary detention" was to protect citizens from irresponsible accusation and hasty charges. It put an extra burden of proof upon the accuser. There was no disgrace connected with "temporary detention."

He couldn't let Glen be taken; that would only be the prelude to more skullduggery. He noticed that Iantosca was looking at Kreuder, and the latter was blinking something. The Patrolman nodded first, then shook his head. He turned to Abend. "Will you please come with us, sir?"

Glen was casually picking up his music to stow the thin plastic sheets away into his case. Peter went over to him and bent down as if to assist. Iantosca was talking to Black in low tones. The other Patrolmen didn't seem to be watching too closely. He and Abend were right in front of the sliding panel that led to the prompter's box and out its far end backstage. He slid his shoe onto Abend's and tapped,

"Duck in when I break." There wasn't time to explain what he intended to do, but Pete knew Glen would be ready.

Abend continued to go through the music sheets, rearranging them and slipping a sheet or two at a time into the pocket of his viola case. He peered at them closely now and then. Peter took out the key to his violin case, then reached up and grasped the music stand, as if to move it down so that the light would be better. As he started to slide the tubing, he pulled out one of the small bulbs and pressed the metal key into the empty socket. He felt a tingling shock run up his arm; then all the lights in the hall went out abruptly.

He'd measured the distance between himself and Iantosca carefully. Now he moved swiftly and grasped the man, lifting him off the floor, then pushing him into the air. His own feet were squarely planted, and his knees bent; as the lieutenant started into the air, the reaction of the thrust pushed Peter backward.

The general outcry around him indicated that the others were doing the same. An instant later, hand-flashes cut into the darkened hall from various parts of the air. Peter called out, "Dad," and felt Clay's hand clasp him as they started for an exit.

Before they had gone many steps, lights came on again. Automatic relays had cut off the flow of current into the damaged music stand, and resumed service on all other lights in the hall. Pete looked around. Abend was nowhere in sight. The others were waving to the frustrated patrolmen as they reached the top of their flight-curves and started down toward the floor. All would be out of the room before any of the patrolmen had landed.

"Clever work, fellow," Iantosca called down, "but you haven't helped your friend."

"We'll see about that," Pete replied, closing the door and locking it. He turned to face the disgruntled-looking Kreuder.

"Didn't you see what I was telling Iantosca?" asked the Claims official. "We were arranging to let Glen get away from him quietly. But you've ruined that now. Iantosca's men saw Glen's escape and the lieutenant's on the spot. He *has* to capture Gideon!"

Barbara Abend was the one person in the little group assembled at Glen's apartment who didn't seem to share the general feeling of gloom. Everyone in the Gideon party knew about Abend's position. There was a sparkle in her brown eyes and a roguish grin on her face as she slapped Peter's back and said, "So we pull a boner, eh? So finally one of us does something, after all this time we've been mooning around trying to figure out something to do, and we find we shouldn't have done it."

"Not we—me!" Peter muttered. "I did it on my own. Now we're all stuck in the rocket tubes, waiting for someone in the control room to fire a blast."

Clay laughed. "Right or wrong, partner, you struck a blow for morale. Wouldn't be a bit surprised if someone else didn't try something if you hadn't beat them to it. They sure acted as smooth as if it had been rehearsed."

"Morale it is, yes," Barbara agreed. "Better a little mistake than sitting around making no errors. When a player swings and misses, so that is too bad; but he should be caught looking at the third strike, he's a bum!"

"That is so," admitted Abend. "Yes, even a mistake can be worth the boost it gives, but now you see we have to have an overall strategy decided on first. The theory of individual heroics . . ."

"Darling, you will please to shut up. Save it for the book you will write later. Explain to me in a few thousand words what difference it makes whether you got away from the Patrol now or later, since you were going to get away . . . No, never mind; I feel a headache coming on." The door buzzed, and she went to admit Kreuder. "Besides, Lon can tell us all about it, can't you, Mr. Kreuder? Before my darling husband, such a sensitive genius, the dope, decides to end it all from misery, you will assist in making with plans?"

Kreuder smiled and shook his finger at Peter. "Next time you'll know better. All right—one mistake doesn't prove a man a fool; so long as you don't repeat on it."

He looked around the room. "As a matter of fact, the young man may have done better than he thought. I've talked with Iantosca. He has to make a thorough search for Gideon, so I made a number of suggestions. He's informed Central and Ama that he's on the track, and the Martian Patrol is now combing through the asteroids where persons at that meeting have claims. I was most helpful with directions—all except 20-47, that is. Obviously, Gideon wouldn't hide out there. But he might be on any of the others. That saves Iantosca's face, and keeps the Patrol so busy they can't give Ama any help."

"I don't get it," Peter said. "Didn't you tell them that Glen was your aide?"

Kreuder shook his head. "Not yet. I advised Iantosca, just before you moved, that Gideon be per-

mitted to escape quietly, so that he could lead us to the others. There was more than one person involved in Abend's murder, you know." He turned to Glen. "There's no doubt that Vincennes is crooked, but we're not sure he's the head man. There are three possibilities: (1) Vincennes is carrying out the actual policy of Ama; (2) Vincennes is trying to get control of Ama; (3) he's working for someone outside the organization."

"What's the real purpose of the cordon?"

"Webster told you, and it's partly true. There's a number of filings, perfectly in order on their face, which were obtained through fraud. They disappeared from Ama's office, and, through a fortunate series of accidents, were returned to me. You see, since Mars recognized Ama, new filings aren't sent directly to Mars; they go to Ama for clearance first. The theory is that the Claims Office might not know how a transfer was obtained, while Ama's in a position to make a careful check.

"These transfers *had* been cleared by Ama, and were due to go out. Since I have evidence that casts doubt upon a number of them, Ama would be in a very bad position were they to reach Mars. Webster doesn't know who assisted in their disappearance, but he suspects that they'll be used against Ama. He's right about the tenuous position of the Asteroid Miners' Association, so far as Martian recognition goes."

"So what more do you want—pictures?" Barbara snorted. "If this doesn't prove Webster crooked . . ."

"It isn't conclusive, Mrs. Abend, because Webster's personal seal does not appear on the documents. There are just as strong grounds for assuming that Vincennes is the head man, or is fronting for some unknown

party, as there is for assuming Webster himself crooked."

"Then what are we going to do?" asked Peter.

Clay spoke up. "Glen and I are going to Mars on Webster's pass, and get certification on our filings. Until things are changed, we'll have to play it as if Ama's honest, no matter how much we suspect. They won't dare to contest us then, and it may lead to a showdown. . . . Pete, do you have that metal you showed me? Let Mr. Kreuder see it."

Peter took one of the pieces out of his pocket and passed it over to the Claims Office chief, who whistled softly. "No wonder Vincennes filed a blanket claim on 20-47. My guess is that this stuff runs under both your claim and Abend's. You may have one of the richest bonanzas up there in the sky that has been found in years."

"What is it?" Peter asked, eagerly.

Kreuder cocked his head and looked stern. "Young man, this is something like a war, and you haven't been disciplined for your action as yet. I propose, as a penalty, that Mr. Peter Clay be left in the dark on this matter for the time being."

Clay grinned. "That'll teach you a lesson, partner."

"And I further suggest that he be put on sentry duty with Mrs. Abend. One of my aides reports that Gideon's 'escape' has worried Ama. They may start looking around on 20-47 on their own and try to pull something fancy."

"You agreed to 'protection,' which means only that you agreed not to work your claim. You don't have to stay off 20-47. It might be a good idea to keep a lookout there. Who knows? Claim jumpers might get to work while the Miners' Guard isn't around."

Glen nodded. "It won't be just routine, either. We all have the feeling that Ama's about to make some move, and a decisive one. All the members of our party have gone out to their claims. Those who haven't any have joined with others who were working alone, so there's at least two on each claim."

Kreuder grinned at the dejected look on Peter's face. "You wanted to go along on the Mars trip, eh? Well, fellow, if you were a bit younger, I'd say that was all right. But you're old enough to take on a man's job now, and sentry-duty's for adults. You not only have to keep awake; you have to be mature enough so that you won't run off looking for excitement."

"Right," agreed Abend. "Now, here's the way we're going to co-ordinate. . . ."

Chapter 13 *The Head Man*

THE SMALL SHIP that Peter rented could not make the trip to 20-47 as quickly as the lost *Abendland*. There were fewer blast-tubes. It took longer to build up acceleration, and an equal length of time to decelerate. All spaceship travel followed a uniform pattern: build up acceleration to peak, coast to approximate halfway point, decelerate and coast in. Once the distance of a journey was known, the other factors could be calculated, although a generous margin for error had to be allowed. Deceleration started well in advance of the theoretical halfway point. It was far better to coast longer coming in than to overshoot the mark.

The Abends had carved a fair-sized cavern out of the fissure-rock that contained the copper they mined. Peter found himself wondering if Glen hadn't done this with some such emergency in the back of his

head. It made an ideal outpost for sentry detail. One person could keep watch of the entire area of sky covering both the Clay and Abend claims from the mouth of the cave. Anyone inside would be out of sight completely. The cavern was large enough to conceal the entire Gideon party. Barbara said they'd cut out an extra exit tunnel just in case.

They landed in a small gully not far from the claim, and darkened the ship. This might make for difficulty if they had to leave quickly, but if it were on, the nose spot could be seen by any other party coming down.

"No lights, Pete," said Barbara, as they came out of the exit-port with a pressure tent, shortguns, longmen, ammunition, and supplies. "I know the way from here."

He looked around the now-familiar landscape, sensing something different. "Barb, isn't it brighter than it used to be?"

"No, Pete. You see lights somewhere?"

"I didn't mean it that way. 20-47 just looks a bit brighter to me now."

"Oh, you mean it doesn't look quite so dark here?" She nodded vigorously inside her helmet. "Yes, I know what you mean. With me it was the same way. The first few times I came here it was so gloomy I could scream. But after a while my eyes got used to it. Now I can see all right—almost as good as the rocket field on Ceres."

It made sense, Peter thought. He sighed. "So . . . we just sit and watch, huh?"

"Not so exciting, you think? Sure, we watch and listen. You stand up first while I fix things inside.

The guns we had better get ready at once, I think. If you get bored, so you talk to the others. Perhaps they will get bored too."

The plan called for close communication among all the members of the party and frequent reports. It had been agreed that trouble was most likely to break at 20-47. All would be ready to come in force should an attack develop. If it broke at any of the other asteroids, Peter and Barbara would reinforce whoever needed them.

There was still a good deal of mystery to be cleared up, but Peter no longer felt the total bewilderment of a few days back. They'd gone over the evidence with Kreuder, and there was no doubt that Cerean exiles, the missing Claims Office officials, and Joseph Vincennes made up a good part of the opposition. Reports from other aides had settled one matter beyond question of doubt. This was not an organization of thieves completely outside of Ama. The question had come down to whether they were up against a hidden minority in the Asteroid Miners' Association or the entire outfit.

Vincennes is a smart one, thought Peter; he could be the head man.

And there was Ogden, the Judas goat. There was no doubt that he had played the role of "lone prospector attacked by claim jumpers" several times before the Clays first encountered him. As for Webster—it seemed likely that he had no part in the skull-duggery. After all, would he have given out a special pass if he were determined not to let the Clays prove their filing?

Peter watched the lights in the sky around him,

remembering again what Black had said: there was always something to see out here in the Belt. The sky was a shifting pattern. Stars and planets kept their relative positions, but asteroids moved around. He was beginning to notice small differences and was glad of it. These things reinforced your sense of wonder, and Pete decided that was a very important thing.

He snapped back to the moment as he realized what he was seeing now. A ship was approaching. He signaled Barbara. "Strange ship coming in. I'll keep reporting, and you pass it on. It'll be some time before they land."

They wouldn't call for help if only the single ship came. They could handle that themselves. Barbara had set up longmen at the cave mouth. She could cover him while he talked to the strangers.

On a sudden impulse he cut his suit-communicator into general, and called himself a fool for not having done so before. The slight clicks he heard indicated that someone had just finished saying something. He thought of hailing the ship, but decided to wait and see if the stranger would call again.

"Hello," came a voice in his ears. "Hello, 20-47. Peter Clay, are you there? Laura Webster calling Peter Clay. I'm coming down. Are you there?"

Pete cut back to Barbara and passed on the news. "Find out is she alone. But don't say anything about me," advised Barbara.

"Right." He flipped the unit back, waiting for a repeat on the message. Such calls would be repeated several dozen times, at least. You never knew but that the party addressed didn't have his unit closed

off temporarily. When the girl's voice came through again, he answered, "Peter Clay speaking. Who's with you, Miss Webster?"

"No one; I'm alone."

"Okay, then. I'll be waiting." What luck, he thought; of all times for her to show up. He went inside the cave. "We can't let her see what's going on in here," he said. "I'd better meet her on the ship."

Barbara seemed dubious. "Not too good, Pete. Might be a trap."

"Let's get some other opinions." He called Ben Black, who was with Honoye, and told them the situation.

Honoye agreed that the Webster girl should be kept out of the mine, if possible. Then Black asked, "Do you have an extra suit unit?"

"Sure."

"Well, put it in your pocket when you go aboard. Set it to our wave so Barbara, and all the rest of us, can hear everything that's said. Don't worry too much about a trap. It may be one, but we can turn it to advantage if it is."

Laura Webster's ship was a small cruiser-type. It was like the one he himself had rented, Peter saw, as it came down. These were used mostly for prospecting, where time was not of the essence and slow travel the rule. Inside it looked much the same too. There was a trace of what you might call the "feminine touch," but nothing fancy.

Peter got out of his suit, wondering what lay behind this visit. He hadn't thought of Laura Webster as a person who went hopping around the Belt. He'd pictured her as an executive who rarely left Ceres—and then only to take the Mars liner.

"I'm not working the claim," he said, as he took a seat, "and I have a perfect right to be here. You can't deny that."

"I wouldn't think of denying it, Mr. Clay," she replied. "I didn't come to inspect your claim. They told me what you had done for me, and I've been looking for you ever since. I wanted to thank you."

"Well . . . your uncle's already done that." He watched her carefully as he continued. "I heard there were jumpers around these parts. I don't see why we should take a chance on someone else's getting any metal out, when we can't ourselves."

Laura nodded agreement. "But there isn't any need for you to stand watch. The guard ship comes by often enough. They keep close tabs on all asteroids where any claim is under protection. It's our responsibility."

He shrugged. "The guard can't be here all the time." A thought struck him. "Tell me, does the guard go by here at regular intervals? And how did you know where to find me?"

Laura laughed, and he had to admit he rather liked the sound. "Which question do you want me to answer first? Well, I'll take them in order. Yes, the guard ship comes this way every few days. We have the Belt pretty well mapped out, and every ship that goes by here takes a look." She paused a moment. "At present, I'd say there are three units that cover 20-47. . . . As to the other question—I didn't *know* you were here. I took a chance on finding you, when I discovered you weren't in town."

"Hm-m-m. Sounds like a rather long chance to me. I might have been going somewhere else." There was

a frankness about her. It was a refreshing change after all the phony friendship he'd been meeting in the past few days. "Look, Miss Webster . . ."

"Laura. Laura, Peter. After what you did for me, I wouldn't want to stand on formalities."

"All right, Laura. But it's a long trip out to 20-47, just on the chance of finding someone you could see back in town. Is that the only reason you came?"

There was no trace of hesitation in her answer. "No, it wasn't. I'd wanted to talk to Uncle about you, but he's off on business. I thought I'd try to find out what he'd told you. I want to help if I can."

"Yeah. Help. Everyone at Ama wants to be so helpful. I suppose you want to talk me into joining up with your organization."

"And what if I do?" she shot back. "Why are so many of you miners cagey about Ama? Uncle's had to fight every step of the way to get this thing started. Now that we've finally gotten recognition from Mars and assistance from the Patrol, so we can really do something . . ." She broke off suddenly. "I'm sorry, Peter; I didn't mean to chide you. But something strange seems to be going on—something I don't quite understand. Uncle Jeff talks as if there's some sort of organization trying to break Ama, discredit it in the eyes of Ceres and Mars. I can understand jumpers and pilferers working together against us. But when the very people we're trying to help . . ." Again she broke off.

"Perhaps some of us don't quite trust the Asteroid Miners' Association," he told her. "Perhaps we're wondering why our filings are suddenly being contested. We'd like to know why everything has been changed around, so that the person who contests a

claim has all the advantage. We're wondering why a miner has to go all the way to Mars to certify a filing. A routine call from the Claims Office should be all that is needed. We're wondering why so many fuel containers have been defective, and quite a few other things too. And it seems strange that a certain Mr. Joseph Vincennes has had such good fortune at the same time."

Laura didn't answer right away. She bit her lip and turned to look out a port. When she spoke again, her voice was smaller. "I don't know, Peter. I've wondered too. Uncle Jeff used to tell me everything, but he's been acting unlike himself ever since the scandal in the Claims Office. I argued with him about this certification business too. His reasons seemed logical at the time, even if they were a bit unfair to the miners whose filings were in the doubtful period. But now . . . I don't know. That's why I came out here. I thought you might be able to help me, work with me."

"What could I do, Laura? What did you have in mind?"

"I don't know for sure. I'm a bit confused, and it isn't just the accident. I wanted to talk with somebody who wasn't completely against Ama, someone on the outside. I've tried to find out what is going on from Wendl and the others, but they either can't or won't tell me anything solid. And Uncle Jeff acts more and more as if his lifework is in balance. . . ."

"You mean you want to do some investigating on your own, without anyone else in Ama knowing what's up?"

"That's about it," she admitted. "It was fine being groomed to run the Association. It's the kind of work

that appeals to me, and I still feel it's worth doing. But I want to know just what I'm being handed.

"I've managed to do some investigating on my own, when no one else was around, and what I've found hasn't been encouraging. I think there is some force working against us, and it's right inside the organization. Uncle Jeff has been leaving too much up to Vincennes for my taste. He hasn't been supervising the way he used to."

"What about Ezzard?"

"Ezzard's a dear, but he's too busy to be much help. He's been wondering too."

"Does he know that Vincennes is an official in Ama?"

"Who told you that?" she demanded.

"Told me what?"

"About Vincennes? That isn't supposed to be known, and I'm sure Captain Ezzard doesn't know it. Vincennes is a sort of special aide. He isn't really an officer and he hasn't any given authority. . . ." She paused again, then said, "But some people are beginning to act as if he were Vice-Director."

"What does Webster say about it?" Peter asked.

"He told me it was important to have someone who isn't known as an officer on the inside—a sort of trouble shooter. Only I didn't know there *was* any trouble before Uncle Jeff took him on.

"Well . . . I've told you that much, so I might as well let it all out. Uncle Jeff explained about the transfer filings that disappeared from our office, didn't he?"

"Yes. That was supposed to be the reason for the blockade. It doesn't ring true to me."

"That is what worries me, Peter—those filings. No one knows that I saw them, and I haven't mentioned

it to anyone else. Those filings *were* approved by Ama. They should have gone through to Mars—should have, that is, if they were legitimate. But I examined them very carefully, Peter. If it had been up to me, I never would have approved them without further investigation. Oh, they were in order, all right. But everyone of them was a transfer on a claim that was filed within the doubtful period. They're all blanket filings, *and they're all in the name of Vincennes or his men.*"

Her eyes widened as she whispered, "Worst of all, I can't figure out who approved them; the seal on them isn't familiar to me.

"Do you see what I'm up against, Peter—why I'm beginning to wonder if I'm not being used as a front for some kind of skullduggery? Why I wonder if Ama isn't being stolen away from us for illegal uses?"

Pete nodded. "I sure do, Laura. You're wondering the same thing that my fa—my partner, and Barbara Abend, and a lot of others are wondering. Did your uncle tell you he wanted to buy our claim?"

"Yes. I—I suggested that, Peter. I thought it would save you the trouble of going to Mars. Uncle agreed that all this was unfair, even if Vincennes was in the right legally. I don't think he is, but Uncle Jeff does. Anyway, I don't like the way Vincennes has been taking advantage of what was learned about those thieves who used to be in the Claims Office."

Peter reached into his pouch and took out the other flake of metal. "Know what this is, Laura?"

She looked at it, then gave out a little cry of delight. "Peter! This is wonderful; it's pure metallic platinum. Where did you find it? I mean, have you found it and have you staked a claim on it?"

"I found one piece here on Glen Abend's claim and others on Vincennes' ship. The day he and his crew came here and tried to toss us off, he had depth-mining equipment. Does that suggest anything to you?"

"Why . . . it sounds as if the platinum must be right here."

"That's what we think, and it explains why Vincennes wanted to keep us from working our claims." He paused, as what she'd said earlier hit him suddenly. "You said something about a strange seal on those papers, Laura? Well, I saw a strange seal myself, not too long ago. Your uncle used it when he sealed the special permit that was supposed to pass us through the cordon so we could make the trip to Mars. He didn't use the ring on his finger; he took one out of his pocket."

"Are—are you sure, Peter?"

"Quite sure." He took stylus and plastic out of his pocket. "Here, I'll draw a sketch of that seal for you. I looked at it very carefully."

He started to draw, and as the girl watched, he could hear her breathing.

"Oh . . . *no!*" she gasped.

"That's the seal your uncle carries around with him."

"That's . . . the . . . seal."

There was a look of horror in her eyes, and her face was very white. She opened her mouth again, but no words came out. For a moment she stood looking at the design, then slumped back in her chair.

Peter took the unit out of his pocket and spoke into it softly. "Barbara, Ben, Tom, did you hear? We

have the proof. Webster's the head man, and Laura's not a part of it. She just fainted."

"Good work," came Honoye's voice. "Listen, now; don't revive her. Put a suit on her and take her to the mine. We just got a call from your father. He was stopped by the Patrol, and they wouldn't let him through. They said they were sorry, but Webster's permit wasn't good unless he verified it personally. They tried to raise Webster, but he's not on Ceres. Kreuder says that Webster and a number of Miners' Guard units have taken off in a body."

"Where are they headed—here?"

"I think they are. My guess is that they intend to start depth mining right away. . . . Well, there's Webster for you. He knew his pass wouldn't get your father by."

"Then why did he give it to us? He could have just as easily said he was sorry, but that the Patrol wouldn't accept it. It doesn't make sense that way." Peter paused as a thought struck him. "Ben, look at it this way. Suppose Webster *did* expect us to go through on that pass? What if he really wanted us to make the trip after all?"

"But he couldn't afford to let you get through. He couldn't afford to let *anyone* get through. That's the whole plan—to prevent anyone from making the trip to Mars to certify their filings. First he set it up so that was the only way they could prove . . ."

Laura's voice interrupted, a little weak, but clear enough. "No—no, that can't be the answer. Uncle Jeff gave out another pass—to a Mr. Yarrow, who also wanted to get certification. The Patrol stopped Yarrow, but I was at the office when they called in. Uncle Jeff said the pass was in order; they let Yarrow go on."

A groan came through the communicator. "Oh—no—no! The strategy must be to drive us all stark, raving mad. Just when we think we have the answer, it all falls to pieces."

Peter found his thoughts whirling around madly. Pieces. That's what they had—pieces in a riddle which didn't make sense. Yet, he was certain that they all fitted together. If he could just arrange them right, rearrange them, turn them around. . . .

Turn them around! He felt a thrill shoot through him as the first inkling came.

"Ben! Tom! Barbara! Everybody! I think I have it. It *must* be the answer, because—yes, because it explains everything. Eureka! *That's it!*"

"What's it, Peter?" asked Laura.

He turned to her. "Laura . . . I'm sorry . . ."

"Don't feel sorry for me; tell me."

"All right. We've been assuming all along that large-scale thievery was the reason behind all this skullduggery. We were right but it isn't *direct* thievery. I'll bet you'll find, if you look, that all the claims that managed to fall in the doubtful period are *surface* claims, none of them particularly rich."

"Why—why, yes," Laura said. "Nearly all the ones I know of are. That's why I couldn't believe the Ama was responsible. It was all so petty. . . ."

"Sure. Those surface claims *were* petty. It's been staring us in the face ever since Vincennes landed on 20-47, Laura. Depth mining. We knew there must be a third mine here. It's beneath the surface, very likely running underneath our surface claims. *That's* why Vincennes made us such a generous offer after we wouldn't scare away. It's why Webster was willing to buy our claim at our own price. It's why, when

some of the others have been forced to sell, Ama has managed to see to it that they got fair prices."

"Sounds pretty good so far, Pete," Black agreed. "But what about this cordon business—how does that fit in?"

"They wanted to be sure that no evidence got through to Mars," Laura put in bitterly.

"Part of it," Peter agreed. "Yes, I guess it was an emergency measure, but they'd have had to find some excuse, anyway. The purpose of the blockade was simply to *stop the Mars liner*. Can't you guess why?"

"So it takes *longer* to get to Mars in a miner's rocket," Barbara Abend said. "So it's a harder trip, and some miners said, 'phooey with it' and sold out. Or maybe they couldn't afford to take the liner."

"Oh!" gasped Laura.

"Your uncle's no dimwit, whatever else he is. Listen, fellows, suppose we went to Mars, got our certifications and came back with them. What do you think Ama would do? I'll tell you. They'd accept them and see to it that our claims were honored. What we *wouldn't* know, of course, was what happened on 20-47 while we were gone!

"You see, we never had equipment for depth prospecting, and the Claims Office wasn't giving out a lot of information for quite a while. So . . . we'd probably never know that valuable property, *which we might have filed on ourselves had we known about it*, had been removed from the asteroid!

"It's a clever plot. I'm willing to bet that if we hadn't discovered that something was queer, we'd never have been able to prove anything had been stolen. Probably we never would have suspected it. In eight months they could take a fortune. They

probably wouldn't bother to work our depth mine to the end—just take a good chunk from it, along with the other iodes, and cover up their tracks so no one suspected."

"We'd better not talk any longer, fellow," came Honoye's voice. "We'd better all start blasting for 20-47 right now, and see if we can give Webster a surprise when he arrives. Tell the girl to clear out before the shooting starts."

"You won't get rid of me that easily," Laura cried. "I'm supposed to be learning how to run an honest organization, so I'll start in by helping make it honest. If your party will accept a new member!"

Chapter 14 *It's War, Now!*

IF PETER HAD had any remaining doubts about Laura Webster's ability to fit in with the party, they vanished before the night was over. She took her watch as if she'd been doing sentry duty all her life. She followed it with a shift at the communicator, while Peter slept and Barbara Abend held the post outside. It was early morning when the first approaching ship was spotted and identified as Honoye's. Ben Black was with him. A little later Peg Bjornsen arrived.

Glen Abend was still sputtering when they reported the first arrivals. He hadn't yet recovered from the earlier report about Laura Webster. "This is mutiny, fellow; we put you on a dull job for discipline, and you get all the excitement!" He was also somewhat disgruntled at not having seen the solution to the mystery himself. "I'm supposed to be the investigator, and who comes up with the solution—an amateur!"

"Well, Glen, anyone can put the pieces together once someone else has dumped them in his lap."

"Hm-m-m. You may have something there. Yes, I think you do have something there. I must remember that." Peter could picture his head cocked as he considered the other side of it. "On the other hand . . . oh, well." He laughed heartily. "Good work, Pete, and I'm glad it was you, since I couldn't be the detective hero."

The *Claymore* arrived the next day, to find that a good part of the "Gideon" forces were on the spot. Peter led the delegation that met Clay and Abend. The grin that split his face was almost audible in his words.

"Hi, partners; unload quick so we can get to work."

Clay looked around, puzzled. "Hi, fellow. What's the strategy?"

"Pete's idea," spoke Honoye. "We landed as far apart from each other as possible, and we darkened our ships so they wouldn't be seen. But Pete here pointed out that searchlights could pick us out just as easily as you please. They could still wreck us and maroon us here until we were ready to give in."

Glen nodded gloomily. "If they want to do it, I don't see how we can stop them. If they have fighting ships, that is. Our longmen would carry far enough, but I doubt that we could do any damage to ships."

"Darling," broke in Barbara, "get busy while you are enjoying the misery, please. All the ammunition and supplies into the mine. There is still room for more pressure tents."

"Yeah . . . there's room," Ben Black agreed, "but it would crowd them together too much. The way things are now, explosions inside won't hurt anything

that isn't hit directly. I think the rest of us will have to set up living quarters outside."

"All right," chuckled Peg Bjornsen.

"A fine thing," muttered Abend. "Here I'm supposed to be the leader, and I don't know what is going on." He shrugged resignedly and turned to unloading. The others were still standing around the *Claymore* when he returned.

"Okay, fellows, up she goes!" sang out Peter, as he bent down and put a hand under the ship. The others did likewise, and the *Claymore* lifted easily off the asteroid's surface. In fact, the hard part was to remember not to make too hearty an effort, so that the craft wouldn't start floating up.

"Hey!" came Clay's voice from inside. "What goes on?"

"Free ride, partner," replied Pete. They had the rocket on their shoulders now, and were shuffling away. Abend stared for a moment, then joined in the laughter and followed, to take a hand. "We're hiding it, huh?"

"Not exactly," Peg answered. "The idea is to have the ships where we can take off easily if we have to. We aren't going too far away." They trudged along for a few minutes, then Peter said, "Here's a good place."

The party halted, set the *Claymore* down and Alan came out. "Smoothest landing I ever had. Going to leave her here?" he asked Peter.

"Right. But not the way she is now. She's getting a paint job, just like the others. Grab a sprayer, partner, and join in."

"Camouflage, huh. Right smart idea, fellow." He

scrambled back inside, then emerged with a sprayer. The others had already started to work, covering the surface of the *Claymore* with a jagged pattern of rock-gray and black. Even under a searchlight it would appear to be part of the asteroid's topography. Heretofore, miners' ships had been painted in order to make them stand out against the basic tones of a background. This would reverse things.

"Glen," came Barbara Abend's voice, "Mr. Kreuder wants to talk to you."

The standard spacesuit-communicator handled two systems, both sending and receiving. It could be set for reception alone either way, or on both systems. As a rule, miners kept one system open for reception on the general-communications band. That meant they'd pick up any signal that came their way, whether it was meant for them or not. General custom was to cut off when they heard the beginning of a message that was obviously none of their affair. The other system was used for conversation within small groups.

Glen closed off his second band and opened the first onto Kreuder's wave. "Lon, you heard that we were turned back?"

"Yes. You had a bit of luck, because the Patrol didn't tell Ama what they were calling Webster about when they tried to reach him. So far as I know, he hasn't heard yet and has no idea where you are. Here's what I've found out: Webster's fleet isn't a very large one, but he does have fighting ships. That means he anticipates trouble. They aren't in any hurry, apparently, as they didn't head for 20-47 first of all. My guess is that they'll arrive tomorrow or the next day. Are you ready for them?"

"As ready as we'll ever be. A few haven't made it yet."

"Tell those who haven't arrived to be on the lookout, and keep on going if they spot the fleet. Listen, now; this is important. Stall as long as you can, but fight if you're attacked. Whatever you do, *don't agree to their landing on 20-47!*"

"Shall do!"

"One thing more. Have you relay sets on hand?"

"Yes."

"Good. As soon as you hear from them, if they talk first, that is, pipe the conversation along to me. If they start shooting without any preliminaries, then just let me know it's started."

"Right. What do you plan, Lon?"

"Old Caution is going to run a bluff."

Abend switched off and passed on the information to the others. "There's just one thing that bothers me," he said. "I don't think Laura Webster should stay here any longer, even if she does sympathize. She wants to help make up for her uncle's crookedness. But getting herself killed, as anyone here might be, won't accomplish anything."

"Well," said Clay, "let's put it up to her. We're not her guardians, and she's got a right to make her own decisions. I think she wants to stay, as much as it may hurt. My guess is that she'll want to see for sure that things are as bad as they look . . . even while she hopes that they aren't."

They returned to the mine to find Barbara and Laura busy at the communicators. Laura looked up as Peter came in. "We've called everyone, and it looks as if they'll all make it in time."

"Good work, Miss Webster," said Alan. He paused and looked around, as if hopeful that someone else would open up the subject. No one spoke, so he coughed shortly and started in. "Laura, none of us knows just what is going to happen when the guard arrives, but we all feel it's going to be unpleasant. I don't think any of us feel particularly heroic. I'd just as soon be on the outside lending moral support, myself. The thing is, we can't expect anyone else to make our fight for us. We figure we have a chance of winning if we fight now.

"But you haven't any stake here, and you don't belong on the other side, either. You've already helped us a great deal, and we'll remember that if we come out of this. But we'd like you to go now, while there's still a chance to get clear."

The small glow from the communicator dials lit up her face as she sat there. Peter could see that she wasn't going to take this well. "Go? Go where? Back to Ceres, where I can be a front for crookedness?"

"You have some influence," urged Abend. "Captain Ezzard is with you, for one. We're thinking of your safety, but we're thinking of ourselves too. It means a lot to us, having you on our side. If anything happened to you, it might be worse for us than if someone else was hurt."

"I have a stake here," she said quietly. "How do you know I'd still be on your side if I went back? How do you know I might not be persuaded to stick with Uncle Jeff—right or wrong? Could you trust me once I'd left?"

Barbara Abend snorted. "Such a question. Don't let them talk you out of what you want to do. You want to stay with us, good—then stay."

Alan chuckled. "Laura, we wouldn't have said anything about your leaving if we weren't sure of you."

"But you have everything to lose and nothing to gain by staying," Peg Bjornsen said. "I don't see . . ."

"Darling," broke in Barbara, "don't try to think like a man. On you, it doesn't look good."

"My thinking habits are irrelevant, if you don't mind," snapped Peg.

"Better than that I couldn't have put it," Barbara answered. "So we're going to fight each other while we're waiting? *Gevalt!* Save the arguments for later and make with the plans."

"Now look," began Glen, "we have to consider . . ."

"I know what you're thinking," Laura cut in. "You're afraid I'll be hurt. Well, suppose I am? If I'm hit by a pellet, will it hurt me any more than it would hurt Barbara or Peg or Bette Demark? I know how to handle shortguns and longmen, and I can run a ship." Peter thought he saw a tear in her eye as she paused. "And I've got to know . . . just how bad it really is. Uncle Jeff has been good to me. I never dreamed he wasn't honest with other people. I don't want to believe he's crooked now."

Her voice broke. "Don't you see? *I must know!* If I didn't see and hear what happened, and he told a convincing story later, I'd believe him because I wanted to believe him. And . . . maybe . . . maybe there's been a mistake . . ."

She turned to Peter. "Right now, I wish you'd been too late that day."

"So that settles it," said Barbara Abend. "Laura stays with us." No one said anything, and she went on. "A fine bunch you are, trying to throw her out when she needs us. Such wonderful reasoning you

have, you dumbheads. You would send her away when she hasn't anywhere to go. Now get out and start making like fighters. Give the brains a rest before they hit a short circuit!"

The guard unit appeared the next day—four fighting ships that took up an orbit around the asteroid. According to plan, Glen Abend was stationed out in the open. His suit lights were on so he could be seen clearly. The others waited and listened inside.

"Hello! Hello!" came a voice from one of the ships. "Miners' Guard calling. This asteroid is closed, under protection. You'll have to leave."

"Hello, Miners' Guard," Abend answered. "Glen Abend speaking; I am not working here—only watching the sky. Heard there were pilferers around."

Another voice came through, one that Peter, Alan and Laura recognized. "Webster speaking. Is that you, Abend? We'd heard you had been killed."

"The intent was murderous," Abend answered, "but I was lucky."

There was silence for a moment, then the other voice took over. "Abend, we're on routine inspection of all closed asteroids. Don't mind if we come down and look around, do you?"

"No need for that," Glen replied. "I've already been over my claim, and Clay's too. Everything's in order, so you can save yourself work."

Another silence, then Webster said, "We'd prefer to satisfy ourselves, even if it isn't absolutely necessary, Mr. Abend. Just for our own records."

"Nope. Sorry, gentlemen, but this is private property, and I like my privacy. You can inspect when I'm not here, but so long as I *am* here there's no

need for it. You know the laws. You can't interfere unless a miner calls on you for help or is under attack."

"I know the laws," Webster replied, "but I don't know that you are who you claim to be. In case you didn't know, the guard has the right to require identification of anyone staying on a closed asteroid. If you *are* Glen Abend, then I congratulate you on your escape. But something tells me that you're a person by the name of Gideon."

"And what constitutes satisfactory proof that I'm Abend, by your standards?"

"We want to see you and your ship, fellow. Stand by, because we're coming down."

"All right, Webster," Glen said, "you can land on this asteroid, but keep away from my claim. If you step on it, I'll consider it an attack."

"Consider it what you like, Mr. Gideon! I don't propose to bandy words with you any longer. We're here to do a job, and we're going to do it. I advise you not to resist." There was a clicking sound as Webster cut communication.

The four ships circled the little asteroid, spaced out so that one passed over the general area of the Clay-Abend claims about every hour. It was not a very wide orbit. The ships were quite close to the surface, but they drifted very slowly. One was nearing now.

Peter was standing in a deep shadow just within the mine entrance. He was looking up at the ship and could see the exit-port open, see suited figures standing in it.

One by one they stepped off the ship into space. For a moment they were standing as if an invisible platform extended from the ports. Then they started

to move down toward the surface, as a tiny spurt of fire issued from their candles.

The Gideon party, they still called themselves that, was here in force, twenty-five in all. Glen had been elected commander in chief. The rest of the defenders had been divided into four units under the leadership of Ben Black, Tom Honoye, Alan Clay, and Barbara Abend. Peter wasn't sure whether he was glad that Laura was in Barbara's unit, or sorry that she wasn't in his own.

The Clay unit had drawn the first defense assignment. They came out of the mine now, keeping in the shadows, to go to the positions already chosen and set up their longmen. Peter had counted an even dozen of the suited figures, still drifting down.

Glen's voice came to him now. "We outnumber them two to one, fellows, but we're not going to show our strength yet. One unit should be able to handle this attack. They didn't bring longmen with them, and the ship will be out of range by the time they land.

"You know the orders. Don't expose yourselves. Don't change position without consulting me, or on order. Keep your communicators open and report in rotation when I call. Reports will be within one-minute periods, once the shooting starts. There isn't too much time to get to you if your air unit is destroyed."

"Which unit will reinforce?" Peter wanted to know.

"For the time being we won't consider reinforcements. I want them to think that you are our entire command. We'll change strategy later if we have to. All right. Al, get the first report."

"One." That was Clay himself.

"Two," said Peter.

"Three." That would be Bette Demark, a husky blonde, who rarely joined in conversation. Her claim was also under protection.

"Four." Frank Guarnieri. Ama had voided his contract with Belt Insurance after his mine was lost.

"Five." Heitor Vasques. Pilferers had cleaned out his mine after he'd withdrawn membership from Ama.

"Six." Mish Karkannian, another client of Belt Insurance.

It was very still then, and the suited figures were dim, menacing shapes in the dim light. There were faces behind the helmets of these shapes, Peter remembered—faces of men who could laugh and cry out in pain as he could. It was nothing like the faked fight on that asteroid where they met Ogden. This would be no putup job. Peter could almost hear the breathing of the others in his communicator. There was a tightness in his stomach. Glen had stressed it, but all knew that this would only be the first assault. They could beat it back, but after that . . .?

He wondered if Laura was sure now. . . . But there couldn't be any doubt in her mind any longer. He wished he'd had a chance to talk to her again.

Someone was whispering. He could hear the words in his ears. "*Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil . . .*"

Chapter 15 Battle

GLEN ABEND'S VOICE was saying, "I've just received a last chance to admit the guard peacefully; offer was refused. Take it easy now, and don't open up until you see someone. Remember—the flash of the pellet can spot you as well as the enemy."

Peter lay flat beside his longman, peering out into the dim glow of light. The suited figures were a little too far away, as yet, for good shooting, and they'd scattered once they landed. They'd approach in a wide circle.

Abend said, "They're moving in slowly, but they're standing up. That's a break for you. You ought to be able to make at least one hit before they realize that they're in range. Once they drop flat on the surface, it'll be harder to spot them. Conserve ammunition, but don't hesitate to fire in unison once you have a target."

Both the shortgun and the longman were single-

shot weapons. The spring had to be pulled back for each pellet, since the recoil was not strong enough to kick it back by itself. There was no danger of jamming, however. These beryllium-bronze springs were virtually unbreakable, as well as having long-life elasticity. Shortguns carried a dozen pellets to the round; longmen, three dozen.

Silence again. This was nothing like the films of Earth warfare Peter had seen, with their continuous roar of explosions and shouting. The defenders were in two lines, in a semicircle some distance in front of the mine entrance. Four were in front and two in the gaps behind, each one either in a small crevasse or in the shadow of a rock. They could move a short distance in any direction without exposing themselves.

If they started jumping, they could go right over us, Peter thought. But they wouldn't; a suited figure in the air was helpless, and a perfect target. Longmen could be swiveled and aimed in any direction. He wondered why they'd all landed in front, rather than one or two dropping behind the mine, to come up from another direction. It argued for poor strategy, but then Webster apparently had no idea that Abend was prepared to defend the mine. He looked around briefly. Glen wasn't visible.

A flare up ahead showed a suited figure. Peter aimed a little in front of it and shot. The second flare revealed it bent down and moving to the right. As Peter charged his gun, two more flares burst—one directly against the man's leg. Peter saw the gloved hand lifting to trigger a shortgun.

There was another burst of light right on the gun itself, then a brilliant flash that seemed to envelop the man's hand and arm. Peter's heart jumped into

his mouth, as Glen's voice sounded. "You've got him. That pellet hit his gun and touched off all the ammunition at once. Must have blown the poor fellow's hand off!"

Another flash revealed the figure tumbled to the ground, its suit deflated. The man was clearly unconscious from shock, and the lack of pressure would be bursting capillaries all over his body. If his helmet weren't cracked or his air unit damaged, he could still breathe. But he'd bleed to death quickly.

Now the attackers knew that Abend wasn't alone here. Those shots had followed too quickly to have come from a single gun.

Peter saw a spot of light to either side of him. That big flash must have revealed some of their own positions. There was a burst in front of the rock near him. He fired at a figure off to one side and saw the man's helmet light up as a crack split along it. Another one out.

"Report!"

He heard his father say, "One," and called out, "Two." There was silence, then Numbers Four, Five, and Six answered. Number Three must have been hit.

"Six, go to Three," came Glen's orders. "Four, cover your right. Five, move up along your gully."

Peter wondered how badly Bette Demark had been hit as he fired again. The figures were not such good targets now. They were getting into shadows and cracks. Who were the two casualties on the other side? He hoped that neither was Webster himself. There was no sign that anyone was trying to aid the fallen ones.

His musings stopped as he saw a figure slowly

coming out of a gully. Peter fired and missed, but two other shots hit the figure's back as it lay flat, shattering the man's air unit.

Three of the twelve had been knocked out, but the story might be different once they came within good shotgun range. Then numbers, which meant greater fire-power, would count. Once a man's position was outlined, he would be peppered with pellets. One was almost certain to be effective.

"Number Six reporting," came Karkannian's voice. "Three's all right. Just a little dizzy, and her communicator seems to be out. She wants to get back into the fight."

"Orders to Number Three are withdrawn," replied Abend. "We cannot co-ordinate with anyone who can't speak with us."

The first flurry of action seemed to be over. An occasional flash indicated that someone was trying to spot an attacker or defender, but there were no follow-ups. That meant that all were temporarily in cover. Peter waited as the silence began to grow and build up again.

Now the battle had returned to its first stage, the waiting game. Sooner or later someone would move, would become impatient or reckless and expose himself. The excitement was gone; this was a war of nerves. You waited and strained your eyes until everything began to look like a suited figure. After a while you fired, hoping that the flare would show something. Peter looked rapidly in various directions as these spotlight shots flashed, wondering if the attackers were creeping up on him.

He snapped out of it as he heard Clay say, "One,"

and answered. He hadn't heard the call to report. Guarnieri, Vasques, and Karkannian all answered.

"Unit One!" came Glen's voice. "Cease fire. The enemy has asked for a truce, and is ready to evacuate."

Peter looked around and saw the distant figures all standing now. His eyes caught the fighting ship as it appeared over the horizon, drifting lazily. He heard Clay protest. "How do we know this isn't a trick?"

"They're all standing in plain sight, as you can see."

"They may just be waiting for us to stand up too. They could get several of us, if we weren't ready to fire."

"Watch them. They're supposed to be putting their guns away. Don't expose yourselves until I give the word."

It seemed to be straightforward enough, though. The others were all hanging their shortguns back on the suit hooks at their waists. They raised their gloved hands, palms up.

"All right," said Abend. "I told Webster we would stand up as soon as they'd done that."

Vasques laughed. "Some army, aren't they? They sure cry easily."

"Don't deceive yourself," said Clay. "They came in here figuring this would be easy, and they've paid for overconfidence. You can bet they won't make that kind of mistake again. They'll come in prepared."

"Prepared to wipe out the force they *think* we have," Glen reminded. "Webster didn't ask whether all of us were out here shooting, and I didn't volunteer any information."

"Why give them a chance like that?" Vasques objected. "They're out to finish us off, aren't they? Well, let's open up on them as soon as they jump for their ship. It'll serve them right."

"And we know they're coming back," put in Karkannian.

"No, as tempting as it may be, we can't do it. It would cost us more than we gained," decided Glen.

"How come?" said Clay.

"Such a move," replied Glen, "would force them to make this a fight to the finish, here and now. That might be their plan, but it might not too. I don't want to push them into it, if they *aren't* already determined."

The figures were now bending over, apparently adjusting their equipment.

"Look at them, will you?" cried Vasques. "Standing out there, calm as you please, just waiting for us to shoot them! Abend, I tell you they're out to finish us—a little while later, if not right now!"

"I agree that Webster wants to get rid of us," said Glen. "But I repeat—there's one thing we can't be sure of. The time might not be right for him to send the Miners' Guard in to commit murder.

"You've all had experience with him. Well, hasn't he been careful to make his every move look legal? Hasn't he always had some reasonable-seeming justification?"

Vasques thought for a moment before replying.

"Yes . . . in a way . . . if you didn't know what kind of a crook he was."

"Exactly," Glen insisted. "I've done a bit of investigation. I'm satisfied that a good part of the Miners' Guard consists of honest men who think they're up-

holding the law. Webster knows that too. He needed that attitude, and he still needs it."

"If we shoot his men down now, we'll be uniting them all against us. If we deal fairly, we may profit by some difference of opinion. Webster's power isn't absolute."

"So what do you look for, Glen?" asked Clay.

"I think he'll offer some sort of compromise."

"Compromise!" Clay snorted. "There's nothing to compromise; he's in the wrong, and we all know it. Why even consider making a deal with him? We didn't come here to make compromises. We could have made them back on Ceres—let him take our claims and pretend we liked it!"

"We've already made a deal," Abend replied patiently. "We've accepted a truce—*nothing more*. I don't expect to gain anything from this but time. That's no loss. I have a feeling that time may be on our side. No matter how you look at it, we've nothing to lose by talking, so long as we're ready to fight when it's necessary."

"Shall we stay in position here?" Peter wanted to know.

"Yes. I wouldn't put it past them to try something if we turn our backs. Stay where you are and let them count you, until they're off the asteroid."

There was a bit of banter among the defenders, but Peter had no heart for joining in. He could see little point in dragging this out, but Glen might have something in mind. Perhaps he was waiting for news from Kreuder. Peter watched the attackers, expecting to see them go over toward their fallen comrades. No such move was made. They'd finished whatever

adjustments they had to make on their suits now. The first man jumped straight up and the others followed, one after another. After a few moments, he saw the wink of candles as they started to head for the oncoming ship.

The lack of any apparent concern for the injured left him with a sick feeling. One man had been beyond help, but the other two might have been rescued. "I guess you're on your own when you work for Ama," he thought. He didn't realize that he'd said it aloud until Clay answered, "Looks that way, partner. Seems to fit into their pattern, and it doesn't set well with Glen's argument about them."

Peter started to shuffle toward the man who'd been hit first. There was no need for concealment. If the guard didn't know already how many had been opposing them, they could count Unit One from the sky easily enough. He turned on his suit light.

Karkannian was saying, "This one's done for," and Peter realized that Mish was talking about the man up ahead. He came up to the figure in its deflated suit and stared down at the bloated face.

"Well, I guess he won't act in any more stage fights," said Clay. "Pretty good actor too. He sure convinced me." Peter saw now that he was looking on the remains of Dave Ogden.

He'd never liked the man. He knew that it hadn't been long since Ogden was trying to kill him and his friends. But somehow, looking at this figure, Peter found that his anger and hatred had gone. He might have been looking at the victim of an accident—the kind that all miners knew might be their fate at any time. It didn't make much difference who had fired

that lucky shot. In a way, Ogden had really killed himself.

And the others? Were they of Ogden's stripe, or were they men who believed they were doing their duty?

Clay was saying, "My father came to Mars, and I was born there. I lived there most of my life. People were born and they died, and some died worse than this. But I never saw a man killed this way until I came out to the Belt.

"They taught me when I was a youngster that men didn't have to die this way, that they shouldn't. But they warned me not to let myself think that it *couldn't* happen again. They said the worst thing was getting so that you took it for granted, looked on it as a natural thing and accepted it."

"We aren't looking at it that way, Dad," said Peter.

Clay sighed. "I wonder. You heard the reaction when someone suggested that we shoot those guards down when they were helpless. I wonder if killing a man isn't so unnatural that a person *has* to convince himself it's perfectly normal under the circumstances. Then he has to be ready to do it again and again in order to keep himself convinced."

"Well, is it better to let yourself be killed?"

Clay chuckled grimly. "The wisest men in human history have been arguing that since languages were invented, I guess. You and I have both given our answers and we're here to answer some more. If we'd made the other decision, we couldn't argue our case. Nope, I'll stand by it, but don't like it."

Peter turned away, and was starting back toward the mine when he felt a heavy blow against his leg

and saw a flash. It was as if someone had given him a violent shove; he felt himself tipping over, and heard exclamations. Peter tried to gain his balance, but he felt dizzy and somewhat faint.

So this is what it feels like, he thought. It didn't hurt; it felt more as if he were outside himself, watching. His suit wasn't penetrated, and he saw the surface of Asteroid 20-47 moving up to meet him. He saw other spots of light around him, then weariness washed over him in a wave that carried him away.

Chapter 16 *Is This Your Law?*

IT WAS LIKE coming out of a series of dreams that were very close to reality. It was as if he wanted to get up, but couldn't quite make it, so he fell asleep again and dreamed he was arising. Peter opened his eyes finally. His head cleared, and he knew that he was lying on a pallet inside one of the pressure tents. His suit was close by, and a communication unit rested beside him.

He could hear Abend's voice, saying, "Poor fellow can't last very long. It's something of a miracle that he's still alive."

I've been shot, Peter thought. But it couldn't be that bad. He wiggled his fingers and toes experimentally, started to breathe deeply. He could think clearly, but he still felt tired. He heard Laura say, "Those films you showed us while we were waiting, Mr. Abend—they aren't the only copies, are they?"

"No, Kreuder has several more. I'd hoped to get through to Mars with them, though."

"I—I don't know if Uncle Jeff realizes that we've seen them. They'd better be destroyed, just in case . . ."

"They're back in the *Claymore* now. Webster won't get them unless he gets all of us."

Clay's voice came through, as Peter looked around and found himself alone. "This fellow wants to talk."

Pete realized now that they were referring to someone else. He sighed in relief. It must be one of the attackers, whom he'd believed to be dead. Then Laura's voice came through.

"Heber, we can't do more for you. We've done all we could, but it's only a matter of time. How about doing something for us?"

The other man's voice was faint but distinct. He must be in one of the other pressure tents. "I'll . . . I'll tell you what I know, Miss Webster, if that will help any. And if you can get word to my brother back on Mars . . ."

"We will if we can. We'll tell him you had an accident."

"Thanks. I . . . I never realized what I was getting into, Miss Webster. When I came back, I thought I could make up for my mistakes by joining the Miners' Guard. They told me that a number of exiles were also working for Ama, and it looked pretty good. I never suspected anything until I ran across Red Cantrellis."

"Who's that?" asked Laura in a puzzled voice. "I've gone through the records, but I never heard of anyone named Cantrellis in Ama."

"He isn't . . . in Ama. Red Cantrellis used to work in the Claims Office when old Yerxa was there. He handled most of the work, and Yerxa didn't know what was going on . . . figured he was about ready to retire anyway, I suppose.

"Well, it all started when I was down on my luck. I went there one day to look over the reports, and I'd just about decided to go on Public Duty for a while. Red took me aside and said he'd let me have a special tip, for a cut in the mine. I couldn't take it up, didn't have the equipment for that kind of prospecting. So Red said he knew of a rich mine not too far out. He'd let me know when the owner was away—the fellow was planning to go to Mars for a short vacation. I turned him down, but when he called me that night, I was ready to try it.

"After that it was too easy. Red and his friends kept me and other pilferers posted on when owners were away from their claims. When we started to get enough to pay our debts, he fed us inside information he'd held back from the general notices.

"Then one day he comes up with a real proposition. 'If you were to file on this mine,' he says, showing me the layout, 'it could be that the original filing wouldn't stand up for certification.' He didn't say more, but I could figure out what was going on. They were starting to tamper with the records, then selling information for what they could get. Only this was a conspiracy to steal claims outright. Well, it worked out. He was smart enough not to crowd me too far, only demanded twenty-five per cent as his cut. But I got careless and a little greedy, I guess. Anyway, they caught me pilfering and sent me back to Mars."

"And what happened to Cantrellis?"

"He skipped—they all skipped out when Mars somehow got wind of what was going on and sent Kreuder in to clean it up. They all got together, had a base on 20-85, and organized jumping and pilfering. It was pretty clever. They never tried to take too much at a time, and only attacked a miner when he was alone."

Laura gasped, "And—and you mean my uncle knows all about this?"

"Red told me a lot," Heber said. "He knew it was safe, I imagine. When Ama started, he tried to block it at first. Then he had an idea. He went to Webster with an offer. He'd give him all the information on the dirty work in the Claims Office and general reports on mines that he'd never put into the official files. Webster was to lay off him and give a clean bill of health to his outfit. In return, they'd set things up for Ama by making sure there were plenty of incidents where the Miners' Aid could show off. They'd help run down pilferers and jumpers who were operating on their own. So the guard has never bothered Red or his gang."

"Who else knows about this?" Abend wanted to know.

"Only Webster and Vincennes—Joe's his liaison man. Ogden was working for them, too, but he gummed things up and was learning too much. My guess is that he wouldn't have come out of this fight alive even if you hadn't gotten him. He made a mess of Belt Insurance—all his talk about tricky legalities. Red hadn't planned that as something Ama could grab glory by stopping. . . . Anyway, he made a deal with Webster . . ."

There were more coughs, then Heber's voice continued. "I wouldn't say anything, and Red knew it. I knew more than was good for me, and had to play

dumb. But I've been wondering who's really using whom. Red thinks he has your uncle in the palm of his hand, Miss. He thinks Webster's really just a front for Cantrellis. But my guess is that your uncle's the smarter of the two. He's been going along with Red, sure, but once Ama is strong enough, he'll clean Cantrellis' band out. He won't play second fiddle in any quartet."

"So that's it," breathed Abend. "Yes, it all fits in. Staged battles with phony jumpers while the real ones are let alone, and all the rest of the show. We're caught in the middle of a struggle for power."

"Heber," Laura asked, "is—Captain Ezzard part . . ."

"No, Miss. Ezzard's as honest as they come; so's most of the guard. There are one or two of Cantrellis' men in each unit to keep tabs on what's up."

Clay added, "Your uncle's a fanatic, Laura. He redoubles his efforts after he's forgotten his aim. He told me he'd stop at nothing to establish Ama firmly, and I believed him. Maybe he'll do just that, but he'll never be able to cut loose from the corruption. What about Vincennes, Heber? Where does he fit in?"

"Out for what he can get. You can trust him so long as you're winning, but if anything really goes wrong, then look out. He's tricky as a rogue."

"Just what I told my partner," Clay remarked.

"If . . . if you want my advice," Heber's voice came faintly all of a sudden, "don't . . . don't take any offer from Webster. Stall for . . . time. He's got time against him now. . . . Has to clean up before the Patrol discovers too much. . . . Stall. . . . Call in the Patrol. . . ."

Heber's voice died away, and Abend muttered, "He's gone. Well, the fellow squared it, all right. If we get out of this, we'll say he was working on our side."

Peter's head was clear now. He started to get to his feet as the inner tent-wall zipped open and Barbara Abend came in. These tents were constructed on the air-lock principle. "Feeling better, young Mister Lazy? Nice and soft you have it while the rest of us are sweating it out. Good. Now get into the suit and leave space for another patient."

"Someone else hurt?"

"Not yet, but who knows when?"

"What happened, Barb? Was I shot? I don't remember—thought the battle was over and we beat them off."

"Oh, sure, those sand fleas jumped away as soon as they found out they had some real opposition. But you, you dumbheads! You let them plant springs with pellets in them that will go off while you're standing around congratulating yourselves, and they're safe up in the ship already. Such brains we have here—I could spit."

"Was anyone else . . ."

"Nope, only you, Pete. Isn't that enough worry for me? Now get out and help the masterminds fall into the soup. And, Petey, don't get mixed up with a girl if she makes like a genius."

Pete laughed. "That sounds like a dig at Bjornsen." He put on his helmet and turned on the communicator. "What about Laura Webster?"

Barbara Abend grinned and blinked. "Stupid—but nice!"

"Don't get restless, partner," Clay was saying, "that's Webster's game." Time was dragging endlessly as they waited by the communicator. A sentry reported again that nothing was happening outside.

Laura seemed to have recovered from the shock. Her voice no longer had a numb quality about it when she spoke. When Peter could see her face, he noted the flash in her eyes. She seemed most angry about the trick which had resulted in his being knocked out.

"I say we shouldn't compromise," she said for the third time. "He's a madman, and he's out to murder us all. Just wait until he calls us; I'll give him something to think about!"

"No news from Kreuder or the Patrol?" asked Peter.

"Haven't raised them," Glen said.

"Hello, Gideon! Hello, Gideon!" burst out the communicator. "Can you hear me? Answer, Gideon; this is Amal!"

Glen sniffed as he replied. "Speaking, Webster. Had enough?"

"Enough of your impertinence! Now, listen. I'm giving you one last chance to save your skin, and I advise you to take it. Get off this asteroid, give us no more trouble, and we'll let bygones be bygones. You got three of my men. They broke the truce without orders, so that evens us up. They'll answer for that planted-spring trick, if that is any satisfaction to you. Leave now, and you can leave in peace. Defy me, and you'll be branded outlaws. The Miners' Guard and Martian Patrol will hunt you down, with orders to shoot on sight!"

Before Glen could reply, Laura snatched the microphone out of his hand. "Is this your law, Uncle Jeff?"

There was a moment's silence, then Webster's voice sputtered back, "Laura! Where—what—why you—you thieves! You've kidnaped my niece!"

"No, they haven't!" she snapped back. "I'm here

voluntarily. I asked you a question, Uncle Jeff. *Is this your law?*”

“Gideon,” came back the reply. “Or Abend, as you prefer, I know when the hand is against me. My niece means more to me than any possible loss of face. Send her out, and I guarantee immunity to all of you. I’ll lift protection from this asteroid at once, and promise that Vincennes will withdraw his blanket filing.”

“What’s the alternative, Webster? Suppose we don’t want to make a deal with the King of Thieves?”

“You’re in no position to give *me* orders or make insults! I can smash you where you stand. Tell your sentry to report what he sees. . . . I know you have a sentry, so don’t bother to deny it.”

The communicator clicked as Webster cut the connection. A moment later Karkannian’s voice came through from outside. “He isn’t bluffing, Glen. He’s got searchlights sweeping this entire area. He could bombard us from the ship if he wanted to take his time.”

“You see,” came Webster’s voice again. “And that is only part of it. I’ve called up the guard cruisers. They’ll be waiting for you if you try to change your mind and escape after it’s too late. I see you’ve camouflaged your ships. Very clever, but not good enough. We have infrawave and ultrawave searchlights too. It’ll take time, but we can spot them all eventually, and destroy them on the ground. You’ll be marooned here until you’re ready to give up.

“Don’t imagine you’ll get the chance to make any glorious last stand, Abend, or that you’ll take any of us with you. The guard’s duty is to smash thieves and kidnapers, not to get itself killed. We were over-

confident before—I admit it—and made a fatal error for some of us. That won't happen again."

"If you murder them, you'll have to murder me, too, Uncle Jeff," Laura answered.

"So you've tortured the girl, have you! You don't deserve any consideration, but I've given my word . . ."

"That's a lie!" she burst in. "I have *not* been tortured or mistreated in any way by these people. You're trying to brand them as criminals because they know you for what you are."

Webster's voice had a pleading quality in it now. "Laura, child, have courage. I know how you have suffered, but I shall put an end to all this." His tone harshened again. "As for the rest of you, we'll have a little object lesson, so you can see that I'm not bluffing!"

Again there was silence. They waited for Karkannian's voice. "They have something peculiar pointed at one of the ships—looks like a miniature rocket-bow, with half a dozen tubes."

"I think I know what they'll do, Mish," said Abend. "Are you covered?"

"Yes." There was another wait in silence, then Karkannian gasped. "Pellets—must be hundreds of them hitting the ship all over. Some missing, most of them hits. The tubes are full of holes already and they're still hitting. That's how they do it, Glen. That ship is finished. Even if the tubes weren't wrecked, the air lock's sprung, and there's a puncture in the hull where half a dozen pellets landed together!"

Abend turned to Clay and the others. "I'll take a vote. This may mean the end of us, here and very

soon, if we try to wait it out. I still haven't been able to raise the Patrol."

"Can the Patrol help?" Peter wanted to know.

"I'm calling as Kreuder's aide. . . . Peg, did you get down all of the conversation with Webster?"

"All there," the Bjornsen girl answered. "This will prove who is guilty."

There was a short silence, then Ben Black looked around. "Anyone for clearing out? You may be wiser than the rest of us, if you go while there's a chance. Let's make it a show of hands."

Tom Honoye said dryly, "Well, it'd be nice to live to fight another day, if we could be sure that Webster would keep his word." He turned to Laura. "Sorry if I sound brutal, but do you think he would?"

"Don't apologize. I know Uncle Jeff now—I guess I've known him all along, but wouldn't let myself see it. Yes, he'll keep the letter of his word, but how far will this 'immunity' go? When he says something you can depend on that much, but you can't know what he isn't saying." Her voice sank. "He promises 'immunity' from the Ama Guard, but he didn't say anything about Cantrellis' men."

No hands went up.

"Well, Abend," came Webster's voice. "I'm sure you and your friends have come to your senses by now. Are you ready to leave?"

Clay picked up the microphone. "Webster, you may recall a conversation we had in my apartment. I repeat now what I said then—your means shape your ends. You've used criminal means, and your ends can't possibly be anything but corrupt, whatever you say or think about them.

"We're staying here, and we're making no deals with thievery." He cut the connection. "Let him rave to himself now, if he wants. We need this system open to try to get the Patrol. It'll take time for Webster to spot all our ships and knock them out. He can't get more than one or two on each passage, even if he does spot some every time a fighter goes over. We've just got to sit tight and hope the Patrol arrives."

"Anyway," said Glen, "this tape will finish him, even if he does finish us."

"Darling," said Barbara, "I am so comforted I don't know if I can stand it. Won't you please ease my dying hours by explaining to me gently how the record will get to the Martian Patrol after we have been done in?"

"Why that's perfectly simple, my dear," Glen replied, lifting a gloved finger. "We will . . . we . . . hm-m-m. You know, that's a good question."

"If you were only intelligent as well as brave . . ." she sighed. "But then you would be someone else. Better we should be together now."

"I wonder," mused Clay. "Do you suppose he's convinced himself that you really were kidnaped, Laura?"

She nodded slowly. "I—I think he has. Uncle Jeff has a flair for being perfectly justified in whatever he does."

"I'm not happy about the thought of dying here," Clay went on, "and I feel worse about the thought of dying for no purpose. If there were some way of getting these proofs out, then the rest of us would feel we had something more solid to fight for."

Laura went to the communicator. "I—I think I

have an idea. . . . Mish," she called. "Mish Kannian, are there any ships around?"

"They have guard cruisers circling the asteroid in between the fighters, playing lights all over. We can't make a move without being seen."

"Thanks." She turned to the others, her face aglow. "They can see us, but all they see is suits. They can't tell who's inside a suit from that distance. Suppose they saw someone being taken to a ship—someone who was struggling and calling for help. They'd follow that ship, wouldn't they?"

"You mean," Glen asked, "a real kidnaping?"

"Sort of. I'll stay here, but they wouldn't know that."

Peter said, "Yeah, but Webster might suspect it was just a trick to draw off his cruisers."

"Even if he did, he'd still have the ship followed. . . . Quiet, everyone. Let's see if he's trying to tell us anything." She clicked on the communicator, and Webster's voice was saying, ". . . worry, my dear. We'll have you safe soon. They won't dare hurt you. Laura, if you can hear me, don't . . ." She clicked it off.

"I think it's worth trying."

"Oh, *wunderbar*! Such lovely games we play now. We shoot off a ship, and *zoom*, out goes one or two of his ships. Then they catch our ship . . . and surprise!" Barbara Abend sighed.

"That's it!" Peter cried. "Games! Look, instead of letting him wonder if it's a trick, why not let him know? Only we won't send out just *one* ship. We'll let him see a 'captive' taken aboard each one of the ships here, and they'll all take off in different

directions. He'll have to chase them all. Then you'll have a real diversion."

"The brains light up," approved Barbara. "But . . . still, so it's a diversion. So what then? Where are we after that? Now if one ship could get through the blockade with the evidence, while the rest are making with diversions . . ."

"If we could accelerate fast enough," Clay began, . . . "but we can't. We'd be overtaken. Even the guard cruisers have more tubes than these miners' ships. All they have to do is to get ahead of us and sow junk in our path when we come along."

"Too bad we can't disguise the ships like asteroids," Barbara said.

Clay looked up. "Asteroids. I think you have it, Barb. The rogue asteroid. I forgot all about it. Glen, isn't it due today?"

Abend muttered to himself for a moment, then said, "It passes here in an hour or so."

"Good. That's the miracle we've been looking for! You and I will take the *Claymore*, set the course so that the rogue meets us, and we'll land on it. It'll take us through the whole cordon. It passes close enough to Mars so we can hop off and land on Phobos or Deimos. We can call for help from there. By the time they figure out what we did—if they figure it out at all—we'll be in the clear. There's no ship that can catch up with the rogue."

Chapter 17 Failure

THEY SAW SWORDS of light sweeping down from the sky above Asteroid 20-47 when they came out of the cavern. There was a procession of guard ships floating above them, passing along slower than the drift of clouds in films they'd seen of Earth. The light blades crept onward, and grayness in between the shafts followed. Where the beams touched, rock formations stood out, leaping into prominence. There was the glitter of reflection from rock-quartz, ice, and other crystals, and the shadows became inky black.

They came out in groups of three and four. Within each group was one figure who struggled, waved arms at the ships and cried out for help. Peter stood in the cavern entrance watching. Laura stood by the general-band microphone and called, "Uncle Jeff! Help! They're taking me away!" over and over. They'd

get her message, but no matter what they saw, the guard couldn't tell which of the "captives" the appeal had come from.

There would be no rain of pellets from the sky, washing over the defenders in lethal brilliance as had fallen on Guarnieri's ship. Peter watched the figures as each group made its way toward a camouflaged ship. Abend and Clay were dragging an unwilling Tom Honoye along. He could hear banter and laughter from all of them as some acted out their roles on the private band. He heard Tom yell, "Unhand me, you beast," then choke suddenly.

"Look at the ham, will you," came Clay's voice. "She's—I mean he's—swooned."

Bette Demark had found that the explosion which knocked out her suit-communicator had left its mark. She was in a state of delayed shock, and it was no play-acting when two of the others carried her to her ship. But it helped the general confusion for those who would be watching.

Peter signaled to Laura to stop calling for help and spoke to the others. "Attention, all of you. Listen. They've seen one person carried out and another apparently keeling over. Laura's not talking any more from in here. But they may decide that one of the first two 'captives' is the real thing if the rest of you don't follow suit."

"That's making with the brainwork, Petey," approved Barbara, from her position by another set. They'd held a council and the three had been elected to stay behind. Laura was to listen in for what she could pick up from the guard communicators. Barbara was trying to raise the Patrol. Peter

would stand watch outside, in the shadows of the entrance.

Maybe something will come off here, too, he thought. They picked me for the dull spot last time, and I had the most excitement. It didn't seem as if anything more would be happening on 20-47 now, though. I guess they've decided I'm responsible, he consoled himself.

Laura had cut the microphone so she could talk to Peter and Barbara without being heard by the guard. "It's working," she said. "They're hopping mad. Uncle Jeff and Vincennes are both yelling orders back and forth. They know it's a trick, but they have to chase the ships."

"They've seen, already?" asked Peter, his stomach tightening. "Golly, are you sure we—I mean the rest of us—can all take off?"

"No danger there, partner," came Clay's voice. "The only way they could do anything would be to make a quick landing, and there isn't time. We're inside the *Claymore* now, and . . ." He broke off as Peter said, "There goes Mish."

Karkannian's was the first ship to shoot away from the asteroid. The others followed in rapid succession.

"We'll call you when we can, partner," Clay said, as the *Claymore* blasted away. He chuckled. "Look at that danged Honoye. He's still in his fake faint."

"No, I think he's asleep," came Abend's voice.

Peter watched the guard ships. A couple turned out of line with kicker-blasts, then shot after Karkannian. Others were jockeying into position to pursue Bette Demark's ship. Slowly the procession was breaking up. The orbit they were following around 20-47

made it possible to aim each ship for a chase in any direction wanted. Their superior acceleration power meant that they'd have a chance to catch up. No one seemed to be going after the *Claymore*, though.

Then Peter understood as he saw the fighter ship that followed behind this brood of smaller vessels in the chain. They'd selected the *Claymore* as the most likely culprit, and would be sending their best after it.

Far out in the sky, Peter could see a small light. It seemed to move slowly, no faster than these ships had been drifting above 20-47. That was an illusion, he knew. The fact that he could see motion at all from this distance meant that the body was traveling at a furious pace.

It was the rogue asteroid, and the *Claymore* was headed there.

"Peter," called Laura. "Uncle Jeff sent one of his heavy ships after the *Claymore*."

"I know," he answered. "I saw it."

He watched with a sinking feeling. True, it would take time for the fighter to catch up, but that wasn't the point. Clay, Abend, and Honoye wouldn't be able to make a landing on the rogue now, without the guards realizing what was intended. Everything had depended upon Webster's being diverted enough so that one individual ship, the *Claymore*, wouldn't be followed too soon!

It had been fun while it lasted, but the diversion was a failure!

"Your ship couldn't land on the rogue now, could it?" asked Laura.

Peter looked out into the sky bitterly. "They could

land, but there's no point in it any longer." There was a faint point of light out there in the direction the *Claymore* had taken.

"They're accelerating," he added. "They'll go right on past the rogue."

"So," broke in Barbara, "we try something else. We keep on trying something else until we aren't around to think of a new plan."

"Yeah, I guess that's it, Barb. Only . . . I don't seem to have any fresh ideas handy."

"Do you think we ought to go back to Ceres?" Laura broke in.

"Not yet. Let's wait for Dad and Glen to call us. It looks as if this is as safe a spot as we could find right now, anyway. The guard's off on a chase. . . . Well, we kept them out of the mine, Barb, at least."

"Come in and get some rest," Laura said. "I can stand watch."

"We'd better have a schedule. I'll stay here until the hour, then stand by the communicators while Barb has some sleep. You relieve me there, Laura, while Barb is sentry. We'll make three-hour shifts of it."

"Me and my big mouth," grumbled Barbara. "I make conversation and say Petey has a suggestion of brains. So now he's a general already."

Waiting and watching was a large part of the miners' life. After a while, time didn't seem to drag on the long shifts any more. There was an almost hypnotic quality about watching the sky, something that lulled you. Peter was in that state, though alert to the

slightest sign of anything different or unusual. He heard Barbara Abend's voice saying, "Come on in, general; time to change sentries."

He went inside. The other two had moved the communicator apparatus inside the larger of the two pressure tents that hadn't been taken down. There didn't seem to be any need for living in spacesuits, which could be donned quickly enough should the need come. Anything landing would be seen in ample time.

He unzipped the outer wall of the tent, stepped inside and closed it. He waited for the pressure to adjust before taking off his suit. When he'd taken it off and thrown it over his arm, the inner wall zipped open, and Laura stood in the doorway.

"Do you still think I should have run away?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No. I . . . well, I guess I was a little worried about you. Didn't realize that you were used to roughing it."

She smiled. "Uncle Jeff took me with him on inspection trips, so I could get the feel of just what the miners were up against." Her eyes had a faraway look. "I wish you could have known him then, Pete; he was so different. He said, and I'll always remember it, 'You're going to be the head of a big enterprise, and you'll have a lot of power. You'll feel you know a lot more than other people because of your position, and you'll be right in a way. But you mustn't let yourself get out of touch with the men and women you're representing. I want you to promise me to get out into the field often. Once you lose the feeling of the miner's life, then you will only be something abstract. You won't be representing anything real.'"

"I can see part of it now," Peter replied.

"He's so sure that his way is right," she continued, "and that anyone who opposes him is completely wrong. At first he felt sorry for people who didn't agree with him. He'd laugh it off. Then—then he began to suspect the opposition of all kinds of things. It was 'the opposition,' now, not just individuals but an organized conspiracy. He felt he was justified in whatever he did to beat them.

"Uncle Jeff used to admit that he made mistakes. Later it got to the point where he couldn't be wrong. 'The opposition' was sabotaging him."

"Far be it from me to interrupt this psychological survey," broke in Barbara, "but if you doctors can bear it, I think I have Mr. Kreuder at last."

"Lon!" Peter cried, as he and Laura came over to the communicator. "Lon!" he called, "where are you?"

"Old Caution has pulled his bluff. I found Steve Menotti's notes—he was working for me—and I told Iantosca that I had conclusive evidence against Webster and Ama. Actually, I'm afraid Steve didn't discover much more than we already know, but we'll worry about that later.

"Now, listen carefully. I can't talk long, because someone will be back shortly, and I don't want this overheard. When Webster shows up, *let him come in*. Keep your communicators open and draw him out as much as possible. Irritate him; make him reveal as much as you can. We have a recording unit attached to this set, and it'll start operating as soon as you switch to band three. Call me there if you need me. . . . Can't talk any more. Iantosca's coming back, and I can't let him know too much yet."

There was a click before Peter could reply. He

turned to the others. "They're coming, but it's too late. Webster will capture the ships before they get here, and that will be the end of the evidence. He probably won't let anyone live to testify."

Laura's face was pale. She nodded as she whispered, "No . . . 'the opposition' must be crushed at all costs."

"Well, if we're going to have company," Barbara said, "I'd better go outside and watch for them."

"I'll join you," Peter added. "Laura, you're awfully tired. Take it easy for a while; you can relieve me later."

She smiled faintly and nodded again, then the two got into their suits. The other tent was farther back, around a bend. It would be used for living quarters.

Peter waved to Laura, then shuffled after Barbara, who was heading for the cave entrance. "Heard anything from the guard?"

"Not a word. They aren't making with ultimatums any more. . . . Well, don't forget that we three are witnesses too." She gasped suddenly. "Pete, look there!" She pointed up toward the entrance. "The Patrol has arrived already."

They cut in the general band as two suited figures, with shortguns poised, advanced into the cavern and confronted them.

"Hello!" Peter called. "We didn't expect you . . ."

"Stand where you are," came Webster's voice, cutting him off. "I have this shortgun trained on you, and Joe is covering your companion. Now! You two are going to tell me where your kidnaping friends have taken my niece, or your helmets will be blown open right now. The second pellets will take off your thieving heads!"

Chapter 18 Breakthrough

THE MOMENT OF SILENCE that followed seemed endless to Peter. Webster's shotgun lifted toward his head as the Ama chief repeated, "Where is Laura? Tell me!" There was a strained quality about his voice.

"So you think we can tell you without our heads, is it?" broke in Barbara Abend. Peter found his voice then, and grated, "What makes you think Laura didn't come here of her own free will, Webster?"

"You dare imply that my niece would associate with criminals . . ." Webster began, then Vincennes interrupted. "Take it easy, Jeff. These people don't scare that way, and you can't persuade them they've committed any crimes, either."

He looked around the cavern, without taking his gun off Peter. "Nice layout your friend has here, fellow, very neat and workmanlike. Since we're here,

you may as well be hospitable and invite us inside your tent."

Webster moved forward until he was beside one of the little spot lamps set in the wall. Peter was shocked at the drawn, aged look of his face. Webster spoke again, his voice lower, "You're playing some kind of trick. Why couldn't you co-operate with me? I made you a fair offer." He paused a minute, then added with deadly softness, "I want my niece, and I'm not the most patient man in the Belt."

Peter and Barbara turned toward the tent, the nearer one holding the communicators. Vincennes said, "I'm sure you have more sense than to try any monkey business on the way in. Mr. Webster is pretty upset, and there might be an accident."

They entered the tent silently and, at Webster's insistence, took off their suits. Peter rested his hand against a communicator. Vincennes snapped, "Hands off, fellow; get away from that set and sit down."

Pete let his shoulders slump as if in defeat and took his hand away. Vincennes went over and looked at the communicator briefly. "Hm-m-m, switched to band three, eh? Well, perhaps we may decide to let you call your friends—whoever they are—later, if you co-operate." He took off his helmet while Webster covered them, then watched the pair closely as Webster did the same. Both suits deflated, hanging on them in loose folds.

The Ama chief looked over the tent thoughtfully. "You were foolish to resist," he said. "It may take a little time, but my guard will capture all of your band. We'll get them, even if we have to wreck a few ships doing it. Will you tell me now which ship Laura is on? The *Claymore*, perhaps—your father's?"

"I'll tell you nothing so long as you call us kidnapers and thieves!" Peter answered. "Maybe you've beaten us, but you won't make us confess to anything we didn't do!"

"Foolish, foolish," sighed Vincennes. "What can you hope to gain now by not co-operating?"

"What would we get if we did tell you?" put in Barbara.

Webster was sitting down now, his eyes haunted. "Your father was right, fellow. Once I started treating people unfairly, I had to keep it up to hold onto the ground I'd gained in the first place. I know what you think of me, and what the others think, but you'll see that it was all justified. The Asteroid Miners' Association will bring new safety and co-operation to the Belt. No miner will have to fear his fellow men. Laura will bring a fresh, young hand to the controls.

"I'll be hated and despised now, but in years to come, people will forgive me for what I had to do to bring it about." He looked up squarely at Peter and Barbara. "I've fought a fight and won. I'm not going to throw it away now—this was for Laura too. I don't want to harm *you*, Peter Clay, after what you did for me back in Cerestown. But I *will* shoot you both if you defy me any longer." He looked at Barbara Abend. "There's an old saying from Earth—'Ladies First.'"

The other communicator clicked, and Webster turned toward it. He paused as Alan Clay's voice came through. "20-47! 20-47! Pete! Can you hear me, partner? Answer me if you hear."

"Answer him," Vincennes said softly.

"Yes . . . Dad . . ." Pete said.

"How's everything at the mine?"

"Tell him everything is all right and ask him where he is," said Vincennes.

"It's . . . all right here, partner," Pete said. "Where are you?"

There was a recognizable chuckle from the set, then Glen's voice broke in. "We made it! We're on the rogue!"

Vincennes' head shot up instantly. "The rogue—so *that* was it! How could they have landed without . . ."

"I thought you told me the *Claymore* was being followed," Webster whispered fiercely.

Vincennes gulped. "It was, Jeff. Dang it all, we *saw* that ship go past it. I don't get . . ."

"We had one little piece of luck, Pete . . . and Barb, if you're listening, you can thank Glen's agile brain for seeing the chance. The fighter was following us, and it was too close for us to try landing the *Claymore* anywhere. They'd be sure to see. But the way the two ships and the asteroid were lined up, we were between the rogue and the fighter. Our exit-port was on the side away from them, so they wouldn't see anything emerging from the *Claymore*."

"But they'd see the flash of your suits, wouldn't they?"

Clay chuckled again. "Well, I got a brainstorm too. We had a little time before the position would be right for a jump. You see, we had to get off at a time when we'd shoot out at the right angle, a little ahead of the rogue. It would come to meet us. Well, we took paint and blackened our suits, then strapped on oxygen tanks."

"But, Dad, it's still a long trip to Mars. You and Glen can't live on that rogue asteroid without supplies."

"Had an extra pressure tent in the hold, Pete. We took that and enough supplies to keep us alive. Won't be too comfortable a trip, but we'll make it. The rogue cuts into Mars' orbit ahead of the planet. We'll jump off at the right time and candle to Phobos or Deimos—either one'll do. We can call for help from there. Or maybe we'll just stand in our suits out in space and holler into our communicators, holler so loud that Webster will hear us all the way to the Belt.

"We have those records, Pete. Webster called the Patrol in to finish us, but it's going to work out the other way. They'll finish him. The Patrol will be on our side now."

"It already is, partner," Pete answered, shooting a glance at Webster. "Lon Kreuder's taken charge of the Patrol, and part of it is out cleaning up the jumpers' organization. The rest is on its way here. We have a couple of visitors listening to all this, but don't worry; they won't bother us now."

He turned to the intruders. "You won't get anywhere by threatening us further. Your fighter is chasing Tom Honoye in the *Claymore*, and your other ships are after the rest of the party. It won't do you any good to capture them. It looks as if you haven't won after all, Mr. Webster."

Webster rubbed his jaw, but Peter was most impressed by the expression on Vincennes' face. The man looked as if he were going over a rapid calculation of his assets and liabilities. His eyes narrowed as he looked at Webster, and a slow smile passed across his face.

Webster said, "When you're a little older, and I sincerely hope you will survive, Mr. Clay, you'll learn

not to cheer before you've really won." He shrugged. "If the Patrol is cleaning out the Cantrellis bunch, well and good. They were tools I needed at the time, but they had to be crushed sooner or later. . . . So far as your story of Lon Kreuder's taking charge of the Patrol goes, I'm not convinced. I'm still in charge here."

Vincennes stepped over to the communicator casually, turned it to reception, and a voice said, ". . . full protection," then stopped.

"Now I wonder who that might be," Vincennes mused. "Just for the sake of argument, let's assume that the Patrol is coming here under Kreuder's command. You know, quite a few things can happen in the meantime."

The voice started up again. "Jeff Webster! Jeff Webster! Lieutenant Iantosca of the Martian Patrol speaking. Your game is finished. I have here the record of your conversation with Peter Clay and Barbara Abend, and we have heard your threats. I warn you, Webster. It will go hard with you if either of them are harmed, or if any of the others in their group are molested by your guard. The Martian Patrol gives the Abend group full protection."

Webster brought his gun up, training it on Barbara Abend. The fury they had heard in his words when he met them outside was back in his voice, "For the last time, *where is Laura?*"

"Haven't you figured that out yet, Jeff?" asked Vincennes. He laughed easily. "She's perfectly safe. You know . . . I think I'm beginning to see the error of my ways. As the young man has said, you can't get law and order out of skullduggery. So, Jeff, you'd better change . . ."

"No, you don't," snapped Webster, bringing his gun so that Vincennes was covered too. "Get over there with the others. I know how to deal with traitors. In exactly ten seconds, *you* will get a pellet against your skull, Mr. Joseph Vincennes. Or do you want to tell me where Laura is?"

"Easy with that gun, Jeff. The girl's coming in right now, I'd say. I just saw the pressure gauge wobble—that means someone's coming into the tent."

The flap zipped open and Laura Webster came in, her face flushed with anger. She looked striking, Peter thought, as her eyes flamed into Webster's.

"So my uncle is the worst thief of all—and a killer too," she said.

"Don't anger me, girl! You won't listen to reason, so I'll have to use force. You're coming with me, now."

Peter had braced himself as Webster turned toward the tent-wall. He started a short jump when Laura came in, her attention fixed on her uncle. The hop took him but a little off the floor. He felt a surge of satisfaction at knowing that he was beginning to master the gravity problem. In another moment . . .

But that was when Laura looked past her uncle, and her eyes widened. Webster turned just as Pete was coming down upon him. The gun swiveled in his hands, then he let the barrel drop as Peter struck him. The momentum carried him backward.

"I'm not . . . a killer. . . ." he whispered. "Get away from me, boy; I don't want to . . ."

There was a flare as a pellet exploded against Webster's side. The force of it hurled him back against the tent-wall. The plastic trembled, and Peter looked at Vincennes, who still held the shotgun which he had triggered.

"Didn't mean to hit him," he said. "Figured I could hit the gun barrel easily at this range."

"You fool, suppose the whole thing had exploded!" Barbara gasped.

"Wouldn't," Vincennes said, "unless the safety had been taken out, as it must have been in Ogden's case."

"Uncle Jeff!" whispered Laura. She knelt down beside the Ama chief, her face stricken. There was no break in Webster's pressure suit, but that made no difference. Deflated, it offered no protection.

He looked up at her. "It's better this way," he said. "I'm all broken up inside, but now . . . I can do what I have to do." He looked at Peter. "Get Iantosca again. I'm ready to confess."

"Uncle Jeff," said Laura, "call your guard and tell them to let the miners go."

Peter started calling the Patrol as Webster took the microphone from his suit-communicator and spoke into it. "Miners' Aid, attention! Miners' Aid, attention! Webster speaking. Cease pursuit. Return to Ceres at once, and wait for instructions from my niece, Laura. Emergency plan A now in effect."

"What's that?" asked Barbara.

"That—that was worked out a long time ago," said Laura. "'Emergency plan A' was to go into effect if anything happened to Uncle Jeff."

"Hello, Patrol!" called Peter. "Stand by for a statement." He and Vincennes went over and helped Webster into the seat by the communicator. The man's face was pale, but the strained look was gone. There was only the stamp of the idealist on Jeff Webster now.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"Proceed, Mr. Webster," Iantosca said.

"Very well. I, Jeff Webster, knowing myself to be

near death, do hereby make this declaration of my own free will. I have not been forced to confess; there has been neither duress nor deception. I confess to full responsibility for crimes perpetrated by the Asteroid Miners' Association. These crimes include claim jumping, forgery, extortion, pilfering, fraud, and wilful violations of public safety.

"I further depose that these activities have been concealed from most of the members of the Asteroid Miners' Association and the Ama Guard. I affirm that Captain Ezzard had and has no knowledge of them. I declare that those who assisted me in the commission of these crimes did so unwillingly and under extreme threats. This does not include Cantrellis and his fellow conspirators. None of them are members of the Association.

"I have surrendered control of the Asteroid Miners' Association, and have turned over all authority of directorship to my niece, Laura Webster. I affirm that she has not been involved in any crimes, as I hope for pardon for my own actions.

"In concluding this statement, I ask consideration for the Asteroid Miners' Association as a whole, and plead for the continued co-operation of the Martian Patrol."

He leaned back in the chair and closed his eyes.

"Statement received and recorded," replied Iantosca. "We're approaching 20-47, and should land within half an hour."

"Miss Webster," came Kreuder's voice, "this changes things. I'm going to make a direct call to Mars and recommend continued co-operation with Ama."

"Lon," said Peter, "Dad and Glen are on the rogue. Can you have a ship meet them?"

Kreuder laughed. "I'll be blasted and blistered. When they get there, this will be cleared up. You've managed to get left behind, and still be in the middle of the most important happenings every time."

"Uncle Jeff," said Laura. "Can't—can't we give you an opiate?"

Webster shook his head. "No pain," he said. "I . . . I won't last long enough for the shock to wear off." He looked up at Peter. "Will you join the Association now? I'd like to know that you and Laura were friends . . . working together."

Peter held out his hand. "I ought to hate you but I can't. I guess . . . you've accomplished something worth-while in spite of everything."

Webster grasped his hand. "Still wearing this suit . . . have to take it off . . . feel tired. I . . . I didn't want to hurt anyone. . . ."

Barbara Abend looked at Vincennes. "Come on, Mr. Quick-change-of-the-ways, we have to take him into the other tent." She got into her suit. Vincennes put Webster's helmet back on his head and donned his own. Before he closed the faceplate, he looked at Laura and Peter. "Well, fellow, you have a real bonanza here. All yours and Abend's. I—er—rather doubt that my filing is in order."

"What about the other claims in the doubtful period?"

"Hm-m-m . . . I think I can assist in adjusting them." He looked thoughtful. "As a matter of fact, Miss Webster, you will need a trouble shooter until everything is cleared up."

He closed the faceplate, then lifted the now-unconscious Webster carefully and followed Barbara Abend out of the tent.

Peter said softly, "I suppose he won't come to again."

Laura's eyes were misty. "I ought to stay with him, until. . . . Well, Barb will call me if there's any change." She grasped his hand. "Pete . . . you'll help me, won't you?"

He nodded. "Sure—er, what instrument do you play, Laura?"

"Oboe," she said.

Peter grinned. "Dad plays cello, and I handle the fiddle. We have some transcriptions for cello, violin and oboe . . ." Which was not strictly true at the moment, but he *could* work out the arrangements.

She smiled faintly. "I think I'd like that."

He picked up his suit. "They'll be here pretty soon. Let's go out and watch for them. You know . . . there's always something to see up there in the sky if you know how to look for it."



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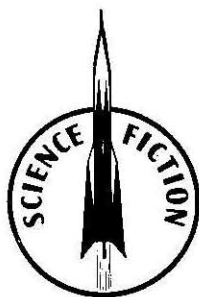
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