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SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

Vol. 2 No. 8

1959

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Short Novels :

SEED OF VIOLENCE

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When Nick Egon discovered an archaeological connection between Lunar and Mars he had no idea that it would turn him into the central figure in an Earth-Mars squabble.

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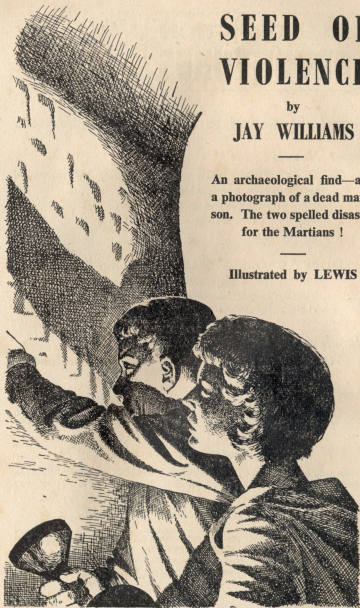
SEED OF VIOLENCE

by

JAY WILLIAMS

An archaeological find—and
a photograph of a dead man's
son. The two spelled disaster
for the Martians !

Illustrated by LEWIS



American writer Jay Williams is the author of several historical novels—The Rogue From Padua, The Witches, etc., also numerous text books and a number of children's books on anti-gravity and space travel. His shorter stories have appeared in The Saturday Evening Post, Esquire, and various science fiction magazines. At present he is working on a novel about the times of King Solomon.

SEED OF VIOLENCE

by JAY WILLIAMS

Illustrated by LEWIS

Chapter One

When Nick Egon boarded the Interplanetary Liner P-44, he had only two thoughts in his head : first, to see his precious case safely stowed away, and second to go to sleep at once. When the box, containing the results of ten days' exhaustive excavation in the lunar pit had been deposited in the hold, and the third officer had shown him to compartment two, he sank back against the cushions with just strength enough left to mumble, "Don't wake me." He had a glimpse of an inquisitive face, pale and flabby, watching him from the seat opposite ; then he plunged into a deep, dreamless sleep.

He awoke slowly and luxuriously. The cabin was empty, his cabin-mate was probably in the lounge. Egon lay back, eyes half shut, too comfortable even to bring himself out of the embrace of the seat.

It had been a rewarding expedition. The chamber, deep-buried in the sand, was clearly made by the same hands as those which had built the cromlechs of Mars. There were glyphs similar to those of Morna desert, and one character—ah, that was worth the work and effort. He remembered the surprise of the men at Lunar Station: "Is that all you've got to show for ten days of digging?" one of them had said. "I can get more than that out of my back teeth." Yes, but that glyph, thanks to the carving above it, could be read and interpreted. He smiled with contentment and hugged to himself a specialist's secret delight. Eight thousand *emmas* was what that single glyph had cost.

His own face, lined and unshaven, grinned back at him from the opaque luxite of the corridor wall, rather lean and worn and a little grey at the temples, for they paid scant attention to vita treatments at Morna Study Centre. His deep-set thoughtful eyes gave him a mild and pedantic look, but there were hints of stubbornness and determination unsuspected even by himself in the firm lips and solid, stubborn jaw. Rubbing the bristles on that jaw, he unpacked his kit and set about freshening up.

The intercom lighted and the third officer's voice said, softly, "Dinner in the lounge in thirty minutes. We bring you the latest news reports from Earth. Crowds rioted today outside the Bloater Pharmaceutical Building, in Chicago, in protest against the dismissal for indecency of Jazzer Clatch, thrumming idol of the solids . . . Controversy continues over the use of parabenzylopium in cigarettes, as Conclaveman Mahoud warned against . . . Here is a bulletin from the very chambers of the Central Interplanetary Council themselves: Councilman Gole, member of the Traditionalist Party and one of the Venus reps, urged once again that powers of the Martian Guardians be limited according to the terms of the bill introduced by . . ."

Egon reached out lazily. For emergency reasons, the set could not be turned off completely, but he reduced the volume so that the voice was a mere whisper. What a strange world, he thought. Everywhere but on Mars was there implicit the threat of violence: riots over thrumming idols, danger in cigarettes, threats in the Council itself. True, there was peace for the first time in human history, a peace that had lasted almost three generations, but there was a restlessness in men that would not let them enjoy this peace. Except for the Study Centres, where work was all-absorbing.

He wiped the last of the wash-and-shave lotion from his face and tossed the towel in the disposal chute. The handle of the compartment door turned, and a man entered.

It was his cabin-mate, the man with the pale face. He walked with an apologetic stoop that reduced his height, and he bore his large, oddly soft face thrust out before him like a visiting card. His complexion had the bleached quality which seemed to betoken a Venusian, a man who had spent his life in the clouded light of the bubble settlements. He came in hesitantly, then seeing that Egon was awake let his breath out in a sigh, and smiled. His smile had an unwholesome quality in that bloated face, rather like the breaking apart of an over-ripe cheese.

"Hope I wasn't responsible for waking you?" he said, sliding into his seat.

"Not at all," Egon replied politely.

"You gave orders not to be disturbed. You've been asleep almost fourteen hours." There was a hint of question in his voice.

"I'm an archaeologist," Egon explained, clasping his shirt. "Been doing some digging on the Moon. I had only ten days, and we still have to do most of it by hand. Had to keep at it pretty steadily, on happy pills and wideawakes."

"Ah—an archaeologist. And you're from one of the Martian Study Centres?"

"Morna Desert."

The other leaned back. The flabby face had taken on a curious air of attention. "Please forgive me," he said. "I had forgotten to introduce myself. Lon Faxon."

"Glad to know you. My name's Nick Egon."

"I'm an engineer," Faxon said. "Brussels. Matter of fact, I'm going to Mars myself for a couple of weeks. Been called to make some tests on a new synthetic they've developed at Tanggra."

Egon glanced at him. From Brussels? With that complexion? Brussels was a city of museums, parks, and amusement centres, and its inhabitants were notoriously burned brown. Then he shrugged. It was no affair of his.

Faxon caught the glance. "I do a good deal of subterranean work," he explained.

"I see."

"Yes. Well, I'll be kept pretty close to the grindstone, at Tanggra, and I wonder—mm—I wonder if you know a Professor named Thorp, at Morna?"

"Of course. Allen Thorp. In the Chemistry Department."

"That's right, that's the one. Good old Allen. We were close friends once, a few years ago. Then we had a kind of disagreement and broke off. How is he?"

"Why, I imagine he's well," Egon said cautiously. "We're not exactly chin-chums."

"I wonder if you'd mind doing me a small favour," the engineer said. "You see, Allen is godfather to my son. He hasn't seen the boy for five years. I was going to mail this picture to him, but since you know him and are going to the same place, I wonder if you'd mind giving it to him when you see him?"

As he spoke, Faxon brought from an inner pocket a wallet and drew from it a small, flat photograph of the sort many people preferred to carry instead of stereos. He handed it to Egon with another of his Gorgonzola smiles. Egon took it with some embarrassment. It was a picture of a sturdy, rosy child of six or seven, dressed in the uniform of a Space Scout Junior.

"I'll be at the other end of the planet, you know," said Faxon. "I'd be most grateful."

"Well I—" Egon could find no graceful way of refusing what was, after all, a slight act of courtesy. "I'll be glad to," he said.

"Splendid! You're sure you won't forget? You'll make a point of it?"

"We Marsmen are very careful of our promises," Egon said a little stiffly, "no matter how others feel about obligations."

"Of course. No offence, Friend. I am grateful. And would you just tell Allen that I send him all the best, and I'll be at Tanggra until the tenth May, Earth time. He can work out the Martian equivalent, I suppose."

‡ Egon jotted it down on the back of the picture in his neat, precise handwriting: 10 May ET, and slipped the photo into his own wallet.

"It's nearly dinnertime," he said. "I think I'll stroll down to the lounge. Fourteen hours, I think you said? I hope there's plenty of food on board. Are you coming?"

‡ Faxon's expression changed subtly. If it were possible, he seemed to grow a little whiter. "No," he said. "I'm—I'm too tired. I'll just rest a while."

Out in the corridor, Egon found himself regretting that he had accepted the errand. Not that he had any intention of changing his mind : the normal, well-adjusted citizen was not given to antisocial acts. But there was something unpleasant, even a little false, about the obsequious engineer, although it was hard to believe that a responsible man in a scientific profession would lie about himself. Still, there was a jarring quality in him, something Egon with his Study Centre upbringing did not quite know how to meet. He shrugged, and strode down the narrow passageway.

Like all planetary liners of the day, the P-44 was built for utility rather than comfort, over four-fifths of her space being given to fuel storage and cargo. Passengers, limited to a maximum of eight, had to have special priority for travel, and divided their time between their tiny compartments and the lounge. Even at that, it was not unusual for dinner to be taken among piles of crates or metal containers.

When Egon entered, there were half a dozen people already at the long table. Dominating all the rest was an elderly man with a mop of brilliant white hair and a lively, angry way of talking. Even Egon knew him from the newspapers : he was Councilman Ralph Ackroyd, one of the leaders and certainly the most vocal member of the Traditionalist Party. With him were two male secretaries who followed him everywhere ; they were called, by newsmen, Pat and Mike, after two characters in an ancient fable. Their real names were Donaldson and Tucker.

Of the other passengers, two were members of the Archon Study Centre. The sixth was obviously on government business, for on the table before him, next to an essence inhalator, lay a dispatch case with the diplomatic seal of the North American Conclaves emblazoned on its lock. He was hollow-cheeked and haggard, a silent type on whom a rich, dark jacket with jewelled clips hung like a scarecrow's rag. As Egon entered, the man raised his head and flashed a look at the archaeologist from enormous startlingly brilliant eyes. Then, without a word, he rose abruptly and disappeared into the corridor.

Egon buzzed for the third officer and ordered dinner. One of the women from Archon knew him slightly, and she and her companion made room for him. They could not speak

much, however, for Councilman Ackroyd's booming voice monopolized the conversation. He was going to Mars, it appeared, to make a personal tour of investigation.

"Slackness in high places," he said. "Confusion masked by paper work . . . Trouble with you Study Centre chaps is, you're dreamers. Dreamers are never the doers. No notion of the demands of progress . . . Going to have a crack at the books myself."

And so on. Egon was mildly aware that he had heard it all before, but he wasn't at all sure he knew what it meant. He ate well, however, and tried to talk softly to the women on either side of him.

After dinner, the third officer stamped his ration check and said, "I'm sorry to bother you, Friend, but you fell asleep before I could get you to sign the unloading manifest for your case. Could you go back to the fourth officer and do that now?"

Egon nodded. He arranged to meet the Archon women for a game of minigolf later in the day, and made his way down the passage towards the last compartment.

As he passed the door of his own cabin, he heard voices coming from inside. The tones were low but tense, and one voice sounded menacing. Egon stopped for a moment.

He heard: "Don't know? Try again." It was a light, pleasant tenor voice.

"No!" came quite loudly. That was Faxon.

Egon caught himself with a start. He was actually eavesdropping, a thoroughly antisocial act for a Marsman. Ten days away, and he was already infected with the coarser air of outside. He went hastily on his way.

His business with the fourth officer was soon settled. He took the receipt back to his cabin, and before entering listened for a moment at the door lest he intrude. There was no sound. Whoever Faxon's visitor had been (and it was a kind of prying even to speculate on that) he must have gone. Egon pushed the door open.

For an instant, he thought his eyes must be playing tricks on him. Faxon seemed to be trying to crawl across the floor from his own seat to Egon's. Then he saw that no one could possibly crawl with his head turned completely over his shoulder. The engineer was quite dead.

Chapter II

Egon leaned against the door frame, holding his stomach down with an effort. He had never before seen violent, naked death. Aside from the rare, almost petrified mummies his researches sometimes brought him, the only form of death he had ever beheld had been the handful of calcined ash in the neatly-packaged plastic containers of the Public Crematorium.

Faxon was not a nice sight, in any case. His feet were tucked jauntily up on his seat; his body lay folded in the narrow floor space, his chest and shoulders on Egon's seat. His head was turned at an impossible angle so that his sightless eyes glared at the ceiling. The floor was littered with papers and personal belongings from a small case that lay on the seat.

Egon's nausea lasted only a moment. Then his social sense reasserted itself and he rang for the third officer.

When the body had been removed to the ship's freezer and the dead man's papers and belongings had been tagged by the third officer, who was also a doctor, Egon sank into his seat again and tried to pull himself together. The third officer had been efficient and positive: Faxon must have been reaching up to the rack for his case, he said, and had lost his balance and toppled backward, slamming his head against Egon's seat at just the proper angle to snap the spine. Government files would establish identity and survivors, and Civil Investigation would establish accidental death. He was sorry for the unpleasantness, he said, but it was the kind of thing that happened; here today and gone tomorrow, he said, with a sententious sniff; in any case there was nothing they could do about it, and it would turn out to be a blessing, on the whole, for Egon, who would have some privacy which no one else on the ship had.

But Egon took little comfort from this. He remembered the ragdoll sprawl of Faxon's body. He thought of Faxon's head resting on this very seat, and of the man's fawning smile, and how he had spoken and looked only a short time before. "Notify the survivors"—there was something so brutal and final in the phrase. To the third officer it was only an occurrence en route, but to a wife and children somewhere it was tragedy and tears . . .

He came to himself with a start. The photo of Faxon's son! He had completely forgotten about it. Perhaps he ought to turn it over to the third officer. But it was a personal

errand, after all, and one which now more than ever ought to be carried out. He would have something else to tell Professor Thorp. Faxon would not be at Tangra after all.

He settled himself in his seat and took out the little copy of Suetonius with which he always travelled. He unsnapped the cover, adjusted the lens, and pressed the tiny button which turned the pages. But he could not read. His hands still trembled and he felt horribly restless. He recalled that he had a date to play minigolf, but the way he felt he'd never be able to control the small spring of the game. In the end, he rang for the third officer again and when the man appeared, he said, "Bring me a bottle of whisky, please. And three beta-complex chasers." He didn't like getting drunk in solitude, but the situation seemed to call for oblivion.

He was better by the next day, and somehow the days passed; the Moon receded and bore the memory of Faxon with it. He spent most of his time in the company of the two women from Archon. One was a geologist, the other a biophysicist, and they were both unattached and uninhibited, so that he was able to keep himself occupied both day and night, with good conversation, games of multiple chess and the like, and a certain amount of erotic play.

Even Councilman Ackroyd and his assistants settled into the routine of the voyage and became fellow-passengers, for not even an Opposition Councilman could hold to nothing but politics during the long weeks of a space jump. Donaldson and Tucker were lively and amusing, and Ackroyd turned out to have an enormous fund of jokes, stories about his checkered past and his political associates, and shrewd observations on life in general. Only on one occasion was there anything approaching a wrangle.

This was after dinner, one shiptime evening. Donaldson and Tucker were playing a gambling game in one corner of the lounge. The diplomatic courier whose name was either Ratchet or Hatchet—Egon was not quite certain which, for the man kept to himself, rarely spoke to anyone, and when he did speak mumbled his words—was watching a tape of an opera with earphones plugged in so as not to disturb anyone else. The two women and Egon were at the long table with Ackroyd, playing a word game called *Pic* which had become a new fad.

Egon had just changed "guardian" into "Martian," added "dug" and was wondering what to do with an "A." Ackroyd

grunted. "Martian-guardian. It's an obsession with you S-C fellers."

"No, sir," Egon said, smiling. "Students can't afford to be obsessed, except by a desire to learn. We try to keep open minds about everything, even the Opposition."

"Ought to take a leaf from the Venus colony's book," said Ackroyd brusquely. "No studying there. They've just dug in and turned the planet to some account."

"There is no life on Venus except our own," Egon replied.

"Life? Don't talk rubbish, my lad. What's life got to do with it? There's only one kind of life that counts, and it's humanity. Humanity's role is to expand, to spread out, to use the planets which God has placed up there for us. All that sentimental claptrap about life only hinders progress."

"The two situations are quite different," Egon said, patiently. "Venus is nothing but a barren chunk of mud and minerals. The colonists there lived—and still live—in protected domes. But Mars is a world, inhabited by intelligent beings. We began by studying it, trying to live peacefully side by side with the Martians—and that isn't hard, for they haven't even a word for 'quarrel' in their language. We're still studying it. Anyway, there is a certain amount of export, you know."

"A certain amount? Controlled by the Guardians. And tied up with legalities and red tape. I'm out to cut the red tape, my lad. Not for the sake of a few thousand students (although you do your job) but for all of us, every blessed mother's son toiling in the factories and laboratories of our beloved Mother Earth."

Now, Egon thought to himself, he has left the realm of logical discussion and entered Oratory Land. No further exchange of ideas is possible. And with a friendly grin, he said aloud, "Please let's not break up the game, Councilman, over a disagreement as fundamental as this. I'll change my present lay to 'man' and 'tiara'; that ought to avoid irritation."

Ackroyd coughed and chuckled. "Very well. But once we're off this ship, I hope you'll come and visit me and continue the argument. I want you to know I'm always accessible, my boy. Not like Councilman Wladek, believe me. Why, I remember once . . ."

The moment came, at last, when they entered the atmosphere of Mars. Egon emerged from the drugged stupor in which he had endured deceleration, and unsnapped his safety web. The P-44 was being warped into her moorings amid a cloud

of siren hoots and loudspeaker commands. He got down his bag and hurried to join the line of passengers waiting to leave the ship. As he stood with the others at the air lock, a voice behind him said softly, "You're from Morna Study Centre, aren't you?"

It was the diplomatic courier, Hatchet—or Ratchet. This was almost the first time he had spoken directly to Egon, except to say "Please pass the salt," or "Do you mind if I play this tape?" He was evidently one of those busy diplomatic types who whirled about the planets with messages from office to office, full of secrets, reticent and knowledgeable.

"Yes, I am," Egon said.

"Going to stay in Mars Station?"

"I don't intend to. But then, I really don't know."

"Don't know?"

"There may be some questions. My cabin-mate was killed early in the voyage, you know."

"Ah, yes, of course."

They had no more time for conversation. The ports were opening, and a rumbling vibration underfoot told of cargo being unloaded. It was not until he had collected his luggage and seen his precious box safely transferred to the depot that a tiny nagging memory in Egon's mind came to life. Somewhere, he had heard that voice speak the identical phrase: "Don't know?" Now it came to him. It had been in his own cabin, behind the closed door, just before Faxon was killed.

The realization puzzled rather than shocked him. After all, it was not unlikely that a busy engineer might encounter a busy courier in the course of one trip or another. But why not speak up? Why had he given no indication that he knew Faxon? Perhaps, Egon told himself, that was the essence of the diplomatic service—to be diplomatic.

He had other things to think of, very soon. He was interviewed by a discreet, bald member of Mars C/I, who asked if he would be obliging enough to remain in Mars Station for the next twenty-four hours until information on Faxon came from Earth, and an inquest could be held. It would be only a slight inconvenience to him, and naturally the government would pay all expenses.

Reluctantly, for he was anxious to get back to work, he agreed. He had his case shipped to Morna, said good-bye to the women from Archon Study Centre and exchanged addresses with them, and took a public slide to the centre of the city.

Mars Station was to all appearance an immense and busy building, a hundred stories high and two or three miles in diameter. Within, it was a network of carefully planned streets and squares, parks, shops, apartments, laboratories, and office units, all radiating from the centre of the building, an enormous domed park, on the fiftieth story. In the painted and filigreed lobby of the Hotel Lowell, Egon was only slightly surprised to see the diplomatic courier from Earth registering at the desk. With a nod to the man, he followed him, gave his name and address to the clerk, and impressed his thumb-print on the registration form. He dropped his bag in the desk chute, whence it would be shunted to his room, ordered a light supper to be sent up to him, and went off to the hotel's conditioner for a few minutes of anti-strain exercises.

A plunge in the salt pool, followed by a change of clothing and a quiet supper in his room, left him pleasantly relaxed. He glanced at the time. Not quite twenty-one. He had time for a stroll in the park, and then bed.

The night lights were lit and the trees and shrubbery cast fantastic shadows in their glow. Now and again a couple passed him, arms twined about each other's waist. Fifty stories above him the artificial sky twinkled with stars and a crescent moon. An air of peace, of dreaminess, descended upon Egon as he rambled. In the pleasantest of brown studies, remembering with affection his companions of the voyage, looking forward to showing Professor Godwin his find, he returned to the hotel. He took the escalator to the second floor and pressed his thumb into the lock of his room. His door opened. Still in a dream, he looked dazedly around at the confusion.

Clothing was strewn on the floor. His valise lay up-ended on the bed with its seams ripped open. His few books were scattered about, their lenses smashed. The bedclothes were torn from the bed, and even his slippers had been slit to pieces.

Egon came back to reality with a gulp. He took one long step into the room and reached for the phone. He checked in mid-stride. The panel between his apartment and the one next door slid open. A heavily-built man stood in the opening surveying him with a broad and friendly smile on his lips.

Egon was the first to speak. "Did you do this?" he asked, more in bewilderment than indignation.

The other man came into the room. He was elegantly dressed in a grey jacket with gold clips on the lapels. He had a face distinguished by its utter ordinariness: the features were smooth and regular, and except for a certain coarseness about the jowls, handsome, as a male fashion model is handsome. It was the sort of face one would have difficulty remembering, five minutes after one had seen it; so utterly without identifying features was it, that the effect could only have been achieved by careful surgery.

He said, looking about him, "A very thorough job, I must say. No, Friend Egon, I didn't do it."

Egon stared at him. "Did you hear any noise?"

The other picked his way delicately to a chair and sat down. "May I?" he asked. "No, I heard nothing. If I had—"

Egon turned away. "Well, thanks for coming in. Excuse me. I'm going to call the manager."

"Just a moment. Please don't do that yet."

"Why not?"

The stranger coughed. "I have come about a matter concerning our mutual and deceased friend, Lon Faxon. A purely personal matter."

That brought Egon to a dead halt. "Faxon?" he said. "I don't understand."

"It's very simple. I have reason to believe that my dear old friend, Lon, was carrying something for Professor Thorp, and that he transferred it to you. A sentimental token. If you'll give it to me, I'll save you the trouble of delivering it. I'm going to Morna tonight, while you, I understand, will be detained for twenty-four hours."

Egon almost reached for his wallet. Then he hesitated. There was no immediate reason for his hesitation, except that the stranger's air was so smooth, so plausible, and at the same time so patronizing. He was like a high-powered salesman of helicarcs or vox-writers, and Egon disliked intensely being pressured by self-confident salesmen.

"You seem to have found out a good deal about me," he said. "How did you know my name? And how did you know Faxon gave me anything?"

"I have certain sources of information," said the other, raising his eyebrows.

"I see." Egon's lips tightened. "Then perhaps those sources also told you how to identify the—the thing Faxon gave me?"

The stranger looked hurt. "My dear Egon," he said. "You're really making a terrible fuss for a very small matter."

"Am I? Your dear old friend Lon must certainly have told you what he was carrying."

The stranger tapped his fingers together thoughtfully. "No," he said, "I'm afraid he didn't."

"Doesn't that seem rather curious to you?"

The stranger sighed. "You really aren't being very friendly," he said, reproachfully. Then he changed his tone, and became very brisk. "Very well. Let's not fence. You have something which Faxon gave you for Professor Thorp. I want it. It was intended for me in the end, anyway. And Thorp is no longer in a position to receive it."

"What do you mean?"

"He was killed in a helicar accident this morning."

Egon stared. Then he said, "I don't believe you."

"No? All you need do is turn on a newspaper. It was most unfortunate. He will be a great loss to science, I'm sure."

Egon frowned. Things were happening too rapidly. "If that's the case," he said, "I'll turn over Faxon's item to the C/I. I should have done so at the interview this afternoon."

The stranger stood up, drawing a cheque book from an inner pocket. "Don't be hasty, Friend," he said. He flipped open the book; the first cheque was made out to the account of Nick Egon. "Take a look at this," he said. He held it out, and Egon saw with astonishment that the cheque was made out for ten thousand manhours.

"If I'm not mistaken," said the stranger softly, as Egon gaped, "your salary is only five thousand *emmas* a year. All I need do is put my thumb print on this cheque and you can do a little private research, buy your own apartment, take a trip . . ."

"Get out," Egon said suddenly.

"But my dear Friend—"

"Get out," Egon repeated. "This is either a monstrous practical joke, or you're deranged. I'll give you one minute, and then I'll put my thumb *here* and ring for the manager."

The stranger shook his head. "You leave me no alternative," he said, closing the chequebook.

Egon turned round to slide the door open. "Glad you see it my way," he began. Then he felt a light touch on the back of his neck.

Chapter III

His eyes opened to a grey and yellow blur which slowly resolved itself into a ceiling on which fell the circular reflection of a lamp. He twisted to one side, discovering as he did so that his head hurt, and found that he was lying on a low divan in a small room. Opposite him, a crescent-shaped desk was placed before two large windows which were masked by a thin, but effectively opaque, drapery.

A man was sitting on the edge of the desk, a slender but wiry man with a dark moustache that stood out against the dead whiteness of his complexion. As Egon looked, the man touched something on the desk and said in an oddly effeminate voice, "Gole. He's awake."

Egon sat up with an effort. The moustached man looked at him sardonically, making no effort to help him. When he was up, Egon felt the back of his head tenderly. There was a swelling there.

A door slid back. His visitor, the man with the undistinguished face, entered. He was evidently named Gole. He smiled cheerily at Egon and seated himself at the desk. The man with the moustache did not move until Gole said, "I'm sorry, Minel, I'd rather you sat somewhere else."

"Don't heave your tripe around," Minel said. "You want me to start on him?"

"Not just yet."

Egon rose, swaying. "You—kidnapped me," he said.

Gole shook a finger at him. "Don't be so old-fashioned," he said. "I brought you here so that we could talk undisturbed. A hotel room, after all . . . You have something I need, Friend. You refuse to part with it. I must therefore extract it from you somehow. You see? It's quite simple."

"Extract it from me," Egon repeated. "Good heavens, this is like some primitive story book. You'd actually use force?" He was as shocked as if someone had told him they practised cannibalism, or went to a private psychiatrist.

Gole tittered. "Say, rather, persuade you by recourse to what the ancients called the *argumentum ad baculum*."

Egon shook his head to clear it. He wondered where he was. Somewhere in one of the deserts? Or in one of the hundreds of private apartments on the 3rd, 4th, and 5th stories of the city? If the latter, there must be grounds about the place for Gole to speak of privacy. But surely the C/I

would search for him when it was found he wasn't in his hotel room ; surely they'd find him.

His thoughts were interrupted by the other's voice, grown all at once harsh. "Have you made up your mind to be a little more co-operative?"

Egon looked at Gole, and suddenly became aware of a false note in the other's appearance. His complexion was bronzed, but on the beautifully white collar of his shirt there was a minute smudge of brown, as if he powdered his face. It occurred to him that Gole's normal complexion might be that of a Venusian.

He said, aloud, "Suppose I haven't?"

"Oh, dear. Well, Friend Egon, there are several courses open to me. We may have to try all of them. First, I could administer one of several drugs to you. Second I could subject you to a series of questions and note the responses on an electroencephalograph. Or third, I could let Minel go to work on you."

Egon looked from Gole to the moustached man, who was leaning against the wall with his arms folded, smiling. All at once, he began to feel rather frightened. It had never seemed likely that anyone would try to get something from him against his will : why should it ? The world of the Study Centres was a world of social responsibility in which every person knew his place, did his work, and never voluntarily performed an act that would harm a fellow student. But Gole and Minel were outside that world ; they belonged to another way of life, another way of thinking.

He said, in an attempt to be rational, "Look here, why is this thing I've got so important to you ? I don't see—"

"It's none of your business, Friend," Gole broke in. "All that concerns you is that I want it. And I don't like things to stand in the way of what I want."

Egon stiffened. "I don't like being threatened," he said, angrily.

Gole motioned with his head. At that, Minel stepped forward and seized Egon by the wrist.

"Now, just a minute—" Egon began.

The next moment, an excruciating pain shot up his arm. He staggered, and while he was off-balance, Minel hit him on the jaw. He fell against the divan and caught at it to steady himself.

Minel bent close to him. He caught, incongruously, a scent of perfume. "Take it easy, dearie," the thug said, gently. "You'll fall."

Egon tried to get to his feet. Minel stepped away and took out a rod about the size of a pencil. A cable twisted from the back of it, disappearing into the thug's pocket. From the other end, a slender, flexible wire sprang. Without warning, Minel slapped the wire across Egon's cheek.

The archaeologist felt a stab of blinding agony run through his jaw and down his neck. It was like a hundred toothaches, a thousand neuralgias. It was so violent and unexpected that he lost his breath.

Once again, Minel raked the thing across his face, and then his neck. He heard a hoarse screaming and realized that it was himself, but he couldn't stop.

Minel glanced towards the desk. Gole was resting on his elbows and there was a smile of pure, perfect delight on his face.

Egon managed to drag himself to a sitting position on the floor. *He likes it*, he thought with horror, staring at Gole. *He could have had what he wanted by drugs or hypnosis, but he preferred it this way because he likes it!*

As if in answer to his thought, Gole said, "You see, my dear Friend, it would be better for you to co-operate. I like people to give me what I want *voluntarily*. Drugs, for example, are so—so objective."

He crooked a finger. Minel moved close again and Egon, without being able to help himself, cringed away. But the thug grabbed him, hauled him to his feet, and propelled him towards the desk.

"Have you had enough?" Gole asked.

Egon was holding his jaw which burned like fire. He gasped, "You won't get anything out of me with this—this disgusting—primitive—"

"Don't approve of the *argumentum ad baculum*, eh?" Gole chuckled. "Now, let's be reasonable. I know who went through your hotel room. He didn't find what I want. Obviously, you had it on you."

He opened a drawer and took out a box, which he emptied on the desk in front of him. "Here are the contents of your pockets," he said. "Wallet—I assure you we haven't touched your money or papers—pens, notebooks, change purse, a

pocket torch, an antique silver coin, a comb, a knife, a few other odds and ends."

He dropped his voice, looking up at Egon. "I could rip all these things to bits," he said. "But I'd rather have it the easy way. Besides, the thing I want might be damaged. I can't take that chance. Now, you needn't say a word. All you have to do is point. You'll be released at once. The cheque I showed you will be handed to you, and another ten thousand added to it."

It was born in upon Egon that he was caught in something larger, more nightmarish, than he had imagined. Twenty thousand man-hours! Whoever Gole was, whatever was behind him, money was the least of his concerns. With one corner of his mind he wondered desperately what could make Faxon's photo of his son so inconceivably desirable.

But the greater part of his mind blazed with anger. There was something indecent in the very thought of someone tossing away twenty thousand *emmas* so lightly—almost as indecent as the callousness with which they tortured him. And the torture itself was an outrage beyond belief. Never in his life had Egon been *forced* to do anything. He realized that he could not give in to it. These men might well kill him. It was clear that they understood only two grounds of discussion: violence and bribery. But he recognised just as clearly that to accept either of those alternatives would mean the abandonment of all that he lived by: the ideas of human dignity, honesty, and honour.

He clenched his teeth. "Go to hell," he said.

Gole's face hardened. "I'll give you ten seconds to reconsider," he said. "One thing we've learned from the past. The best methods are the simple, direct ones. I'll hand you over to Minel. And I assure you, in less than an hour you'll talk. It will be an agreeable hour for me."

Egon knew with an inward shudder that this was true. If he was certain of anything, it was that he could not physically stand another fifteen minutes of that burning, furious pain. Desperately, he caught hold of the edge of the desk, his mind groping wildly for a chance of escape.

"Wait a minute," he said. "You can't—"

"Yes I can. Minel!" said Gole, sharply.

Egon was not aware of any conscious decision. Under his fingers lay a deep, ornamental moulding along the edge of the desk. He gripped it with his fingers and heaved. The desk

caught the other off-balance as he leaned back in his chair ; he was toppled over with the desk on top of him. Egon sprang to the windows and dove headfirst through.

Glass showered about him as he landed sprawling in a patch of moss and rolled into a clump of bushes, dazed and almost senseless. Above him, he heard muffled shouts. Then a dull report sounded and he heard a whining yowl in the air over his head.

Someone caught him by the arms and dragged him to his feet. A voice whispered, " Can you walk ?"

He nodded, speechless.

" Get him to the car," said the voice. " Derek's covering from the other side. Quick !"

He was hustled through the shrubbery. Beyond, beneath a couple of feathery trees stood a sand-coloured helicar. He was pushed in. The door slammed. Egon collapsed against the cushions. Through the transparent roof he caught confused glimpses of streets, of a tunnel, of a vertical shaft up which they shot, then of dark streets lined with warehouses. The car dropped to a halt in a dim alley. Egon was pulled out. He tried to look more closely at his captors, but they wore sand-hoods that masked their faces. He could only see that one was extraordinarily short, like a child, or a Martian. He was hurried up a short flight of stairs, through a dark room full of office furniture and into what seemed a closet. A door slid open. A flood of sudden light blinded him. He stood squinting, and then he was pushed into the room that lay beyond.

Chapter IV

He found himself in a small but trim apartment. Three walls bore huge stereo-murals of Earth scenes : snowy mountain peaks and dark forests, with the glint of the sea in the distance. A large and complex filing machine, its rows of lenses glittering in the light, completely covered the fourth wall.

" Sit down, please," someone said.

He fell into the nearest chair. His new captors removed their hoods and he was able to see their faces.

One was the diplomatic courier from the liner, whom Martin had known as Hatchet (or possibly Ratchet). Now, however, he was dressed in dark, close-fitting coveralls that became him better than the foppish clothes he had worn. The second was a

four-foot Martian, his smooth, swollen head shaking with a constant tremor, his chinless face even more lugubrious than usual. The third was a woman.

She was nearly as tall as he. A cap of black hair cut straight above level brows, a tan complexion almost translucent that showed the pink of health, clear grey eyes, determined, calm, and observant. She looked like a rocket pilot, and when she spoke her voice had the authoritative ring of a first officer.

"Feeling better, Friend Egon?" she asked. "Abel, give him a drink."

"You know my name?" Egon said.

"Yes." She took a glass from the diplomatic type and handed it to Egon. "Don't be afraid," she said. "It's only brandy."

Egon drank and let his head sink back against the back of the chair. He was conscious of great fatigue; it had been a long night.

"Gole was not easy on you," the Martian said, in fluty tones. "He is a rough man."

"What's it all about?" Egon asked. "Who is Gole? Who was Faxon? What was the—" He hesitated, reminding himself that he did not know these people.

The three exchanged glances. Abel said, "Better tell him, Lissa. He'll be easier to work with."

The girl nodded. "Yes, I agree. Look here, Friend. I know that all this must be very confusing for you, being kidnapped and beaten and threatened. I know you're wondering how we come into the picture. Well, the fact is that Faxon, the man on the P-44, was a drug-runner."

Egon sat up. "What?"

"That's right. Faxon was carrying twenty thousand *emmas* worth of a rare drug called *silbar*. He was to pass it on to a contact man at Tanggra, who in turn would deliver it to Gole. When Faxon realized that our man, Abel here, had him spotted on the ship, he passed the container on to you. We don't know how it was disguised—in fact," she added, glancing sidelong at Abel with a momentary tightening of her lips, "we didn't realize it had been passed on to you until afterward."

"Oh," Egon said. He looked at Abel and said, "So it was you who searched my hotel room?"

The other nodded. "Sorry, chum," he said. "It was in the line of duty."

"I see."

"Now, Friend," Lissa went on, crisply, "you know the whole story. If you'll just hand over the item Faxon gave you, we'll be grateful. In fact, I think we can even arrange for the reward to be paid to you."

Egon rubbed his chin thoughtfully. In only a few hours he had become warier, less trustful. He said, "So you're agents of the government? Narcotics squad, or something like that? Naturally, you've got credentials."

"Naturally," said the girl, brightly. "I'll show them to you if you're not satisfied."

"I'm *not* satisfied. In the first place, the thing Faxon gave me wasn't exactly designed to hold twenty-thousand *emmas* worth of drugs."

Lissa bit her lip. Abel put in, "That drug can be hidden in a very small space, Friend."

Egon began to feel, once again, an unaccustomed anger boiling within him. He controlled himself, however, and said, "I somehow have the feeling you people think of scientists as dreamers, with no practical sense. Nevertheless, a few practical objections to your story occur to me. For instance, doesn't it seem odd to you that Gole would offer me twenty-thousand *emmas* for a package of drugs worth twenty-thousand *emmas*?"

They were silent. He went on, "And it seems to me odd that a narcotics agent should kill a drug-runner rather than arrest him. You did kill Faxon, didn't you?" he said, staring at Abel.

The man's lip twisted. "You're boxed," he said. "Faxon fell off the seat and was killed accidentally."

"It's funny," said Egon, without humour, "but I don't believe that. Do you?" he said to Lissa. "I heard this man—Abel—talking to Faxon a short time before the accident. And I suppose Professor Thorp's accidental death came out of the same box? I was supposed to deliver the item to Thorp, not to a contact man in Tanggra."

The Martian uttered the peculiar neighing chuckle of his race, fluttering his long, six-fingered hands as if they were streamers. "You had better tell him the truth, Lissa," he said. "This man is not so stupid."

The girl blushed. Then she pulled up a low chair and sat down. "I never said he was stupid," she replied. And fixing her large grey eyes on Egon, she said, "Why are you so anxious to know, Friend? Can't you take my word for it that the

thing we want belongs to Earth? It may mean the difference between life and death for all of us. It really won't matter if you know what it is or why we want it."

Egon shrugged. "It's very easy to explain," he said. "I'm a scientist. I've been brought up to believe in certain things, among them the principle of free choice and voluntary submission to the things that are good for society. I have never been asked to do anything without reason. I've never been asked to take things on trust; rather, to put them to the test and make sure of the answers."

"Well, I don't like to change. I'll tell you this, frankly. I didn't like Gole's methods of treating me. I don't see why I should accept you any more freely or quickly than I accept Gole. You haven't been honest with me."

"Remember, Egon," said the Martian. "We did rescue you from Gole."

"I don't think I owe you anything for that. You helped me because you want the same thing he wants. If I don't like your story I'm going directly to the C/I and let them take over."

Lissa said, in a hard voice, "You may never get to the C/I, Friend."

Egon bristled. But the Martian said, "She is speaking not of us, but of Gole. He will be looking for you."

Once more, Egon felt the touch of fear; his jaws and throat still burned from the touch of that dreadful whip.

"Go on," he said.

Lissa clasped her hands in her lap. "Do you listen to the papers?" she said.

"Not very often."

"You know what the Teepees are?"

"The Traditionalist Party?"

"Yes. As you may know, they maintain an Opposition in the Central Council, and they've been legislating for an end to the Martian Guardianship. Their position is that it is the right and duty of humanity—spell that with a capital H—to use all the resources of the planets. They claim the Guardians are preventing the full use of Mars for the benefit of mankind."

"I know that," Egon said. "I heard it not long ago from one of their own leaders, as a matter of fact."

Abel chuckled. "Ackroyd. That's right."

"Well," said Lissa, "here's something you don't know, because Ackroyd was keeping it a secret. Their next step is

going to be an all-out drive for the extermination of the native Martians. The first gun will be a statement that Martians aren't classifiable as human beings, but are an inferior race, a kind of mammalian sub-species, or however a biologist would put it."

"But—that's absurd!" Egon burst out. "It's immoral, and totally unscientific. Martians don't—" He hesitated.

"—don't look like you," the Martian put in. "Is that it?"

"Yes."

"Some of your people find us repulsive," said the Martian, with what passed for a smile. "I know that. Nevertheless, it is true that we are biologically almost identical with your species. But so are other of the lower orders: gibbons, gorillas, chimpanzees, even lemurs."

"Exactly," said Lissa. "The Teepees are going to come out into the open. They'll claim that no one would set up a Guardianship for a planet full of monkeys."

Egon drew his brows together. "Do you mean," he said, "that they are seriously saying it is right and moral to take a—a whole planet away from its inhabitants?"

"Right and moral have nothing to do with it," she said, drily. "Another thing you don't know is that nine of the ten leaders of the Teepees are also representatives of some of the most powerful interests on the three planets. They include ferrous and non-ferrous metals, synthetics, radiation, transport, and chemicals. What's more, they are all leaders in the Venusian clans—several of them by adoption."

"Sure," Abel put in. "As far as they're concerned, Study Centres and Martian natives are just so much cobweb. And you know what you do with cobweb? Brush it aside."

"He puts it crudely," said Lissa, "but that's about the size of it. All the talk about the Future of Humanity and the Progress of Mankind is a smoke-screen. Once let them sell the idea that Martians are only inferior animals, and—well, you might have the International Wildlife Federation complaining, but the Guardianship would be set aside. Most Martians aren't like Rhyllon, here, as you know. He's a Centre Martian. The others are gentle; they'd be swept aside and the planet would be plundered for the benefit of the Eight Clans. As for your Study Centres, how long do you think they'd be allowed to remain in existence as free and

independent centres of research that don't produce direct profits for the Clans?"

"Professor Thorp saw it coming. And he threw in with them."

"Thorp?" Egon said, slowly.

"Yes. He was a coward."

"No. Don't say that. Who knows what they put him through?" Egon shuddered. "I can understand. I've had a taste of their persuasion." Then he looked up. "But surely we aren't so primitive that commonsense has vanished? Even though many irrational people may fall for the argument, surely the Council will never vote out the Guardianships on so slender a pretext?"

"Ah, that's where Gole comes in," said Lissa. "He is a member of one of the most powerful of the Clans. And he is what they used to call, long ago, an *agent provocateur*. It's his job to arrange an 'incident.' We don't know what it will be or when it will happen, but we know that he holds all the threads in his hands. Members of the Council, enough for a voting majority, have been bribed or blackmailed or threatened. Gole's little 'incident' will, we think, provide the spark to touch off a carefully arranged popular demonstration and then the carrying of a bill to the vote."

"We don't know who these councilmen are, but their names and the details about them—that is, what blackmail was used on them, or the amounts of the bribes—were what Faxon was bringing to Mars. I imagine that as soon as Gole had those lists in his hands, he'd have gone on with his 'incident.'"

Egon drew a long breath. "They're—this is incredible. It's the most inhumanly antisocial operation I ever heard of."

Lissa eyed him soberly. "You don't realize how fully antisocial they are," she said. "Gole could have squeezed out of you all he wanted to know by means of drugs, for instance. But he wanted you to crawl, he wanted you to scream out the information under torture, or better still give it to him in exchange for a payment so that he could always have a grip on you. If you hadn't jumped through that window, you'd have been a lost soul forever—either way."

Abel lit a cigarette, and added, "You were upset about my using violence on poor old Faxon. You're like all the Study Centre types, you think everything can be settled by discussion. Did you try discussing the problem with Gole?"

Egon flushed. "We needn't get into a long theoretical argument now. Gole doesn't prove that men must return to the Dark Ages. What about you three? You're secret agents, aren't you?"

"Never mind what we are," Lissa said. "I've told you enough so that you can see we're in favour of the Guardianship and against Gole and his backers. Now, then. You can decide, can't you?"

"All right," said Egon. "He gave me a photo of his son."

"His son? Faxon hasn't any family," said Abel.

"Never mind that. Of course he hasn't," Lissa snapped.

"How big was this picture? Any frame?"

"About two by three. No frame. It was well-worn, so I imagine that when Gole saw it he thought it was mine. It's ironic that his own man disguised it so well . . ."

"Um. And he still has it?"

"I suppose so. He has all my belongings."

"And you didn't tell him what it was?"

Egon shook his head.

Lissa sprang to her feet like a cat. She strode to the filing machine and snapped down the switch of a communicator. "Hsien," she said. "Is Derek with you? Good. Get right back to LS8. It's a photo of a boy. In a wallet. Bring the whole works. Yes—if you have to. Otherwise, keep it quiet. I'll send Abel to take the other street."

She broke the connection and whirled on Abel. "You heard me," she said. "Get going. I told Hsien to shoot if necessary. But I think if we have that list—"

"Are you staying here?" Abel asked, sliding back the door.

"Yes, I'd better. Get it back to me as quick as you can."

Abel nodded, and left. Ryhllon said, "Shall I stay also?"

"For the time being."

"What about *him*?" Ryhllon jerked his head at Egon. "It may not be safe for him to go."

Lissa closed the door. "You're right. You'd better remain for a while, Friend Egon," she said. "At least, until this is over. Then we can see about protecting you from Gole—if we still have to."

Egon stood up gingerly. The pain in his face had subsided to a dull ache, and he was feeling more like himself. "I wonder," he said, "if I could have another drink. I think I need it . . ."

Lissa got him one. The Martian had folded himself up in a corner and was resting, as his people did, with both eyes open and his slender ear-stalks erect instead of drooping. Egon took a few steps about the room and sipped his brandy; then he turned to look at Lissa. She had thrown herself into a chair with her ankles crossed. Their eyes met.

He said, "You're a pilot, aren't you?"

"I was. Not of an interplanetary liner, though. That's for old ladies who can stand the boredom. I was captain of a patrol vessel, one of those high-powered, two place jobs."

"Oh. How did you get involved in this—side-line?"

For a moment, her eyes flashed. Then she smiled, and when she did so her face softened and he could see that she was really very beautiful. "It's not a side-line," she said, quietly. "My brother was in it. He was killed by a man like Gole."

"I see."

"Do you, Egon? For people like Gole, it isn't only the Martians who are a lesser race. It's everyone who isn't part of the clique, who isn't a clan member, everyone who will work for them, all the boot-lickers . . . and of course, all the followers. They have plenty of followers; people who accept any authoritative, loud voice without questioning it, people who believe in the phrase 'the lower orders,' people who want to spread humanity and its gospels everywhere at the expense of all other life."

"I suppose you're right," Egon said. "But look here, we've been able to establish a decent sort of life here in our Study Centres. Why can't—"

"I know what you're going to say. Yes, it might be true for all of us today. But on Venus, things were different. The tremendous physical difficulties to be faced and the small size of the original colony, fostered the growth of tight work units based on family groups. At first, this was fine, but as years passed these groups became clans, and as you know the heads of the Eight Clans, the original pioneers, became autocrats with almost supreme power. Supreme power is a dangerous thing, Egon. It's like a taste of *silbar*—there really is such a drug, by the way. A few ounces and you want more, and more. Addicts will kill anyone to get the stuff."

"And you think the Venusians—the Teepee Leaders—won't hesitate—"

"They won't stop at anything. Not even war."

Egon drank the remainder of his brandy. "Aren't you afraid of that?" he said. "Doesn't your kind of violence, and theirs, when they clash, lead to war?"

"No, Egon. We're trying to prevent a war, by stopping people like Gole. What about you? Were you passive? Or did you jump through a window?"

He put down his glass, and sighed. After a moment, he said, "Lissa."

"Yes?"

"When this is all over . . ."

"Yes?"

"Well, do you ever have dinner with anyone who isn't a secret agent?"

Lissa turned red. Before she could reply, however, the door behind her slid open. Gole stepped through, holding a flat, ugly-looking Bolsen fitted with a silencer.

"You should never leave your base unguarded, my dear," he said smugly.

Lissa and Egon froze. Rhyllon's head came up and his ear-stalks dropped. The slight movement drew Gole's attention.

"Well, well," he said. "Got a house pet, have you?" He jerked the muzzle of the gun. "Stand up, you."

Slowly, Rhyllon got to his feet. He was no higher than Gole's elbow. He raised his hands in the air. Then Gole, with a chill smile, shot him.

The Bolsen made no more noise than the click of a door lock, but Rhyllon's body flew apart, literally disintegrated before their eyes and was plastered over the stereo-mural behind it.

Gole swung the muzzle towards Egon, and the archaeologist braced himself. But the other only said, "Come on, move," and stepped aside. Beyond him in the doorway, were two more men armed with magnum hand-guns.

Lissa cast one glance at Egon. Her face was deathly white. Egon himself was shaking with the reaction to Rhyllon's death, but managed to hold down his quaking stomach. Lissa went to the door and Egon followed, with Gole behind him.

They were taken down the dark stair to a helicar that waited below, and pushed into the back seat. One of Gole's men sat on the jump seat with his gun on his knee, pointed at them. Gole and the other man got in the front and the car swept away. In minutes, it had emerged from a tunnelled ramp on

to a flight stage. There was no one about. Egon was astonished to find that the sky was still dark, although the east was greying; he had expected it to be daylight. He had passed through the stage of fatigue and was wide awake, unnaturally alert.

On the flight stage they were hustled from the car directly into a private jet. They were strapped into seats, side by side, with Gole and one man behind them and the other man in front. Minel was sitting in the pilot's bucket, and as they passed him he turned and smiled broadly at Egon. "Hello, dearie," he said. "Back to the fold, eh?" The next instant, with a roar, they were in the air.

Chapter V

They headed south. The dark red-brown of the tundra unrolled below them, with here and there a lonely monolith pointing to the sky, or a crumbling ring of stones, pitted by sand, relics of the long-vanished civilization which had left only the burrow-villages with their placid, small inhabitants.

Egon was very conscious of the warmth and nearness of Lissa, so close to him that their thighs and arms touched. She sat motionless, staring at her hands in her lap; then, as if aware of his gaze, turned her head.

"I'm sorry," she said, in an almost inaudible voice. "It seems to be over."

"Shut up," said Gole, behind them.

Egon moved his hand to touch hers. They did not speak again.

The ship slowed. Glancing through the window, Egon saw that they were above a low, eroded chain of hills that lay some three hundred miles from Station One. Even as he watched, the ship dropped. He saw that there was a low building in a fold of the hills, with a concrete stage nearby. In a few moments they had landed, and he and Lissa were marched to the building.

They went through a corridor into a large vestibule with an escalator in it. Gole went ahead; beneath the escalator he slid open a circular door and led them into a library. One whole wall contained a theatre screen. On other walls there were books, including some old-fashioned bound ones, a

newspaper screen, a projector, and a small private bar. There were no windows in *this* room, Egon noted.

Gole dismissed all but Minel, and then sat himself in a deep chair and leaned back.

He said, wagging his head playfully, "You must be more careful how you play with desks, Friend Egon. You gave me quite a bruise on the tummy."

He stroked his stomach as he spoke. Then, in the same tone, he said, "Your well-timed escape was something of a surprise, you see. So you aren't quite the innocent you pretended to be? Well, well. You took me in, I admit it."

Lissa said, "You're making a mistake, Gole. He has nothing to do with us."

Gole raised his eyebrows. "Dear me," he said. "Don't tell me my dear friend Lissa is interested in the young man. But how delightful. Only it doesn't change matters."

He sat up straight. "Look here, Egon," he said. "I'm a busy man, but I'm also a practical man. You're shrewd and smart. I never guessed you were working with them. I like smart people. I'm going to give you a chance to change sides."

"Oh?" said Egon. Involuntarily, he rubbed his jaw. The pain had quite gone, by now. "Go ahead," he said.

"You know what's at stake. But you don't seem to have realized that the game's over. The end is already determined. You can't stop it. We're going to win. Only a fool—like *her*—would doubt it.

"Oh, don't look so hurt, my boy," he added. "You can have her, too. A few minor adjustments in her psyche . . . You throw in with us, and you can be Chief of your Study Centre. We need bright, willing, co-operative young men. Doesn't that sound attractive?"

"And all I have to do—?"

"Well, I'd like to know what it was that Faxon gave you," Gole murmured. He got up and took from his jacket pocket a flat container. Tapping it against the palm of one hand, he continued, "It's one of the things in here. But that's secondary, my boy. We're at the jump-off. The next few days, or hours, will see the whole thing settled whether you tell me or not. Your telling me would be a, shall we say? an earnest of your good intentions."

He licked his lips. "You know what these Martian house-pets say: 'From the hall of life there is one door, to the hall

of death.' That's very good now I come to think of it. Yes, well, we're at the one door. There isn't any other, not for you."

Egon's knees shook under him. He was tempted—tempted and frightened. No man likes to look at his own extinction, and Egon was fond of life. Before, it had been a mere fear of physical pain that drove him, now it was the grin of death.

Then he remembered Rhyllon, and knew that however he decided they would have no mercy on him. He looked at Lissa, standing straight and brave, with her arms folded; she returned his look with one of her own, darting as an arrow.

He said, "Not interested, Gole."

Gole's lip twisted. "A sentimentalist," he remarked. "Go ahead, Minel."

The thug must have been standing directly behind Egon, for before the archaeologist could move he had been seized and slammed into a hard chair. He tried to rise, and sank instead into darkness.

He was a child of three or four. In another room, he could hear his mother singing. There were some wire cages on a bench, and Egon knew he was not to touch them. There were small white animals in one of them: mice, that his father used for something called "speriments." No one was watching him. He pried open the door of the cage and one of the little white creatures came out, twitching its pink nose, moving quickly and deftly as if on wheels. It darted to the edge of the table and leaped to the floor.

Egon wanted to stop it. He ran forward and stamped on it. He felt the tiny bones crunch underfoot, and felt the sickening give of its flesh. It squeaked once. And he could not get it off his shoe.

The memory vanished. Then, horribly, it began again, only now he was Egon the man and Egon the child, both at once. The mouse ran across the floor. He stamped on it. His gorge rose. He heard someone say, "Will you tell? Come on, talk." The mouse ran across the floor again. He stamped on it. And again.

He struggled wildly to push the nightmare out of his mind. He tasted salt on his lips. But once again, it was as if forceps were inserted into his brain, remorselessly plucking out the memory and exposing it to him.

All at once, he was awake and conscious. He was strapped in a chair. Minel was sitting opposite him with a white box on his lap from which a slender, glittering wire led to a band about Egon's brows. The thug was smiling fixedly. As Egon looked, Minel very slowly toppled forward and fell over the box. The back of his head was flattened and sticky and dark, as if it had been punched in.

Egon squeezed his eyes shut and opened them again. The image of the mouse appeared to be superimposed on Minel ; then it vanished, as he pushed it out of his mind. His vision cleared. He saw Lissa, holding a small, dark-blue weapon, keeping it trained on Gole, who stood motionless, his mouth partly open.

Lissa said, "Egon. Are you all right?"

"I—I will be," he replied.

Slowly, she backed up until she could reach one of the straps that held his arms. She unbuckled it, still keeping the gun pointed at Gole.

"Undo the other," she said. "Can you walk?"

Fumbling with numb fingers, Egon got the other strap open and pulled the band from his head. "I'll walk," he said, hoarsely.

Lissa said to Gole, "Stand still, you. Don't touch that buzzer. Don't move at all." And to Egon, "Lock the door."

He staggered toward it, fell against the wall, slid the bolt to lock the door. At the same time, he heard a distant bell begin ringing.

"Lissa," he gasped. "It was an alarm."

"Doesn't matter," she said. "Can't be helped. Gole, give me Egon's wallet out of that box. Make it fast."

Gole's face was the colour of weak coffee and milk, his Venusian pallor showing through the makeup. He opened the container and drew out the wallet.

"You'll never get out of here," he said, flatly.

As if to put a cap on his words, a crash sounded from the other side of the door. They heard a yell, and then two shots, one on top of the other. A neat round hole appeared in the tough plastic of the door, and the news screen shattered and fell tinkling to the floor.

Involuntarily, Lissa turned her head. Gole stepped away a pace and touched the huge theatre screen. It opened and Gole slipped through the crack thus revealed.

Egon pushed with his hands against the wall at his back, and somehow hurled himself across the room. He got one foot wedged into the opening. Lissa stooped over the body of Minel and came up with a silenced Bolsen pistol.

"Go on," she said. "After him."

Egon forced himself through, and she followed. The screen swung back into place. They were in a narrow corridor dimly lighted by a thread of fluorescence along the ceiling.

Egon stood still for a moment, rubbing his face.

"Are you all right?" Lissa asked, again.

"I'm all right. That—devil!"

"I know. I heard . . ." She handed him the Bolsen. "You know how to use one of these?"

"Yes. I've fired them for practice." He took it a bit gingerly, fitting his hand inside the cup-shaped grip.

"I'll keep my blackjack," she said. "I know what it can do. I had it hidden. Gole was so intent on watching Minel, he forgot to watch me. He has a great capacity for enjoyment—of a certain kind."

They went down the corridor. It descended steeply, and Egon was the first to notice the change: the walls and floor, from dull sheets of metal became stone. The air turned chill and musty.

"It's an ancient tunnel," he said. "If I only had some equipment!"

"It's just as well you haven't," said Lissa. "I must say, I admire the single-mindedness of you students."

The thread of light ended. They no longer needed it, however, for ahead of them a pale glow was visible. As they hastened on, it grew a little brighter; they emerged at length into a large square room, then into a circular chamber with the open dark blue sky far above them, like a bull's-eye. The chamber was shaped like a caisson, some forty feet across. Its walls, instead of stone, were made of some black substance that gleamed in the light like volcanic glass. It was two hundred feet, at least, to the opening above.

"Dead end," said Lissa.

"Then where's Gole?" asked Egon. "He couldn't just have flown—"

"But he did." Lissa pointed. In the centre of the caisson lay a tarpaulin, and near it were fuel tanks, a tool bench, and a couple of spare tyres.

"He must have kept a helicar here," she said. "It's a fine back door." She looked up at the shining black walls. "I wonder if he built this for himself?"

Egon shook his head. "I've never seen one before, but I'll bet anything it's Martian—and very old. The passage is certainly their work. This may have been a well, or a mine shaft."

He rapped the wall lightly with his knuckles. "Well, what do we do now?"

"Go back," Lissa said briskly. "We can't climb these walls. I suspect that Gole never told his boys about this place—if he had, we'd have had them on our heels by now. There are two of us, with guns. We'll have to try to fight our way out somehow."

She took him by the arm and looked straight into his eyes. "Are you afraid?" she said.

Egon smiled at her. "You know," he said, trying to speak lightly, "you're really a very pretty girl, as well as being efficient. Sure, I'm afraid. All this is a little out of my line. But a scientist ought to be adaptable, don't you think?"

She blushed, and grinned. "You're fresh, too. Come on, this is hardly the time or place—" She swung away.

Egon followed her into the large square chamber that adjoined the well. He stopped for a moment to look about him. There were shelves here, of the same black substance which formed the caisson walls, compartments which must once have had doors, now vanished. The floor was covered with crumbled heaps of dust and gritty sand in which glittered particles of metal, or glass. Egon slapped helplessly at his pockets.

"Damn!" he said. "Gole has everything of mine, even my pocket torch. Haven't you got a light, Lissa? Just for a minute."

She began to say something, then checked herself and handed him a tiny cigarette lighter. He snapped it on and leaned close to peer at the walls. There were faint carvings, bas-reliefs that covered all of one wall, and beneath them worn hieroglyphs cut into the stone. Egon stared for a long moment, until at last Lissa said impatiently, "Come on, Egon. I sympathize with you, but we must get going."

"You don't understand," he said in a hushed voice. "This is—this is unbelievable!"

"I'm sure. But Gole is on his way somewhere with those lists. First things first."

"First things !" said Egon, and began to laugh. Then he checked himself. "Of course. You're right." He returned the lighter to her. "Let's go, then. I've seen enough for now, in any case. I'll tell you one thing, though. We know the ancient Martians got to the Moon. Well, this place was a rocket launching shaft."

"Tell me later," Lissa said. "We've wasted enough time already."

They panted up the long tunnel. They came to the panel that opened into Gole's library. Egon whispered, "Think we can get it open from this side?"

Lissa nodded. There was a simple latch on one side of the panel. "Have that gun ready," she said.

She put her hand on the latch. Very softly and slowly she pulled the panel inward. Egon pressed close behind her, the Bolsen raised.

Lissa uttered an exclamation. Egon was on the point of firing, but she caught his arm. "No !" she said.

There were two men in the library. One was a Chinese, the other Lissa's partner, Abel.

"We cleaned them," Abel said. "It was a short fight but a merry one. Derek's searching the upper floors, looking for you."

"I'll get him," said the Chinese, whose name was Hsien. He stepped to the door and whistled shrilly.

"How did you find us?" Lissa asked.

Abel scratched his nose. "One of Gole's men was in the apartment when we went to search it. He told us."

Egon opened his mouth and closed it again. He decided he didn't want to know any details. Hsien returned with Derek, who was a chunky, blonde man in a high-necked coverall. Both he and Hsien carried short-barreled automatic weapons.

Lissa said, "Gole got away. And he knows the list is in the wallet ; he's got it with him. I'm afraid I made a mess of things at this end."

"Wait a minute," Egon put in. "I've just had a thought. What's today's date?"

"You got an appointment?" said Derek.

"I've just remembered something. It might be useful. What is the date?"

"Fourteenth of March," said Abel.

"Faxon told me he'd be at Tanggra until the tenth May, Earth time. That's today. You said that as soon as he got the lists, Gole would go ahead with his—incident. I wonder if this could be the day set for it, and Tanggra—"

Abel snapped his fingers. "Councilman Ackroyd ! That's one of the places he was to visit. He was going to the Martian village outside Tanggra."

"Have you got the car ?" Lissa asked sharply.

"Of course," said Abel. "But there's a jet outside as well."

"That's right. They won't need it any more. Let's go !"

Chapter VI

With Lissa at the controls, the jet streaked northward towards the region which had once been known as Syrtis Major. Below, the ground was a blur of browns and reds as they passed over the miles of tundra : dry, sandy earth and low shrubs, really giant mosses. Then came a sea of sand, tan and grey, blown by the wind, and after that a rolling country of stunted plants that resembled heather. They flew above a range of broken hills and saw below them the shining surface of a salt flat. This was Templeton Marsh, and on its far shore was Tanggra Study Centre, a cluster of low, pastel coloured laboratories and living units, among which were the web of a radio-telescope, latticed towers bearing power lines, and an observatory dome. A couple of miles beyond lay a straggling forest of spindly thorn-trees, and on the fringe of this forest was a Martian village.

Martian villages had neither name nor government. In them, perhaps nine-tenths of the natives lived. The thorn-trees furnished abundant fresh water, for which they were tapped much as maple trees on some parts of Earth are tapped for syrup. Edible mosses grew all about, and stunted bushes bearing fluffy seed-heads that could be combed out and made into thread, for weaving. The mild, quiet people dwelt in burrows in the earth ; they had few crafts, and no art but that of singing. Their lives were uneventful save for occasional sandstorms, featureless as most of the surface of the planet itself, peaceful and short. Their only connection with the past civilization of their planet was that their villages were built near the sites of ancient ruins. Whatever the former uses of these empty, underground constructions, they were now regarded as

sacred places : a flat, stone-flagged floor was called the Hall of Life, and the labyrinthine lower passages reached through a dolmen, or doorway, were called the Hall of Death. Beyond this, no student had yet determined what, if any, were the religious beliefs or rites of the Martians.

While they were yet some distance from the village, Egon could see that it was the centre of unusual attraction. Helicars and larger planes were converging on the spot, and below, outside the village, they could see half-tracks parked amid a tangle of apparatus. Lissa brought the jet down and turned to Abel.

"Got some credentials?" she said.

He took out a sheaf of papers and sorted out five. Three were newsmen's cards, the other two were diplomatic passes. He handed them round.

"These will get us close enough to spot trouble," Lissa remarked, giving one of the diplomatic passes to Egon.

They got out of the jet. People were already pressing towards the centre of the village where, before the stone dolmen that marked the entrance to the barrow, a stand had been erected. On it was a lectern which contained a prompting device and microphones and it was flanked by the cameras of the news reporters, which would broadcast three-dimensional solid pictures all over the planet, and by long-range television cameras which would project the scene to Earth. Reporters swarmed everywhere, as well as officials of the Guardianship, visitors from various Study Centres, and, moving softly and slowly in large groups, Martians from the village itself.

Abel, Hsien, and Derek disappeared. Lissa and Egon walked slowly towards the stand. When they had shown their passes and pressed into the very first row, Abel rejoined them. Egon noticed an unexpected facet to the man : as he forced his way through the crowd he shoved against the humans, but when he came to groups of Martians he bowed politely and waited for them to move to let him through. Perhaps he, too, remembered Rhyllon, Egon said to himself.

Abel said, "Not a sign of Gole."

"Keep looking," said Lissa.

"I've got Derek on the right and Hsien on the left. I'm moving back. You stay here." With that, Abel left them, nodding and smiling as if he had said something amusing.

The announcer was already speaking. “. . . a great pleasure indeed to introduce Ralph Ackroyd, Conclaveman for Nether Zealand, distinguished member of the Traditional Fair Play Party, and member of the Central Council of Earth. Friend Ackroyd.”

A technician turned up the sound of artificial applause mingled with the strains of the Council Anthem. Ackroyd, his white mane bristling above his florid face, strode up to the stand and bowed his head. The sound faded.

“Friends,” Ackroyd began, “I am speaking to you from the sands of Mars. Many, indeed by far the greater number of you, have never experienced what I am now experiencing ; the cool, dry air, the sky darker than our own, the bracing quality of an atmosphere that is, to all purposes, virgin and fresh. It is, in fact, why I have come here—to experience this for myself. Not to acquire by second-hand, for that isn’t my nature. No, Friends, to see, taste, hear, and learn at first-hand, and then to report to you.

“Before me—you can see them when the cameras scan the crowd—are Martians. Not Marsmen, not human beings who live and work on this planet, but Martians, natives of this spot. Think of it : living beings, unallied to us, strange and different, born of another earth. It is not surprising that our first contacts with them produced wonder and awe, a desire to meet them on equal terms. And later, when we found them incapable of such equality, a desire to protect and cherish them. Hence, the Guardianship was established, a worthy body, pledged to protect these—creatures.”

He paused, and his bright little eyes sparkled. “Yes,” he said, “I repeat that word. Creatures. I have come here to see them, to observe them, to meet them for myself and learn, if that is possible, the truth. And this is what I say advisedly, they are creatures but they are not men.

“Oh, my friends, I wish that you might stand here beside me and see them as I do. They have no homes ; this village is only called so by courtesy, for it consists of holes in the ground as you will see later. They have no government, no arts, no science, not even religion, that blessed faith which separates mankind from the beasts. They communicate, yes, as birds or dogs communicate. They are emotionless, passive, without the spark that is reason and intelligence. To look into their dull and gentle eyes is to know that they have no souls. They are not human beings.”

He held up a forefinger. “I repeat, not human beings.”

At that moment, Lissa caught Egon's arm. "Look," she whispered. "There's Gole."

Egon had seen him at the same time. He was standing within the shadow of the entrance to the barrow, just inside the stone pillars. His hands were buried in the pockets of his jacket, and he stood perfectly motionless, the handsome undistinguished features set in sober attentiveness. No one who saw him would ever remember what he looked like: he was the very archetype of the Man in a Crowd.

"Egon," Lissa said, in a very soft voice, "I have the most awful feeling. Do you remember what he said to you? 'From the hall of life there is one door, to the hall of death.' Then he laughed, and said that that was good, and he'd have to bear it in mind."

"Yes, I remember."

"I just realized what the 'incident' could be."

"What?"

"Don't you see where Ackroyd's speech is going? He's going to wind up with the conclusion that the Martians are an inferior order, a lesser race. He's going to call for their extermination, just as I told you. What do you think would happen if, after he asked for an end to the Guardianship, he was killed by a mysterious shot fired from the entrance to a Martian ruin?"

Egon glanced at her. "Are you serious? You mean the members of his own party would kill him in cold blood for the sake of—"

He stopped. From his own limited experience, he could guess that no sentiment of loyalty or love would stir men like Gole.

He acted without thinking. He held up his hand and called in a loud, clear voice, "Just a moment, Councilman."

Ackroyd was used to hecklers. He stopped with a benign smile, and two burly C/I men began to move towards Egon.

"You and I travelled on the same liner," Egon shouted. "You told me you'd always be approachable—that I could come and talk to you—that you weren't like a certain Councilman I could name. Or have you forgotten already?"

Ackroyd said, "I certainly haven't forgotten, Friend Egon. Let him pass, please. I'd like to hear what he has to say."

"Thank you, Councilman," Egon said. "May I come up there?" Without waiting, taking advantage of the C/I men's hesitation, he jumped up on the stand.

"I'll be brief," he said. "I'm an archaeologist, as you know. And you know I'm not a crackpot. I haven't come to heckle you, Councilman. But there's one thing wrong with your speech. The Martians *are* human beings. What's more, I can prove it."

From the corner of his eyes, he saw Gole move. One hand began to emerge from his pocket.

Ackroyd, looking just a little flustered, said, "My dear young feller—"

He got no further. For Egon caught him round the neck and fell to the floor of the stand, dragging Ackroyd with him.

One of the C/I men sprang up on the platform, reaching for them. At the same instant, there was a faint click. The C/I man's head vanished in a bloody splash. His body fell sideways against the lectern and sent it crashing down.

Egon rolled free of Ackroyd and dropped off the back of the stand. A gout of sand and stone rose up beside him with a roar. He heard someone shout, "Don't shoot *him*, you fool!"

Egon saw Derek running towards the dolmen. Gole had gone. Egon leaped towards the stone doorway; he got there at the same time Derek did.

"Look out, damn it!" Derek panted. "He may be waiting just inside."

"Never mind," gasped Egon. "Got a torch? Give it to me. I know these ruins. You don't."

Behind him there were shouts and confusion. Derek, without another word, tossed him a pocket torch. He lighted it and darted inside the portals.

He had twice investigated this particular barrow. The long central passageway with numerous blind-alley branches led down to a chamber knee-deep in dust. From it, a dozen labyrinthine ways went out and one of them ultimately led to a shallow, bowl-shaped hollow in the forest. Egon did not doubt that Gole's helicar was there.

Fortunately, Gole was not waiting in ambush. Egon's torch cast a clear white light on the time-eaten walls. He could see deep tracks in the dust before him, and dust-motes floated thickly across the beam of his torch. He began to descend, and as he went the noise behind him faded. There was silence, and his pulse throbbed in his ears under the weight of the earth.

He advanced cautiously, throwing the light into the blind alleys which were rarely more than a few yards long. At last, he came to the entrance of the central cell. He had been counting his steps; when he came to the last bend in the passage, he snapped off the torch.

It was well that he did so. While he was still masked by the angle of the passage wall, he heard that deadly click, and in the utter darkness a faint greenish pencil of light appeared. Sparks flew from the stone and there was a ripping crack. Chips rattled about him, and one struck him on the cheek, stinging like a wasp.

Egon stood still in indecision, his fingers sweating within the grip of the Bolsen pistol. Then he moved forward a little way, lifted the light above his head and thrust it round the corner. He flashed it on, peering beneath it for a quick look, hoping that if Gole fired again the shot would go high.

In the circle of brightness he saw Gole. The man was half-crouching near one of the passages, the dust clinging to his legs and misting the air about him. He had a small torch in one hand, his Bolsen in the other. When the light came on he lifted the pistol but this time there was no sound. His face convulsed, and with a curse he threw the heavy gun at the light. It clanged against the stone. Gole turned and made for the tunnel behind him.

It took a moment for Egon to react to the fact that the Bolsen's propellant charge must have failed, and that Gole was weaponless. He entered the chamber and started for the passage by which Gole had left. He turned off his torch for a moment, and far down that tunnel he saw a tiny flickering reflection that must be Gole's torch. Then he realized that the other had taken the wrong passage. This one, instead of leading out to the forest, ended after three bends in a *cul de sac*.

A fierce elation filled him. Going as quickly as he could, he entered the tunnel. The dust was all about him, for the lesser gravity prevented it from settling quickly, and Egon had to crook his arm over his nose and mouth to keep from choking. He counted the three bends, and flashed his lamp straight before him, and there was Gole.

He whirled round as Egon entered, throwing himself back against the blank wall, holding his own torch as if it were a gun. He must have just realized that he was trapped. His eyes glittered like those of a wild beast.

"Don't shoot," he said.

"Come out of there," Egon said, in an unnatural voice.

"You'll shoot if I do—the way you stepped on that mouse," said Gole.

The hair rose on Egon's neck. He began to tremble.

"That—that's not—" he stammered. His throat closed, and the hand holding the light began to tremble.

"Just like a mouse," Gole whispered. "Crunch! Isn't that what you'll do, Egon?"

The torch and the pistol were unbearably heavy, and shook in his grasp. The earth seemed to rock beneath him. Egon fought, slowly and painfully, against the terror which overwhelmed him, greater than his hatred of Gole. He wanted only to run, to bury his face somewhere, to scream and fall into oblivion.

But at that instant Gole sprang at him. So frozen were Egon's thoughts that the other seemed to move with deliberation like a slowed-down motion picture, his torch brandished like a club, his teeth bared in a grin of triumph.

It was the grin that really saved Egon.

He thrust the Bolsen straight out in front of him, and squeezed the grip with the last of his strength. There was an ugly, smashing sound, and then silence.

The bare, blue-walled office of the Director of Tangra Study Centre was crowded. There were Councilman Ackroyd, the Director himself, Bendel the Chief of Mars Civil Intelligence, Mortimer, one of the members of the Board of Guardians, Egon, with Lissa beside him, and a lean, ebony-faced man named Dhotal who was Lissa's superior.

Dhotal held the torn and blood-splattered photograph of the boy in the Space Scout uniform. He set it carefully on the Director's desk, uncorked a small bottle, and poured a few drops of an amber fluid on the face of the photo. With his handkerchief, he rubbed until the child's image disappeared. Beneath it, clear and sharp, appeared incredibly tiny lines of typescript.

"Well, Councilman," he said grimly, to Ackroyd, "you came to Mars to see for yourself. Now you can see."

Ackroyd wiped his forehead. He looked shaken and older, but his voice was still peppery as he said, "Afraid I find it difficult to believe. My own party conspiring to kill me—takes a bit of getting used to. And these Councilmen, whose name you say are here—"

"I don't think this information should be released just yet," said Mortimer. "I believe it ought to be settled *in camera*. We can tell the reporters it was a fanatic . . . a madman, perhaps."

Lissa pushed Egon slightly. He glanced at her, and she nodded. He got to his feet, clasping his hands nervously.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, "but I made the statement, during Councilman Ackroyd's speech, that I could prove Martians were human beings."

"An excellent diversion, too," Bendel put in.

"It wasn't a diversion. I meant it. Only what I *should* have said was that human beings are Martians."

There was a silence. Then Dhotal said, "I don't think we follow you, son."

Egon looked round at their intent faces. "Well, you know that we have not yet been able to read the Martian glyphs, the inscriptions they left on the walls of their ruins. Their descendants, the present native population, have no written language of their own and can't help us. Nor have we found more than a few carvings to give us an idea of what those ancient Martians were like, of their lives, or even their appearance. In a subterranean room beneath Gole's house, however, I found a series of well-preserved bas-reliefs.

"Before I tell you what they showed, I must go back a little. As some of you know, Professor Godwin, of Morna, was one of the first men to perform archaeological excavations on the Moon. Working with him, I became persuaded as he was that there might be a connection between the Martian ruins and one small cromlech we found but did not excavate on the Moon. I won't go into details, it isn't important, but in the end I was assigned to do some digging. I found a typical Martian chamber—we still have no idea what they were used for, or why these people with their high degree of technological skill chose to build in stone. But in that chamber preserved in the lunar sand and airless climate, I found, among others, a single character which I could read. It had a carving above it—"

"Which you could read?" the Director of Tanggra interrupted. "I don't see how—"

"Sir," Egon said, "if you saw a drawing of a cross with a looped top—what is called a *crux ansata*—how would you interpret it?"

The Director pinched up his lower lip. "That would depend," he said. "It is generally regarded as a fertility emblem, meaning life."

"Exactly. And if you saw such a device, with a picture above it of a woman giving birth to a child, you would no longer be in doubt that that was its meaning. Right?"

"Is that what you found?" asked Mortimer.

"Yes. And almost at once I began to ask myself how on earth of all the possible arrangements of lines to make glyphs, the Martians had happened to choose precisely that one which is identical with the tau cross, or *crux ansata*, the symbol of life for so many peoples on our own planet.

"Now to get to what I found below Gole's house. It was, to begin with, a cylindrical well made not of stone but of some hard, shining substance. In a chamber next to this shaft I found an entire wall of carvings. These made clear that the shaft was a rocket launching well. And they also explained my glyph to me.

"The circle is a planet. And the cross is a winged ship, leaving that planet, flying—not as we'd draw a spaceship, *upward*, away from the sun, but *downward*, towards the sun. Towards our Earth, in short."

His audience sat utterly still. Egon thrust his hands deep into his pockets, and chuckled. "It may be damaging to our earthly pride," he said. "The fact is, the bas-reliefs show that those ancient Martians do not look like their present-day descendants on this planet. They look like us. To be precise, they look like Cro-Magnon man—"

"What?" exclaimed the Director, rising to his feet.

"Yes, Cro-Magnon, or Aurignacian man, who appeared suddenly and strangely in Europe countless ages ago and thrust aside Neanderthal man. We cannot altogether hope to fathom, certainly not without much more research, the aspirations and thinking of those remote Martian ancestors of ours. But they *were* our ancestors. I'm sure of it. They, too, wished to colonize other planets. Their method of colonization was to plant on our earth several hundreds of their people, armed only with fire and knowledge, to live as primitives.

"It's possible that they foresaw the degeneration of their race on Mars, the ultimate peaceful fading away of a people with too much leisure. We can see the same thing on Earth, among some of the more primitive peoples. No one has more leisure time than a man whose food lies ready to hand, whose

climate is without extremes, and who has no natural enemies. But such men weaken, they fall an easy prey to unexpected illnesses, they lose their art, they never develop their science. Perhaps the Martians knew—and for this reason planted their colony to face great odds, to grow tough and adaptable. To become, at long last, men—natives—of Earth.”

For a time, no one spoke. Then Ackroyd got wearily to his feet. “I’ll have to go somewhere and lie down,” he muttered. “It’s too much for me to take in, all at once. First the attempt on me, and then this. Young man, you’ve wrecked my life.”

He turned to the door. Bendel solicitously took his arm. At the door, he looked back and added, “Of course, you saved it, too. I’m grateful for that. But not as grateful as I ought to be.”

Mortimer of the Guardianship, sighed. “It’s all very strange,” he said. “We shall have to authorize full-scale research at once. Meantime, Egon, please don’t leave here. I’d like you to stay at Tanggra until we’ve made up the team. You’ll go with it, of course. I’ll take care of the arrangements.”

Lissa stood up beside Egon. “It’s fantastic,” she said. “So we’re Martians—all of us?”

He nodded. He could understand Ackroyd’s feeling, for he himself was drained, tired beyond belief.

“I think I’d like a bite and a long sleep,” he said. “It’s—my God, it’s twenty-four hours since I had anything to eat. No wonder I’m ragged.”

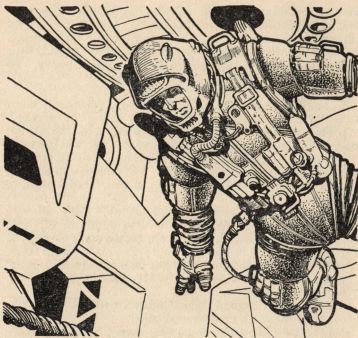
Lissa said, “Wait. Last night you asked me a question. I’d like to answer it now.”

He blinked at her. “A question? What was it?”

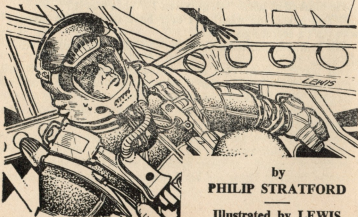
“You asked me whether I ever have dinner with anyone who isn’t a secret agent.”

She grinned, and took his arm. “Well, the answer is yes,” she said.

—Jay Williams



Don't Cross A Telekine



by
PHILIP STRATFORD

Illustrated by **LEWIS**

London-born Philip Stratford has had an unadventurous civilian life, having worked mainly in the office of a large City company with a brief excursion into salesmanship on computing machines. However, he has been a keen writer of science fiction for many years and his works have appeared under numerous pseudonyms since 1954.

DON'T CROSS A TELEKINE

by PHILIP STRATFORD

Illustrated by LEWIS

Chapter I

Craig rolled the plastic dice between his two square, blunt hands feeling the smooth slickness against his toughened skin. He threw his heavy head back dramatically, staring up at the smoke-blackened ceiling where smoke and liquor fumes coiled. He tossed the dice.

His mind reached out, gently, caressingly, nudging the plastic cubes. A deft touch—a professionally controlled roll and quiver on halting—a gasp and smothered oaths from the knot of flushed-faced gamblers.

“Eight, gents.” Craig said, as though surprised. “You can all pay me towards my old-age pension.”

"You should live that long," growled the one-eyed space-man who had wagered and lost his paypacket.

"Luck of the devil," said the space guardsman, whose corruption of money had been lost faster than he had picked it up.

"All the luck of the game, gents," Craig said, softly, smiling. His mind snickered. Mugs! Because he had the body and muscles of a boxer and the face of a punch-drug pug, they with their superior intellect had immediately seen that he could not be a telekine. Now he had to pick up their solar credits, pocket them, buy a round of drinks to soften their loss, and get to hell out of it fast. Mugs had a nasty habit of finding out he was a telekine at the wrong moments.

And the wrong moments were invariably when he had just made a big killing. As he had now done.

"Set 'em up all round, Slim," he called negligently to the barkeep. "Some of your Venusian rotgut, if the glasses don't melt before we have time to drink it."

Coarse guffaws greeted this as the barkeep poured the fuming liquor. They all quaffed deeply, their piggy eyes inflamed, their mouths slack and the liquor rilling down their chins. Craig did not drink. He stood up, with that deceptively casual movement like the flowing litheness of a leopard. His brawny boxer's body was displayed well in tight scarlet jerkin and cream jodhpurs, and his twin needle-guns slung low emphasised to all that this was a man not to be trifled with, a wanderer of the starways, a strolling gambler who plunged, win or lose, and paid his debts, if necessary, in blood.

The door opened. A gust of cold raw air spilled into the close choking atmosphere of the low-ceilinged tavern. Men called out, angrily; and then their voices stilled, and the tavern became very quiet. Slowly, Craig turned his head.

He recognised what that silence meant. Strangers. It had met him when first he had ducked his dark head into the tavern. Until he had established himself as merely one of themselves, visiting from Outside, the regulars had been wary, off-hand, frigid. All manner of strange rites and transactions went on in the upper rooms, where dim lights shone behind thick curtains.

Now the sounds of men talking, drinking, arguing, drifted slowly back as the tavern gave the newcomers the once-over and went back to more serious work. The two men—an

oldster and a youth—moved through the reek of spilled wine and trampled cigar butts to the bar, ordered drinks. Craig gave them a long searching look, and then went on with the prepared speech that would get him out of here fast.

Before he had a chance to open his mouth a voice whispered in his brain. He stilled at once, listening, his eyes darting about the crowded tavern in search of the telepath.

"Sit down, you big oaf, and don't attract attention by rolling those cow's eyes of yours about." The voice, telepathic whisper though it was, was cutting and sarcastic and entirely upsetting to Craig's ego. He flung his cloak off in a swirl of costly fabric and glitter of artificial gems, and slumped back on the settee.

"More wine!" he yelled, banging his companion's tankard on the table. "Drink, friends, and be merry."

He wondered how in hell he would get out of here if the guards burst in with one of their damned detectors.

"That's better," said the mocking voice in his skull. *"Act like the bloated arrogant ignorant pig you are. And listen!"*

Craig's face was thunderous now, red and blotched with anger. *"And who the hell are you?"* he said, forming the words silently in his mind.

"That need not concern you for the moment. I have a job that must be done. A dangerous job. You are the man to perform this task—for me."

The anger was receding now. He was getting his wits back. Quite obviously, the telepath must be one of the two newcomers. He glared at them, hating them.

"So you're a telepath, same as me," he sent silently. *"Why should I wait about here bandying words with you? I've an urgent appointment—"*

"I believe you would not relish the consequences if I told these deluded idiots here that you were a telekine? No, I thought not." The mental voice was distantly amused at the wash of anger and alarm that pervaded Craig's thoughts. *"Very well, then. Stop radiating and listen. I need you for a job that I believe only you can perform. I want your word that you will work for me, no questions. If I do not receive this assurance in sixty seconds, I shall disclose the tele-detector I have under my cloak and say, quite innocently to the crowd here, that there is a telekine present and will he please give us a demonstration of his skill. I shall watch with some amusement your dismemberment."*

"And with me, the dismemberment of your job," Craig thought sharply. *"You said only I could do it."*

"I'm counting the seconds. Oh, yes, I quite agree. It would be a check, no more. I should be forced to go farther afield to find someone willing to work for me. You happen to be near at hand. There are now thirty seconds left."

Craig sat at the table, his right hand balled into a gripping impotent fist. He watched as all about him men sang and drank and swore and gambled. He'd just cheated some of them out of a considerable sum of money, and it was notorious what happened to a telekine caught cheating. Much as he might dislike the situation, he was trapped. And this damned unknown knew too much, anyway. He knew enough to know that once a professional telepathic gambler had given his word to another telepath, that word could not be broken.

"What are you paying?" he thought sullenly.

"That's better." There was a purr of satisfaction about the incoming thought, a triumph almost feline in its self gratification.

"Well?"

"Fifty thousand solar credits—when the job is done."

The reaction to that was automatic.

"Half before we start, half on completion."

"As you wish. When you are in fuller possession of the facts you may realise that money is secondary in this. Speed is not. Meet me outside. We'll go to my place where we can plan—"

The thought cut off. Craig had caught the tendril of probing power, too, and he stifled a curse. Someone, somewhere close, had a tele-detector working. The thought that electrical and mechanical contrivances could spy on the workings of a human brain sickened and frightened a telepath. That a man who was an insensitive, and by definition a clod, could trespass in however clumsy a way upon the pure ground of mental powers was unspeakably obscene; it was sacrilege.

This time Craig rose determined to leave at once. He heard the shrill mounting whine of a jetcar from outside and the sound spurred him. By all the signs, this was a raid.

The oldster at the bar lifted his glass and drained the amber wine with all the appearance of having all the time in the world. Craig brushed past him. The youth cowered away, half flinging his cloak across his pale and delicate face. The oldster turned, muttering audibly about the quality of the wine, and pushed himself away from the bar. His low voice reached Craig clearly.

"Central spaceport. South waiting room."

Craig did not bother to reply. He was too busy saving his own skin.

In his book as soon as the regulars woke up to the realisation that there was a police raid on, and as soon as they saw the special character of that raid, they'd waste no time in sorting him out. Mugs they might be ; but ordinary men just didn't expect a telekine to go around posing as a gambler and cheating at dice and cards. It didn't add up. But it had been known to happen, the odd character who hadn't been able to make out in face of modern civilisation's many spaceborne challenges would sink to the gutter level and cheat at cards. Inevitably, they were found out, and, equally as inevitably, they came to a sticky end.

Craig just did not approve of sticky ends. Especially when the demisee was himself.

The oldster and the youth moved away from the bar, headed for the rear of the tavern. Craig's eyes followed them. As strangers here, they would not know the geography of this place ; yet they were attempting a breakout through the rear. Perhaps, just perhaps, the police weren't raiding this place because of a certain space-travelling gambler called Craig !

Suspicion crystallised in Craig's mind ; he felt sure that the two mysterious strangers had been followed by the police. Now—if only he could lie low, ride out the storm . . .

The main doors crashed open. A group of black uniformed policemen burst in. Their flash guns were held steady before them. Their captain's voice amplified, broke over the din of the tavern.

"Hold it, everyone ! This is a raid. Please do not move or attempt to leave."

The voice tailed off and the captain gave rapid instructions to his sergeant. The customers, grumbling, apprehensive, cowed, were lined up against the wall. Drink spilled from toppled glasses and the nervous laughter of wary men crackled like sheet lightning. Craig lined up with the rest. If he played this very quietly, he might get away with it. Only death lay in making a break now . . .

The captain walked quickly down the row of men, giving a single clean glance into every face. He approached Craig. In just a minute the whole shebang might explode.

Craig's muscles tightened up. He breathed lightly and easily, forcing himself to relax. His hands hung, casual, limp, above his holstered weapons. By the time the police captain reached him, he was in perfect adjustment to make a savage, stunning break for liberty, or to remain appearing half-frightened, imbecilic, innocuous.

The police captain's eyes were grey. They flicked over Craig's blunt face, impersonal, measuring, comparing the features they now saw with some memory—and passed on.

Behind Craig, now, the men were shifting about, talking low-voiced, grumbling. Everyone sensed that there was more to this raid than a mere descent on the gambling rooms. The police were after someone. With the realisation of that, the tension was broken for all in the tavern; they relaxed and began to exchange coarse jokes with the watchful police.

The captain reached the end of the line. He shook his head and went back to the bar. The sergeant shouted.

"All right, you gaol-birds! Carry on—and keep your noses clean."

Catcalls and cheerfully obscene suggestions were hurled back at him. The bar filled up as men sought to wash away the sudden fright. Craig wedged himself in behind the captain.

Slim, the barman, was busily serving the voracious crowd. One of the assistants was talking to the policeman. By straining his ears, Craig could pick up about half what was said. He sighed for a real penetrative telepathic sense; but knew enough to see the pitfalls in that. Straight telepathy between gifted individuals had brought sufficient problems in its train; no doubt once humanity had sorted out those a new set would be upon them. Here, drinking Venusian wine in a Venusian tavern, he had to push up close to overhear what was being said.

"... can't help you, captain." *Buzz, buzz.* "Girl?" A loud laugh. *Buzz, buzz.* Then, very clearly: "Not in here. No girl'd dare. Disguise? You crazy? Disguise, in *here*?"

Craig waited and watched a moment longer. Then he eased out of the crowd and walked slowly, lurching a little towards the door. If he appeared to be a little drunk it would soften the police suspicions.

He passed their scrutiny and stepped outside. Above, the concrete roofing swept away in a long curve, dimly lit. Stretching away on his left were the raucous signs and lights of the pleasure sections of the city, with a few men staggering from

one bar to the next. Craig gave them a swift, penetrating look. Miners, mostly, in town for a spree ; one or two techs and rocket men ; an odd space guardsman or two and the inevitable panhandlers, squatting listlessly in the gutter, awaiting a hand out. Life on Venus was tough ; if you had no job or money, then no-one would help. By merely existing in the underground cities you were using up precious oxygen.

Craig gave all this sad scene of frenetic gait and pathetic poverty his usual hard stare. As far as he could tell everyone he could see was genuine—that is, they were what they presumed to be to the outside world. In modern Venus no man made his political associations known ; and thus no man opened his mouth to talk too freely when strangers were present. That taut silence that had enveloped the tavern when the strangers—when Craig himself—had entered, was no dramatic stunt to weaken newcomers. That watchful silence held until the regulars were assured that here were no government men, no agents provocateurs and no paid spies.

Hitching his needle-guns into a more comfortable position, Craig turned his back on the pleasure sections and began to walk briskly along the dimly lit corridors of the underground city, heading out for Spaceport South.

Chapter II

Craig had long since made up his mind what he would do with his life. As a telepath and a telekine he had decided to make a quick killing, win all the cash he could in any way open to him, and then takeoff for a nice spread back on Earth. Earth, in his view, was the only decent planet in the system.

And now he'd been chiselled into taking on some job that might wreck his plans. He considered the idea of ducking out of the deal. He need only make for Spaceport North, buy a ticket, say, to one of the cities on the other side of Venus, and no-one would be any the wiser. Only his word held him, and for a professional gambler to put any store on that commodity struck him as remarkable—and foolish.

He was stuck with his own principles, and the principles of the telepaths, the small proportion of Earthmen with the power of talking to one another without the aid of spoken word. If they could not hold to a bargain between themselves,

then they could have little hope for their personal futures. Already the governments of the planets of the solar system were becoming alarmed at the growing power of the telepaths. If they thought that they could force through legislation to outlaw them, they would do so at once. Only a few telepaths in high positions had held that horror at bay. If the telepaths broke faith one with another, then soon they would be swept away altogether. Or so thought Craig, as he walked on to discover what job he had contracted into.

The night-time periods of the Venusian underground cities were times of quietness, away from the pleasure sections. As he passed corridor intersections, with the dim lamps receding away on either hand, he heard the soft swishing of pumps eternally circulating air and water. No-one passed him.

Had it not been for his preternaturally quick hearing, which already tonight had picked up enigmatic words spoken between the police captain and the bartender, he would have been dead.

He caught the sinister slither of shoe-leather. At once he leaped sideways, ducking and turning in one lithe movement. The bludgeon hissed as it went through the air.

A dark shape, arms outflung, sprang upon him. He went on with his ducking movement, upended a sharp shoulder, took his assailant in the stomach. The man went on over his back. In a fraction of a second, Craig had swivelled and struck. But the blow missed as the man swayed sideways. Then followed a space of confused struggle, of hard breathing, of a desperate twisting and turning to secure a grip. Craig felt the sheer power in the other's sinews. He knew that he had been attacked by no mere cut-purse. This man was a professional. He was out to do just one thing.

And that thing was to kill Craig.

After that first instinctive movement and the reaction of violent action washing away his dark imaginings, Craig felt not unalloyed pleasure rising in him. He had always loved a good fight ; even, as now, if it was not a particularly clean one. He thrust with his knee, his head well down, his right fist battering at the other's face, his left seeking to do nasty things elsewhere. He felt blows on his ribs and rolled himself away. This fellow was tough ; but Craig was beginning to feel he had the upper hand.

He felt his guns banging against his side and wondered if his opponent would commit the final foolhardy sin of bringing

handweapons into play. Here, in the close confines of the concrete corridors even the limited and stopped down power of the flashweapons could wreck destruction over too wide an area.

From bitter experience, Craig knew that when a man feels he is about to die he will resort to any means to stave off that unpleasant event. He won't care if he destroys a whole world if by so doing he can save his own life—at least ; that had been the normal course of events in the men Craig had had to deal with during his hectic career. He struck hard, again and again, wondering if he would be forced to burn this man down, and with him half the shielding keeping in the precious oxygen.

A fist looped. Stars exploded in his eyes. He shook his head and bored in again. He took his first long look at the killer. In the shifting shadows, as an upflung arm darkened his vision, he saw a keen, brown face, two bright eyes that had a glazed, fixed look of vacant, animal passion.

Nasty. A doper. Craig decided that he must finish this off as soon as he could. It was not easy. At last, with a quick feint and a sudden cunning body-reversal, he was able to plant a rock-like fist cleanly on the fellow's jaw.

He went down like a sack of asteroid nuggets.

"Right, fellow," Craig said, heavily, panting. "Now let's have a look at you."

The abrupt cessation of conflict had betrayed Craig. He spoke too soon of victory. Even as he bent down, one hand outstretched to grasp the seemingly slack head and twist the face to the light, the killer struck.

Craig had just time to avert the main force of the blow. Then he was reeling back, stars exploding in his skull, pain washing up from his face to sear into his brain. He was down. Above him the menacing shadow, foreshortened and distorted, towered. Craig made a supreme effort. He raised himself up, his left arm buttressing his body, his right upflung. Like that, he took the next blow, grasped and grappled with the cruel boot that sought to kick his ribs in, twisted and wrenched.

The killer went down. And as he went down the upper part of his body disappeared in a coruscating flash of radiance that all-but blinded Craig.

His wide-open eyes had caught the full benefit of that gush of light ; his eyes streamed with water, tightly closed, the water still forced its way out. He felt pain and cartwheels of fire traced lines of agony on his brain.

Rough hands shook him. Curt voices grated in his ears.

"All right, Craig. You're okay now. Come on, snap out of it."

"My eyes!" Craig said.

"You shouldn't use flashguns down here. You've only yourself to blame."

Through his pain Craig resented the injustice of that.

"I didn't." He spoke viciously. "Someone else horned in on my fight." He wiped a shaky hand across his face, feeling the tears still squeezing from his racked eyes. "Wait until I can see again—"

"You'd better get out of this," another voice said. "The police will be along soon." A pause and then a scraping of feet. "Bring what's left of that with you."

Craig felt himself lifted. He stumbled, upheld by callously gripping hands under his armpits. His legs dragged until he remembered his pride. Then he forced himself upright, staggered in a drunken spider's dance between his two supporters down the long hard concrete corridors that he could not see.

Much later he allowed watery light to enter his eyes, opening the lids with gentle experiment, forcing them apart in face of the storm of protest his mind conjured up at this fresh abuse. He desperately wanted to see who these men were. They had brought him somewhere, probably one of the bee-hive like apartment blocks of the underground city, and he wanted to know them, to mark them, to decide just what his next course of action should be.

But, most of all, he wanted to meet the man who had butted in on his fight and by so doing had presented him with this agony of tear-filled and burning eyes.

"That's better, Craig," said the first voice, of cool authority and complete inhumanity. Craig swivelled, trying to make sense of the vague blur that was all his abused eyes could tell him of the man talking.

"Who are you?" said Craig thickly.

"My name is Curtway. Brett Curtway. You have heard of me, I imagine."

"Yes." Craig laughed. "Brett Curtway, the man who wants to make Venus the planet for Venusians only. A sort of interplanetary nationalist. Well, I'm not one of your admirers."

"That's as may be, Craig. It so happens that that side of my life doesn't concern you. You are a professional gambler,

and therefore by definition a star wanderer. You have no settled place on Venus, or on any other planet of the solar system. You are, to me and men like me, merely trash."

"That's not news," Craig said tiredly.

He was beginning to see a little better now, and his first thoughts were for the other men with Curtway—him, he knew well enough from tv and tridi appearances. As the agitating member of the solar council from Venus, Curtway was the typical backwoodsman, demanding that one little patch of ground, be it on Earth or Venus or where else, should belong just to those people who happened to be there at the time he was born. Native and antedating rights had no place in the schemes of men like Brett Curtway.

The other three men were what Craig had already imagined they would be. Plug-uglies. Curtway was the brain and guiding hand here. Craig faced the councillor, smiling, wondering just what would come next.

"Why bring me here?" he asked. "And why so cagey about the police finding a mere trashy gambler mixed up with a Venusian killer?"

Curtway, his face by the minute growing clearer to Craig, smiled his smooth, oily smile. He was a big man, almost as big and tough as Craig himself; but the weakness of character showed in the darting, never-still eyes and the weak and full lips that pouted in eternal sulkiness.

"That's simple. I have a little job for you to do. Oh, yes, we know that you are a telekine, Craig. My men watched with pleasure—mixed with envy, I do assure you—your little gambling affair tonight. I am told that your mastery of the dice is nothing short of perfection."

Craig decided to play it along. "Thank you," he said.

"Well, now, Craig. This is what you have to do—"

"Have to do, Curtway?"

The man's tones changed; their hard incisive quality sharpened into outright command. "Have to, Craig. You killed a man tonight and only by the grace of Venusian Venus herself you didn't bring down half the roofing."

"I didn't kill him, and you know it!"

"But I don't—and you did. I have witnesses who saw it and who will be only too pleased to testify to that."

Craig lay back on the bed. He was in a small, windowless room, the air conditioner humming slightly out of phase, the bed hard and lumpy, the single chair, in which Curtway sat, old and tattered. The three gunmen stood by the single door. It would have to be, Craig saw clearly, a matter of adjustment to circumstances.

"All right, you vampire," he said with assumed nonchalance. "You might as well tell me what the job is."

The flickering smile on Curtway's face nauseated Craig. The man hadn't even the manners of a gentleman; he was already openly gloating over his coming triumph. Craig listened, his mind working in a parallel groove as Curtway spoke.

"My men were about to approach you in the tavern tonight when the police so unceremoniously burst in. Later, they were in time to see your foolish action with that loser you had milked—"

"That's not—"

"Very well, very well, Craig. We won't argue over that."

"How come you, a planetary councillor, were around a tavern?"

"A man," Curtway said sententiously, "must often dabble his fingers in the dirt for the sake of an ideal."

"Your ideal being to cut Venus off from the solar system and—"

"That is not the way I see it!" Curtway's whole manner changed; his anger was quite genuine. "This is part of the task you must perform. It is for the good of Venus, and if you will not co-operate willingly, then you must be made to see reason some other way."

"You haven't yet told me what all the fuss is about," Craig said laconically, and as insulting as he could.

Curtway's thick lips moved, pursing against the anger that rose in him, and Craig saw the little signs and gleed. Curtway said: "My men will take you to a certain place. There you will open a safe. When my men have a film I need, you will close the safe again. That is all."

Craig's professional interest was aroused. "Is it a tele-proof safe?"

"We do not think so. It may be. There is probably a tele-alarm fitted. This, you will have to deal with. The only thing that matters is that I must have the film in my hands." Curtway leaned forward. "And you know as well as I do,

Craig, that you will be killed out-of-hand if you refuse to co-operate. As to trusting me after the event ; you have no choice, have you ?”

Craig sweated suddenly. The whole thing came home to him with unpleasant force.

Curtway went on : “ All other things being equal, I do not think I shall kill you—I hate bloodshed. As soon as I have the film, my plans can go into operation, and then, when the dream of a lifetime has come true the means whereby I obtained my evidence will no longer matter.”

“ I assume you’re going to pay for my services ?”

Curtway threw back his head and laughed. “ You, Craig, could become a great man, if you had the guts and moral fibre. As a cheap twister, a professional tele-gambler, although wasted, you have found your right niche.” He smiled. “ Yes. Yes, I’ll pay you. You know that the job is urgent ; that there is little time, that is why I tell you that your life, after you have opened the safe, will be yours. I’ll pay you, as a bonus. But if you fail me, if you put back my plans, then you will be crushed like a noisome fly. Understand ?”

“ More or less.” Craig lay back on the bed and thought of the offer of a job made to him by the old man in the tavern. That was something he had to do through honour and his word. — This job was forced on him by pressure. He saw quite clearly that he would have to do both.

“ When do we start ?” he asked. “ I have something I must do for myself, before that. If you don’t mind, that is,” he added with insulting sarcasm.

Curtway became serious. “ Have I your word, as a professional tele-gambler, that you will do this job I offer you ?”

From the corner of his eye Craig saw the three gunmen tense up, their hands sliding towards their hidden weapons.

“ Yes,” he said flatly. “ You have my word.”

“ Good. The ship leaves Spaceport South an hour after midnight, Venus time. You will be met there. My men will stay with you at all times ; oh—I trust your word ; but I like to double-check my aces. As a gambler, you will understand that.”

“ Suits me,” Craig said.

Chapter III

Fifteen minutes later they were sitting in a jetcar whining its way towards Spaceport South. Craig felt amusement that he was being provided free transportation to a destination to which he was going in any case. The car debouched from the main trafficway tunnel and ran across the angle of apron, and halted before the departure terminal. They all stepped out, Craig, his two plug-ugly guards and the driver.

Craig looked upwards. The concrete roofing was broken at regular intervals by round one-hundred-foot diameter ports. Some ports were closed by steel shutters. In others the erect bulk of sleekly shining spaceships waited, quietly, their fins resting solidly on the concrete beneath and their prows thrusting through the triple airlocks into the maelstrom of fury on the surface of Venus. Soon he would be sitting in one of those great ships of space, waiting to be flung by the power of the encircling magnetic accelerators out into space, to some destination that at the moment was a complete mystery to him.

The little group walked through into reception and the driver vanished towards the restaurant. The others sat on a plastic covered bench. They waited. After a time, Craig tentatively reached out with his mind. He sent quick, stabbing interrogatory thoughts. Once he tangled with a response, a quick, furtive lick of interest, stilled instantly as he recognised the mind as that of a stranger. Some man, high in the control room of one of the spaceships, working on the electronic computer. Not the oldster from the tavern.

The driver came back with a yellow envelope containing tickets. He was careful not to allow Craig to see them. Craig wasn't worried about that; he'd know where he was going when he arrived.

Then a thought tendril curled into his mind.

"Craig? You are here?"

"I'm here." Craig's face was slack and relaxed, completely indifferent to what was going on around him.

"I am glad you were not caught up in the tavern."

"No thanks to you," Craig thought sourly. "The police were after you and the boy, weren't they?"

"The boy? Oh! Oh, I see." Again Craig caught that sense of feline amusement in the other's thoughts. "Yes. The police were following us. Now, I have not much time.

You have given your word and I know you will keep it ; but this job is urgent and you must start at once."

There was no sign in the coolly-lit reception room of the oldster, nor of the boy ; Craig thought ironically : "*You should see me now.*"

The incoming thought stream brushed that aside. "*This is what you must do. But first—don't you want payment as we agreed ? Where are you ?*"

"*Don't worry about the cash for now. I'll trust you to pay me when the job is done. Hurry up. Tell me.*"

"*Very well.*" The thoughts carried stiffness. "*My father has been unjustly accused of a crime—what it is does not concern you. But for me to clear his name—*"

"*Your father ? How in hell old is he, then ?*"

"*You spoke to him tonight.*"

Craig woke up. "*You mean—you're the kid ?*"

"*It is not important. What is important is that there exists a film that will prove my father's innocence. This film is locked in a safe that can only be opened by a telekine—*"

"*Hold it !*" Craig sent a strong thought riding over the youngster's thoughts. "*Would Brett Curtway have anything to do with this ?*"

The complete silence of shock—and then, urgently, angrily : "*What do you know of it ! Quick, tell me !*"

And at that point Craig decided to play it very close to the chest indeed. He sent his thought : "*Nothing. Just a hunch. Curtway has his fingers in every dirty political deal on Venus these days.*"

Reluctant admission that nothing more could be got from a man unwilling to unburden his mind—the other's thoughts went on : "*There is nothing I can do but trust you. You have given me your word. The safe is aboard a spaceship wreck drifting in the asteroid belt—I do not intend to give the co-ordinates to you. We will take you there in our space-yacht—you will open the safe—*"

"*I'm rather afraid that won't be yet awhile,*" Craig sent. He had no doubt but that this was the same safe that Curtway wanted opened. He was too knowing to ask why they hadn't opened the thing with explosives or torches—modern safes of a certain type were designed to destroy their contents utterly if any such clumsy attempts were made to open them.

"I'll get the film in due time ; I'll have to contact you as soon as my present difficulties—"

The kid's thoughts were bitter : *"So you're breaking your word ! A professional tele-gambler's word will mean a lot to me in the future !"* There were, strangely, no oaths, no blasphemy.

"No, I'm not doing that. I'm sitting here in charge of two gun-happy characters and if I tried to meet you they'd cut me down." Which was not, Craig admitted to himself, strictly true ; but the kid had to face the facts. He debated if he should tell the other about Curtway's offer. Certainly, his inclinations were toward the old man and the boy ; Curtway had not created a favourable impression, to phrase it lightly, but his own innate caution supervened. *"I'm what you could call under arrest."*

"You told me the police hadn't—"

"I did. They didn't. These are very tough gunmen, and I don't intend to tell you what they want me for. To be honest, I hardly know myself."

The kid was smart. Craig saw that. In trying to be clever, he had told too much. The youngster's thoughts rode in, sharp and suspicious : *"Curtway ! You mentioned him—I should have realised. You're working for Brett Curtway ! You low-down, rotten, double-crossing bas—"*

"Now take it easy." The pain in the thoughts upset him. It wasn't pleasant, and it scraped at his nerves. *"I just got picked up ; they claim I killed a man with a flashgun, which I didn't, and they have this hold on me."*

"And they want you to open the safe and get them the film ?" The thoughts were steadying now. *"And now you can tell them that Leslie Mallinger has asked you the same thing in a trusting way and you can all have a good laugh."*

"Trusting ?" sent Craig, annoyed. *"A fine lot of trust you ever had in me."* Then he thought. *"Mallinger—Mallinger—isn't the chairman of the pan-solar league called Mallinger ?"*

"My father."

"I see. Things are beginning to shape up now. I didn't know he had a son, though."

"There's a lot you don't know Craig. I'm just wasting my time with you now."

There was no mistaking the defeat, the bitterness in the thought. Craig felt in some obscure way responsible.

"Wait a minute," he framed the thoughts slowly. "The police were asking for a girl, a girl in disguise, back at the tavern . . ."

"So what, Sherlock?"

"Well, it's making no difference to my decision," Craig sent angrily, embarrassed. "You might have told me—I might have sent anything!"

Her laughter tinkled in his mind, a silver cataract of mental amusement. Then, with sobering abruptness, she was again the hard-headed woman of politics and double-dealing and the devious ways of power in the solar system.

"I cannot tell you the true story behind all this, it's complicated and dirty and all tied up with interplanetary power politics. But, if you love the people of the solar system—and by that I mean if you have a shred of concern over their welfare—then I beg of you not to give the film to Curtway."

Years ago, when he was young and innocent, Craig might have been impressed by the sincerity in the girl's mind. As it was, a disillusioned, soured, bitter gambler, he wouldn't trust a single person he didn't have under constant surveillance. Added to that was the very fact of the entreaty coming from a girl; her femininity told against her in Craig's practical, cynical mind.

"Sorry, sister," he thought—"No soap."

Her answering thought seared his brain; he winced involuntarily, and turned on the plastic-covered bench as though to ease cramped muscles. About him the guards lolled, confident that their charge was seeing it their way and making no trouble. Craig wondered, himself, which way he was going to handle all this mess.

He sent: "I meant simply, Miss Mallinger, that I wouldn't commit myself. Until I know more about this set-up I cannot decide. Curtway has a case for the secession of Venus—even you must see that."

Relief flooded into his mind. "I can convince you," she thought, almost incoherently. "I know you will see the truth. Curtway is evil; evil for the people of the system. You say that he has grounds for cutting off Venus from the rest of the planets—some people do think that. But they are wrong, terribly wrong! If Venus secedes, then the whole system must die."

"Surely that's melodramatic—and untrue?"

"No—on both counts."

"Oh, sure, I know you mean the raw materials; but we'd get by—"

The guards climbed lazily to their feet, prodded Craig upright with casual vigour and the group, led by the driver, went towards the exit doors. Somewhere a child was crying. People were calling across to one another. A red light was blinking regularly above a flight number and the exit door. Craig must have missed the tannoy announcement.

"We're off," he sent to the girl. "Just where, I wouldn't know."

"Flight M876 is being called now. That's direct to Mars. And Mars at the moment is near enough in orbit to the point in the asteroid belt—"

"I'd suggest you went there directly. But I wouldn't like you to be mixed up with Curtway. His men are rough."

They walked through the exit and settled into the padded transporter chairs. The chairs began to move, carrying them steadily up and into the gleaming spaceship. Leslie Mallinger's mental thought wavered, then returned at full strength. "My father has said that he believes in your word of honour. He says that you will bring the film to him on Mars, at the Silver Sands hotel in Leinsterville. The name we will use will be Murray." The thought broke. Craig had been smoothly slid into the spaceship's entrance lock. Around him metal walls curved, brightly lit, efficient, cold. The girl's thought rode in, tinged with despair, bitter with resignation. "And if this is true, Craig, if, as my father believes, you will bring the film to him, then I, too, believe. And, more, I believe that you will not first have shown it to Brett Curtway."

They were inside the spaceship now, the lock valves were closing, shutting out all sight of the concrete underworld of Venus. Craig, touched, sent: "I promise nothing, Miss Mallinger. But do not lose hope."

Then, deliberately, he cut the connection, blanked his mind. Fifteen minutes later they were in space.

* * *

Chapter IV

Craig had journeyed enough between the planets and satellites of the solar system for the experience not to bother or awe him ; he accepted the grandeur of massed stars flaming in packed splendour on every side, the harsh radiance of the sun filtered through observation ports, the sight of Venus spinning away below them, dwindling and turning into a crescent of milky light. Mars was near conjunction with Venus—the green comfortable old Earth was away over on the other side of her orbit—and the journey to the red planet consumed very little time. The rockets thundered through the fabric of the ship, soundless scant inches away from her skin, and at turnover the atomic jets began their exactly balanced task of slowing the ship to a featherlight touchdown on Deimos. From there passengers would go on to destinations in the outer planets by long-range interplanetary liners, or to Mars itself by planetary ferry.

Craig and his guards took neither of these courses. The driver—a taciturn, heavy-set man called Stenning—curtly bid them wait in the glassite bubble on the tiny satellite whilst he made arrangements. Craig was completely unsurprised when at last they all went through an air-tube clamped to the lock of a small private space-yacht. To flit among the asteroids he had not expected his employers to use a liner.

Back on Venus, Curtway must have been burning up the interplanetary communications network. The yacht was small but fast and powerful and Craig did not miss the twin cannon mounted in a hundred and eighty degree turret forward of the dorsal fin. These babies were taking no chances.

The space-yacht broke connection with the control centre as soon as they were spaceborn, Stenning handling her with the casual ease with which he had driven the jetcar to Spaceport South on Venus. Mars and Deimos dwindled astern.

There was, to Craig, nothing odd about shooting into the asteroid belt in search of a space wreck. By this time in mankind's outward progress to the stars the spaceways were scattered with the wreckage of centuries of interplanetary travel. Men lived in conditions of utmost primitiveness sustained by the miraculous power of modern science on chunks of rock among the asteroids, making some sort of living out of salvaging bits and pieces from wrecks. The old days of retrieving the last stages of boosted chemical rockets

were long over ; but with all the coming and going in the solar system, mishaps were bound to occur—and did—and it followed as a natural consequence that men would seek to make a living from them.

As to this particular wreck, the wreck that contained the safe that was of crucial importance to Mallinger and Curtway, Craig reasoned that it must be of recent origin. That these guardians of his knew, or thought they knew, exactly where it lay in all this jumble of rock and metal showed to his suspicious mind that perhaps they had had a hand in putting it there. It was very likely.

Normal astrogation called for a wide orbit around the asteroid belt; but inevitably over the years ships would come to grief ; if they did not fall into the sun or into Jupiter then they might well end up in the asteroids. Space travel for all its familiarity was still a chancy business.

The need for haste was apparent. Both Curtway and Mallinger knew where the wreck was ; they both knew that the safe could be opened only by a telekine and they had both been on Venus—Craig assumed—when that information had come into their hands. Curtway had lost no time in setting his police onto Mallinger. Once off Venus, though, Curtway's powers would be far less and Mallinger could call on his interplanetary reputation and standing as chairman of the pan-solar league. To Craig, interested only in scraping together enough capital to retire in comfort on Earth, the whole mess was annoying, irritating and a brake on his own plans.

But he could not forget the tense sincerity that had reached him in Leslie Mallinger's thoughts.

As the outriders of the asteroids span up, chips of light floating in shadow, Craig felt the tension screw up in the control cabin of the space-yacht. Stenning, his dark face scowling in concentration, worked out co-ordinates.

The guards sat about, loose-limbed and watchful, and Craig knew that it would be foolhardy to attempt anything in the way of a break with those vultures' eyes on him.

"That's it, thank God," Stenning said. He punched the final figures into his machine and the space-yacht scudded away under the drive of throttled down rockets, heading for a wreck, a safe and a decision.

Mass detectors coupled into spectrographic identity equipment still demanded time in sorting a man-made chip of broken metal from the encircling swarms of asteroids.

Craig sat with the others, eating and drinking a meal the constituents of which passed his lips without taste. He had decided to allow what would happen to happen. There seemed no chance at all that he could surprise these watchful men and take the ship from them. Once the yacht was under his command he could astrogate her back to Venus safely enough. Maybe, a little voice of hope whispered, he could make contact with the Mallinger's yacht out here, in the deeps of space?

Angrily he slapped down a plastic beaker. He hadn't even decided which side to fight on; Curtway or Mallinger. He thought of Leslie Mallinger's soft thought-stream, whispering in his head; he thought of the crude exercise of power of the thick-lipped Curtway, ready to burn him down at a moment's notice.

It all seemed too obvious, somehow.

They found the wreck late on the second morning of the search. It had taken just over thirty hours, and the waiting was sawing at Craig's nerves. He flexed his fingers and stared at the screen, where the yacht showed up clearly, her bows dented and her stern tubes crushed and crumpled under the impact of a giant internal explosion. He could not read her name. He didn't bother to ask Stenning.

Only when they were floating across in armoured space-suits, their shoulder jets flares of light in the void, did the idea come to him. He examined it critically. He could very easily fumble the safe opening, he thought, and thus destroy the film within. The fallacy of that struck him at once. If he destroyed the film—then Curtway would destroy him.

And Craig had no wish to die. He felt that that was not an unusual position for a man to take up.

Inside the wreck he found a shattered nightmare. When the explosion had occurred, from what causes he had as yet no inkling, the whole rear sections had been blown out. The atomic drive tubes had simply vapourised. All forward of the shielding bulkhead was shaken and ripped as though struck by the fangs of some night-prowling monster from a world beyond reason. Craig compressed his lips. They floated forward, avoided dragging piping and shattered walls, side-stepping tumbled masses of equipment. The control room

was in better shape and here, buttressed against the bulkhead, stood the safe that was the magnet drawing so many people with one object in mind halfway across the solar system.

Craig had long entertained a suspicion about the way in which, alone among the other telekines, he had been picked for this job. Swinging forward into the wrecked control room and looking keenly at the enigmatic safe, he began to see some of the answers.

He spoke carefully into his microphone.

"I see that I am not the first."

Stenning moved one armoured arm impatiently, waving at the safe.

"Get on with it, Craig. Don't worry about things that don't concern you."

Craig indicated the headless corpse that was jammed into the angle of wall and computer.

"I recognise him. Even without a head. Bill Lucas. One of the best telekines on Mars. I'd know that man anywhere."

There was suppressed fury in Stenning's answer.

"He bungled the job—he paid the price. Now get on with it. We've a lot to do after you get the film out."

"Sure, Stenning, sure you have. But if a first-class telekine has his head blown off doing what I'm supposed to do next, I'd say that does concern me. Wouldn't you?"

"Well?" There was sullenness in the words now.

"Well, I'd suggest you stop this play-acting and tell me a little more about the job. What did you tell Lucas? What happened when he died? Anything you think might help me, help me to keep my own head safe, as well as get this damned film for your boss."

"We told him the same as you. He came in here, full of anger and cockiness. There was nothing that I could see. He looked over at the safe—and then his head came off."

"Didn't you feel anything?"

Stenning's face inside the space helmet was drawn now, remembering. "Yes." The words were reluctant. "I felt a pain, like an instantaneous headache. Came and went in a flash." Stenning swallowed, the sound a crash over the speaker. "It was a horrible experience."

"I see."

Craig did see, too. He knew now that there was a particularly effective and particularly nasty telekine trap on the

safe. Stenning's patently dishonest reactions to the questions—his nauseating assumption of horror at the death of Bill Lucas—meant nothing at this juncture ; they were part of the price Stenning had to pay for being one of Curtway's bully boys. Craig pushed across to the safe and, carefully keeping his mind a telepathic blank, bent to examine it.

His last safe-cracking job had been years ago ; when he was little more than a gangling adolescent with big ideas. The bet had been, he remembered with sudden clarity, Joe's new jet-skates against his own new telescope. The safe had been a simple job, the sort of contraption the local meat-market could afford, and opening it had presented little difficulty. He recalled the pleasure those first trips by jet-skate had given him. He'd even left the entire contents of the safe untouched.

Things were different this time.

This time the element of the gamble, the bet, was still there ; the only difference was that Craig's life was at stake.

He put his armoured gloves on the safe. Here it was, a blank, waiting, sentient thing ; sentient in that as soon as he began fumbling with his mind at the tumblers in the lock, an unleashed force would lash out to crisp his brain and take his head off his shoulders . . . He paused. Why this ghastly decapitation ? Why bother ? A telekiller device could burn a man's brain out without the added nauseating beheading.

There must be a reason ; there was a reason for anything if you only looked hard enough.

A warning ? And why, too, hadn't Curtway's men bothered to remove Lucas' corpse, it would seem the obvious move. Craig thought. The problem was black and white. You couldn't interfere with the safe electrically or mechanically because it would destroy its contents. You couldn't operate the tumbler by telekinetic power because the teletrap would blow your brains out. And you couldn't short the device out because then you'd be applying electrical or mechanical forces to the safe . . .

A double-check on both methods of opening.

And then the final, the betraying clincher came home to him.

If Curtway's men had been here before, then why hadn't they simply unbolted the safe and taken it with them to Mars, Venus or Earth, where they could have had the benefit of very many powerful telekine minds ? Perhaps, he thought greyly, that was what Bill Lucas had been trying to do. Perhaps the

poor guy had been trying to unbolt the safe, showing off and using his telekinetic power—nonsense, Craig's mind snarled at him, nonsense. Lucas would first have tried to open the damned safe.

Craig set his wipers going to clear the sweat that beaded around his helmet ; the flying drops were annoying.

"Get on with it, Craig." Stenning's voice shocked into his consciousness, compelling, demanding. Craig turned on the man.

"Shut your fat trap," he said viciously, "and let me get on with this my own way."

There was always, his mind ran on, the chance that he could get away with suggesting that Lucas had jammed the lock and that now it could never be opened. A faint chance, and one that must be used only as a last desperate emergency.

He was fluttering around the edges of an idea now. Something was trying to break through. Because the solar governments eyed askance all telepaths, and particularly telekines, who were forced to degrade themselves with menial jobs if they wished to live ; jobs that their powers were insulted to be employed upon ; but everyone had to live. There were far fewer telekines in the system than telepaths ; Craig had always felt the most pronounced reluctance to do what he now saw was inevitable. But when it came to saving his own skin he must put that desirable end first.

Passively, poised for instantaneous withdrawal, he allowed the pattern of the lock to form in his mind. He watched it, rather than explored it. He allowed it to form. He traced the circuits, skirted the tumblers, sensitive, like a film receiving the ghostly imprint of photons upon its chemicals.

The lock itself was relatively simple. He cut his mind off from the safe and then conjured up the memory. Yes, he could manipulate that lock, simply, open the safe door in perhaps fifteen seconds.

The trouble was that as soon as he made the first delicate mind prodding at the tumblers, the device would react and his head would come off.

So—and so that left the way that he had feared and hated to use.

Quite deliberately, without allowing his moral code to obtrude itself, he slid into Stenning's mind. There were three tumblers to be taken care of. It worked out admirably.

Stenning was looking at the safe. His eyes were wide and blank. Craig had no difficulty. Deftly, he began to manipulate the first tumbler, Stenning's brain the bridge between his own powerful thoughts and the mechanisms of the tumbler.

He thrust with a sure surge of strength, withdrew at once from Stenning's brain and watched dispassionately as the man's space helmet exploded.

One of the gunmen jerked upright, his flashgun cradled in armoured gloves, staring in bewilderment. Craig gave him no time for more than that.

The first tumbler had been tripped. The device, in reacting, had not stopped that last powerful twitch of Craig's mind acting through the brain of Stenning. Now Craig repeated the same formula, using the brain of the gunman.

When this man's space helmet exploded his companion swung his gun in frenzied panic, flaring it wide to cut down Craig. Stark terror showed on the man's face; his comrades had suddenly, gruesomely died—and he intended to kill the only man who could be responsible.

There was now urgent self-preservation in Craig's actions.

He thrust through the last gunman's mind, twisted at the last tumbler.

And, as the gun veered towards him, as the device prepared to unleash its flood of murderous energy, a fresh thought stream flowed into his mind.

"Craig? This is Leslie Mallinger—"

His reactions were so violent that he shouted the words aloud.

"Get out of it! Get out of my mind!"

The device tripped, the gunman's gun spurted its wash of lethal flame. A bulkhead soughed into slag. The gunman's head came off.

The last tumbler tripped.

And Craig sent: *"Leslie? Are you all right?"*

The answering thought was, through all the cold unemotionalism of thought shaky, trembling, scared. *"Yes, Craig. Yes. What was it? I felt as though I'd stuck my head in a furnace."*

"Just the device to kill off meddling telekines," he thought dourly. *"Where are you?"*

"We have your yacht and the wreck in our screens. We can be with you in two minutes—are you alone?"

Craig laughed. "Yes. Now." He was not at all amused. Death and destruction left him with a cold emptiness in his mind that was frightening ; like the damp darkness of premature burial.

"Come on over."

There were two things he must do before she arrived.

One—open the safe with trembling fingers and remove the metal box that was its sole contents. Two—gather up the dead men's guns and transfer them to his own empty holsters.

Chapter V

Looking into the opened safe he saw the hair-trigger wiring that cobwebbed the back. He saw the circuits with his mind. The ugly flat slab of high-explosive he saw without seeing ; that could erupt into a hellish sphere of killing energy at the slightest touch. Moving the safe would have been death ; as would moving the ship. He could see the fixed stasis indicator ; someone had set that to go off the moment the ship was taken in tow.

Whoever had left the safe here, circling amid the debris of the asteroid belt, had not wished the safe's contents to be taken away. That was an understatement ; but Craig couldn't put it any other way.

Whoever had done that must have believed that there existed someone who could open the safe again ; or have been someone on the point of death.

His outside mike pickups transferred the metallic sound of a spacesuit and he turned to see Leslie floating in, guiding herself by adroit stabs at projecting wreckage.

"Just in time," Craig said. The safe door was shut behind him ; the circuits still live, still deadly.

"Did you get it ?"

"More or less."

"Don't play with me, Craig—where is it ? Give it to me !"

"Now just a minute, miss," Craig said, thinking. "Seems to me I'd like a little more information before I go a step further."

The flashgun in her hands was steady on his armoured chest. Craig laughed.

"I suggest we go back to my yacht and take off these suits and talk the whole thing over."

"There is nothing to talk over. You have the film. I want it."

"Maybe, maybe. I still say let's get out of these suits." Craig deliberately edged his way back, going out of the shattered cabin and along to the airlock. He went through a convenient gash in the hull and jetted across to the space yacht that had been brought here by Stenning. Craig had already decided that he needed a yacht; and this one seemed to be convenient.

Leslie was baffled. Craig could guess that she did not know whether or not he had the film. The safe was shut. He might have opened it—or he might not. The three dead men—four, counting Lucas—must have puzzled her yet she gave them no consideration. Strong stomach? Craig didn't think so. She was so absorbed by her job that nothing outside it had power to move her; Craig found himself warming to Miss Leslie Mallinger.

Back aboard the yacht he thankfully removed the space-suit and turned to watch Leslie shed her own. He liked what he saw. She was no raving beauty; but her dark hair, alive face, brown and strong-boned, held the things in a woman that Craig sought; she was strong bodied, too.

"I let you jet back here without killing you, Craig," she said evenly, "because I do not like unnecessary violence. But you took an awful chance on my trigger finger."

"You wouldn't shoot me." Craig moved towards the galley. "You need me for the job of getting that film. Coffee?"

"Thanks." She looked at the gun, laughed, a short bark of baffled self-amusement, and thrust it away. Craig, busying himself with the electric cooker, smiled. This girl could handle herself well, he saw that; and he guessed she could continue to do so in an emergency. She'd come out safely from the tavern on Venus, for instance . . .

"Why were the police after you on Venus?" he said.

"Is that any business of yours?"

He poured coffee expertly. "Maybe, maybe not. Here, and thank your lucky stars antigrav is still on." She accepted the proffered coffee and drank appreciatively.

"All right, Craig," she said unexpectedly, both hands around the coffee cup. "I'll tell you. My father and I were wanted by Curtway's police—bully boys more likely—because

they wanted to use him as the excuse for cutting free from the other planets of the solar system. Satisfied?"

Craig was beginning to add up two and two—and the fact that they obstinately insisted on coming out at five gave him the keenest amusement.

"Partially, yes. Let me tell you something, in return. After I'd left you I was attacked by a man who'd been doped to the eyebrows. I was having a tough time with him. Then someone shot him with a stopped-down flashgun—a flashgun that had been stopped down far below the normal aperture. It crisped him and didn't do any other damage. The concrete was unmarked."

"Well?"

"Well, that means that someone had their gun all ready to use—and that's not normal. No-one—*no-one*—uses a flashgun underground on Venus. But here someone did. And it was all ready jiggered to work. So that tells me that they'd set that guy on me, then come along and callously killed him."

"Why do that?" She finished her coffee and held out the cup. Craig spoke slowly as he filled it.

"They killed him in cold blood so they could claim I had done it and thus have a hold on me. All right. I don't like that sort of politics. Come to that, I don't like politics at all. But at least your force was not quite so crude."

She had the grace to flush.

"I'm sorry about that. Time was slipping by, the whole thing was sliding away—and after Hugh was killed I didn't really care what I did. And that," she finished, her face going taut and hating, "still applies."

"Who was Hugh?" He said gently. "Can you tell me?"

She took a grip on herself. "Hugh was my brother. Yes, I can tell you, now. It might do me good. Hugh chased this ship out here—or rather, chased it half-way and then took it over and was in turn chased the rest of the way by Curtway's men. They'd been trying to break through to Venus. We'd been held there; but, through a little judicious bribery we got free for a time. In the safe was the film, and Hugh wanted to prevent that film from falling into Curtway's hands."

"I thought you said your brother took the ship away from Curtway's men? Surely that means they had the film?"

She smiled. "They had. It was shot on Earth and was being brought across the system to Venus. My brother captured the ship, most of his friends were killed and they were

chased out here past Mars. When the gang caught up with them he couldn't open the safe, the ship was a wreck, so he set the various alarms and safety devices—and then took the life shuttle for Venus. He died in my arms.”

“I see.” Craig drank his coffee to cover the girl's obvious emotion at the memory of her brother's death. “So that left both parties knowing where the safe was, and neither one able to open it. So Curtway's men went to Mars, got poor old Bill Lucas out here, he was killed by the infernal device on the safe. They must have radioed back to Curtway and he then set about finding a telekine himself.”

Leslie Mallinger laughed. “And both sides found a man called Craig. You.”

“Yes,” Craig said, hamming it up. “I walked smack into an interplanetary political intrigue. Oh, well, it makes life interesting.”

She put down the coffee cup and reached into her pocket. Craig, half looking at her, said: “The thought of all you good people rushing about desperately seeking someone to open a safe for you that you daren't touch or move fills me with a certain satisfaction. I am indulging in retrospective righteous glee.”

Leslie pulled out her gun and pointed it. She acted with tired determination, as though all the play-acting was done with. Craig came alert at once.

“Let's stop the fooling, Craig. I want that film. If you have it, hand it over. If you haven't—then we'll just jet across there and open up the safe.”

“So you don't know yet,” Craig said, smiling. “Well, well.” He walked slowly across to the control board and studied the yacht's layout.

“Well?”

“Just a moment. Is your father still aboard your yacht?”

“Yes.”

Craig stood looking down on the control board, knowing that this was the time for his decision. How could he tell if this girl was speaking the truth? If he gave her the film and she didn't shoot him, then he could never return to Venus, Curtway would shoot him for certain. That was assuming that Curtway would allow him to go on living elsewhere in the system. Curtway had struck Craig as the sort of man who would ruthlessly destroy anything and anyone if they crossed him. Craig had no wish to tangle with a man like that.

But—suppose he didn't give the film to the girl, suppose he got out of this situation and went back to Curtway? Curtway would then secede Venus from the system; that would not bother Craig unduly; but it would most certainly affect this girl and her father. And Craig was feeling things about Leslie Mallinger that he thought he had forgotten years ago.

Had she been startlingly beautiful, full of the beautiful spy vamping act; he would have found it easier to doublecross her. As it was, she was just a pretty girl, who was trying to do a nasty job in a tough man's world because her father was in trouble and her brother had been killed.

If he had been, that is, if she was speaking the truth.

Chapter VI

Craig thought of his projected spread back on Earth. Without Venus in the system, life there would be much leaner than now, with all of Venus produce to fatten world markets. The system could ill afford to lose Venus . . .

Everything seemed to point towards handing the film over to Leslie, possibly teaming up with her, and taking a chance on Curtway's vengeance. It all pointed that way; it all looked so cut and dried.

Craig never had liked simple solutions when he didn't have all the facts. They were usually wrong.

Now he turned half away from the control board, taking no notice of the flashgun in the girl's hands, and stared at her, hard. She did not flinch under the scrutiny.

With his body blocking off most of the tactile controls, Craig reached out with his mind and manipulated them unseen by Leslie. Rapidly he set up a tractor beam, keying it onto the wreck floating out there in space. All the time his mind was busy exercising its telekinetic power, he was looking at Leslie and waiting for her to speak. He was genuinely interested in how she intended to handle the situation. Having a gun in her hand aimed at his chest heightened that interest.

The wall speaker hummed with an incoming signal and then a man's heavy voice said: "Leslie? Are you all right?"

"Perfectly, thank you, father," Leslie said. "I am just finding out that Mister Craig, a telekine, after having given us his word, intends to try to wriggle out of it." She stared at Craig as she spoke.

Craig refused to be needled. His estimate of the girl rose. He smiled.

"Not quite accurate, Miss Mallinger. I'm just trying to decide which of you is telling me the truth. You see, if you've told me lies, that invalidates my word. I become a free agent again."

"I haven't lied to you !" she flared.

"So you say."

Her father's voice crackled again from the speaker.

"If you two have finished arguing you might like to train your screens on a bearing of two-fifty and a declination of fifteen. You might also tell me who the company is."

Their screens reached out, picked up the oncoming spacecraft, showed a magnified picture to them. Craig swore.

"A credit to a hangover that's Curtway's pals ! Mister Mallinger—take your yacht to hell out of it ! We'll strike in another direction, confuse them. Hurry."

"Leslie ?" The voice was still calm. "You're sure—"

"Do as Craig says, father," she interrupted. "I can take care of myself. It's vital you are not captured again."

Despite himself, Craig felt tension creep into his mind, making him fear for the safety of this girl. He knew what would happen to her if Curtway got her into his clutches.

"We'd better start moving, Craig."

"In just a moment," Craig said. Then, suddenly, he turned on the girl. "Are you willing to take a chance ? I mean—are you willing to risk being shot, possibly killed, to lay hands on that film ?"

"Explain."

She was hard as nails, tensed, waiting.

"If that is Curtway or his friends, I want to talk to them. I want—"

"You want to talk to them !" The scorn in her voice flayed him. "So that you can tell them you have Leslie Mallinger aboard ? What sort of fool do you think I am ?"

"No, Miss Mallinger, no. It's not that." Craig was worried now, uncertain. "They'll be here in seconds now. You must trust me ; after all, you have the gun. You could always shoot me."

"Don't worry. I will."

Craig swallowed, then smiled, swung to the radio.

The incoming voice was unmistakable.

"Stenning ! This is Curtway. What in blazes is going on out here ? And what was that ship that shot off—"

"Curtway ?" Craig cut in, keeping the vision off. "This is Craig speaking." The outline of Curtway's ship was plain now. The twin cannon mounted just forward of the dorsal fin, in a similar position to those on the yacht that was now his property, looked formidable and menacing. They had swivelled to cover the yacht.

"Craig ? Where is Stenning." A pause. Then : "Have you got the film, Craig ? Speak up, man."

"Well, now—" began Craig.

"Hold it. I'm coming aboard. And tell Stenning he'd better have a damn good explanation ready for me."

"I'll do that, Curtway."

Through the port the twin jets of Curtway's suit flared. Craig picked him up on his suit radio. "Curtway—the film is safe. You never told me what it was all about."

"Good. You'll hand it to me, personally."

From the corner of his eye Craig saw Leslie's gun hand tremble. He shook his head violently at her.

"Oh, Curtway, Stenning's aboard the wreck." Craig tried to put a conspiratorial friendship into his voice, an oily hint of partnership. "I figure your offer to be a good one, if it's still open . . ."

"Offer ? What offer ?" The jet exhausts from Curtway's suit steadied. The man's voice was loud and exasperated and full of menace: "Craig—do you have the film or does Stenning? Speak up, man !"

Craig was enjoying this ; even Leslie was half-smiling, the sounds Curtway was making were ludicrous through all their vicious promise of anger and annoyance. Craig was worried in case he carried on the farce too long. He had to have Curtway in just the right bloody frame of mind ; only then, he felt, could he believe what the man said.

"Surely," he said in a shocked voice, "surely you remember your offer ? Why in hell do you think I rocketed all the way out here for ? You could have found a telekine nearer than this, couldn't you ?"

"Listen Craig. I'm going across to the wreck and talk to Stenning. If I find that he hasn't the film but you have, I'll tear you apart—and I mean that. You're meddling in things that don't concern you. That film shows enough to enable me to reveal the double-dealings and the filthy plotting of

Mallinger, and that means with the pan-solar league discredited, that I can take Venus out of the solar system. And that, Craig, is what I'm going to do. So don't get the idea that you're important."

Curtway's jets flared again; he shot towards the wreck, drifting among the asteroids. Craig flung a thought into Leslie's brain. "*If we make a break for it, his pals will have to pick him up. That will give us a good start.*"

"*What are you trying to do, Craig? You're risking both our lives just because you want a chat with Curtway.*" Her thought stream battered at him. "*And Craig, I believe you do have the film*"

It was clever. Very clever. Craig nearly fell for it. Then he caught and held his forming thought, the automatic impulse to think of the film in its flat packet resting in the pocket of his spacesuit hanging in the air lock cupboard. He smiled and wagged a finger at her.

"Now then, Miss Mallinger—that film, assuming I have it, is some guarantee of my life. I'll admit that I am beginning to dislike Curtway more than ever; but that doesn't make you right. Does it?"

She clenched her fists. "What do I have to do to make you believe me?"

"At the moment, nothing you can do can affect me. Just keep a watch out on Curtway's ship. If she moves, call me."

"Where are you going?"

"Going?—Oh, nowhere. Just don't bother me for a moment."

"Well I" she exclaimed. "Of all the confounded nerve—"

"Quiet," Craig said, waving a hand. Then he forgot her and concentrated. The job was going to be ticklish; but there had been no time to do it before and now, with Curtway going to stumble on the chaos in the wreck any minute and the girl waving her gun in a highly nervous state—the time to do this had come almost too late. Cautiously, Craig reached out with his mind and dabbed gently at the spacesuit pocket. He slid into the flat film canister. Then he began to allow the first frame to form in his mind. He studied it. Then he flicked along, running around the film, his mind circling in like a chip of driftwood on a whirlpool, flicking faster and faster, absorbing the pictures on the film and watching the scene they brought to life.

He was vaguely aware of the hum and click of instruments in the control cabin about his body ; of Leslie Mallinger sitting moodily in the control seat, watching Curtway's yacht ; of the sense of impending disaster that hung over everything ; and he was aware, too, of a wash of surprise that the girl was allowing him to do what he was quite obviously doing. She had made no further protest after that first outraged burst of anger at his high-handed words. The idea cheered him. If she had nothing to fear from his perusal of the film, then that alone argued in her favour.

Then he concentrated on the pictures the film was showing him.

This film that had caused such a great deal of trouble and death in the solar system was, to Craig, expecting he knew not what, alarmingly disappointing. The film showed merely an office on Venus, in one of the concrete underground apartment blocks close to Spaceport South ; the view through the door was unmistakeable. Craig could see quite clearly the line of padded seats in which he had ridden aboard the spaceliner with the thugs for company and the mental voice of Leslie Mallinger pleading in his brain.

The two men were sitting sideways to the camera, talking to a third facing it. Curtway was sure that he recognised the third man from tridi shots and news releases. He was sure it was Mallinger, the girl's father, and the chairman of the pan-solar league. He put all his skill as a telekine into the ticklish task of interpreting the jagged line of light down the side of the film, translating its thickness and thinnesses and peaks and troughs into sound. Gradually, as he moved his questing mind along the film he heard the voices of the men, talking, through the hum and bustle of the Venus spaceport's daily activity.

"Now see here, Mallinger," the burly man was saying. "We represent Earth and Mars. You know very well that if we are to make the most out of the situation on Venus we must have a sound man here. A man we can trust."

"You can trust me," Mallinger said, smiling that tridi famous smile. "I have no secrets from you gentlemen. I want Venus. You have Earth and Mars. If this trading deal goes through, as I trust it will, you need have no fear that Venus will secede."

"That's good," said the man from Mars oilily. "We can dump our products here in return for the raw materials from

Venus. The standard of living on Venus is low ; and if we are to make profits and live comfortably on the other planets then we must ensure that the standard remains low. We cannot allow the men here to think they can live as well as we do. Venus is a backward planet, it must stay that way."

Craig flicked on. The situation was obvious—and blatant. These men were cooking up a deal whereby the materials wrested from Venus were to be sold in the open solar system markets at rigged prices, so that the men of Earth and Mars could grow fat. It was sickening; it made Mallinger into the worst sort of hypocrite there can be. It also, from the point of view of the men of Venus, made secession inevitable if they found out.

And Curtway, the man who wanted to take Venus out of the system, wanted this film with the desperation of a maniac. He had killed for it, lied for it, stolen for it. He would stop at nothing to make sure that this film was shown on all the radio networks of Venus. Then Venus would be in his pocket. In the resultant explosion of feeling, Curtway would emerge the big boss. It was simple and fool proof.

Craig withdrew his mind from the film, from the canister and from the spacesuit pocket. He looked about the control room of the yacht.

"Well?" said Leslie. "Satisfied?"

"This film condemns your father," he said. "He's the biggest scoundrel in the system—"

"According to that film!" she flared back.

"The blurb said it had been shot by a secret camera when these men from Earth and Mars visited your father at the spaceport. It bears all the marks of being genuine. That *was* your father!"

"I haven't seen the film," Leslie said bitterly. "But I can imagine what they have done. I guess they have put together a pack of lies and in some way incriminated my father. We were on Venus, and they arrested us and, as you know, we escaped. We were lucky still to be free when we contacted you at that tavern."

"And that seems a long time ago, Leslie," he said gently.

"What are you going to do? I don't intend to stay here another minute. You have the film somewhere. I can easily find it, even after I've shot you." She raised the gun.

"Now wait a minute!" Craig said hastily. He had a sudden awful vision of the girl pressing the trigger. "Hold it! We've been fencing about long enough—"

He broke off as Curtway's voice crackled from the wall speaker. "Craig! All these dead men—one looks like Stenning. What's been going on?"

Craig glanced towards the screen. Curtway was standing in the gash ripped in the hull of the wreck. His small armoured figure glinted in sunlight.

His words were clipped, harsh. "Fenton! Go aboard that yacht at once! If Craig tries to act funny, cripple him a little. You needn't be gentle; but don't kill him. And hurry!"

An airlock began to open on the side of Curtway's yacht. Two armoured figures appeared on the sill. From this short distance the guns in their hands looked grim and ugly.

Leslie sucked in her breath.

"Craig! We've got to leave! They'll blow us out of space if they find me aboard—"

Craig said: "Not with the film so far unfound—" But he spoke too late; spoke in a welter of sudden action.

Leslie had reached forward and driven the controls to the limit; the yacht bucked, surged and then blasted away leaving the asteroids dwindling behind. Craig whirled to the screen. The ship had given that fierce uncontrolled lunge when the wreck had been freed from the tractor keyed to her. He looked back, seeing the blossoming explosion out there, soundless, immense, final.

"I had a tractor keyed to the wreck," he said in a whisper. "And when you moved this ship, you drew the wreck with us. And when you moved the wreck—blooey!"

Leslie stared into the screen, aghast.

"Then—then, I killed him?"

"You did; but I wouldn't let it worry you. He would have scoured space until he'd killed both of us."

"Why did you let me—"

To their rear the space yacht was swinging in pursuit. Craig moved towards Leslie and chucked her under the chin. Then he went up the ladder and into the dorsel gun turret. As he freed the guns, he said: "I don't think they'll catch us. But, just in case—" He swung the guns, checking that they were working smoothly and their power supply was adequate.

"Why, Craig, why?"

"Why did I let you . . .?"

"No. Why did you decide I was telling the truth?"

He laughed. "I might have guessed you'd reach right to the heart of the problem. Well, then, this film was ostensibly made on Venus. It had to be, to make your father's treachery to Venus mean anything. But you'd told me it was made on Earth."

"So—?"

"I figured it must have been made on Earth because had it been shot on Venus there would have been no reason to have found it here in the asteroid belt. Why take it into space at all, if it was made on Venus and was to be networked on Venus?" He stared backwards, through the gun sighting screens, saw the pursuing ship dropping astern. "And if it was made on Earth then it was a fake. You were right, all along the line."

"Oh, Craig!" she said, and stopped.

"It's going to be all right, now. Your father will be able to carry on with his work. Curtway is dead. The idea of taking Venus out of the system will die with him, don't fear. It was touch and go while it lasted—"

"And you, Craig. What are you going to do?"

He laughed, securing the guns. "I'd plans of retiring to a nice spread on Earth. By tele-gambling I thought I could make easy money. I did, too. But now—now I think I have other plans."

He climbed back down the ladder, stood facing her.

"And now?"

"Now, I think," he thought directly, doing away with the need for words, "*I think that other jobs are before me. Your father will need a telekine to help his telepathic daughter. Together, we can make Venus a place worth living in. If that doesn't sound too—*"

"*It doesn't, Craig.*"

They stood looking at each other. Craig felt very happy. He had always liked strong-minded girls, and this time he had found one and with her a job and reason in life.

"They need more telepaths in the system," he said softly, looking at her. "You and I ought to work on that."

—Philip Stratford

While most of our thoughts are concerned with the present and immediate future, an occasional glance backward into Man's wonderful past can be most revealing and rewarding. Art work 20,000 years ago, for instance.

CAVE PAINTING

by George Chailey

Imagine that you are crawling through a tunnel deep under the earth, pushing an acetylene lamp before you. It is cold and damp and your lamp smells. Then you come to a cave where the waters of an underground lake lie still and sombre, and stalactites hang from the ceiling. You raise your lamp and see, on the bare rock walls and roof, finely executed paintings of bison and reindeer in red and black.

The style is monumental, the forms simple, the colour brilliant. Excitement and wonder grip you, for these paintings were made from ten to twenty thousand years ago, by your remote ancestors, and they are the earliest works of Man to survive to the present time.

In some place, the pictures are as fresh as the day they were painted, because the caves have been hermetically sealed by falls of rock. Thus no flow of air has disturbed the paint and the temperature has remained constant since prehistory.

Another factor in preserving these remarkable pictures is *dampness*, which is more usually associated with the destruction of works of art. Over the centuries, mineral springs have formed a new deposit of lime over the pigment, protecting it like a glaze. This action is known as "sintering."

The first decorated caves were discovered at Altamira, Spain, in 1879, and you will almost certainly have seen reproductions of the bison from these walls. Since then, many examples of pre-historic art have been found in France and Spain.

The purpose of these paintings, hidden away in the bowels of the earth, is *not* mere decoration, but essentially religious ; they are part of magical rites connected with fertility and hunting. The men who made them did not think of themselves as "artists," but rather as sorcerers.

The animals portrayed by our ancestors include horses, mammoths, ibex and aurochs. Quite often these animals are marked with vee-shaped arrows, and the stylized human forms represent hunters. Little attempt is made at composition, each animal or group of animals apparently being drawn for its own significance.

How were these striking paintings created ?

The cave selected would be far back from the living quarters and probably only the initiates would ever see the finished work. The artist-magicians worked under difficult conditions, in narrow galleries and on high ledges. They had no light except that thrown by guttering oil lamps—stone dishes filled with fat and a crude wick. If you are ever lucky enough to go to Lascaux and see the pictures there by electric light, you can be sure that you have a better view of them than did their original creators.

The visual memory of these early painters for the form and movement of animals is of a high order, and due directly to the fact that their existence depended on hunting the subjects of their pictures ; of necessity, they used their eyes to see much more intently than we do today.

These primitive artists worked direct on the bare rock surface. An outline was drawn with wood charcoal, or engraved with a flint ; for deeper engraving they used a pick with a quartz head.

The colour range is light yellow through red to dark brown and black, obtained from the ochres and manganese earths. No blues or greens are found. It is likely that colour was used symbolically, red for life and black for death.

Various techniques are used for applying the pigment to the cave wall. In some cases, colour in the form of naturally

occurring lumps is used, as pastels are today ; sharpened sticks of pigment have been discovered just as some early painter left them.

Or the pigments might be ground to a fine powder in a hollow stone and mixed with vegetable juices, animal fat, or blood. As a viscous paste, it was applied with the fingers, or a brush fashioned from hair or feathers and stuck to a piece of wood or bone by fat. Large areas could have been covered by using a pad of fur.

As a liquid, the paint might be applied by blowing through a reed or hollow cylindrical bone held in the mouth. Powdered pigment was also used with a blow-tube. At Castillo, in Spain, are a series of stencilled impressions of left hands made by using this method, and often, the hands are mutilated, suggesting sacrificial rites.

Sometimes, too, the actual surface of the rock is exploited, and the pose of a bison may be determined by protuberances from the wall which form the head and forequarters of the animal.

At Les Trois Freres, in France, there is a large cave where one entire wall is covered from top to bottom with engravings, including one of a dancing wizard. This figure has a human body, the head of a stag and the tail of a horse, and strongly suggests what a preview of a prehistoric " art show " must have looked like—a gloomy cave, smoking oil lamps, the initiates dancing round and performing their rites, an invocation for a good " kill " by the hunters.

It is not unusual for one painting to be superimposed on another, as if the artist had discovered a particularly good site ; perhaps the magic made here brought better luck than that made elsewhere.

Some of the paintings are masterpieces of art—by present day standards—and the cave at Altamira, where a polychrome prize extends for forty-five feet and includes twenty-five life-sized animals, has been compared to the Sistine Chapel.

It may be instructive to draw a parallel with artists of our own time, who perform a similar magic in advertising ; an attempt to hypnotize a reluctant quarry !

—George Chailey

South African author Clifford Reed very quickly made a mark for himself in science fiction circles when he came from Durban to London a few years ago. His short stories are appearing in numerous magazines and he has just finished a short novel for SFA entitled "Children Of The Stars."

HALFWAY HOUSE

by CLIFFORD C. REED

Illustrated by LEWIS

"Valeria," the man behind the desk enunciated, "was intended as a half-way house between Earth and Sirius 2. An emergency stop. And as a penal colony. The two go together. For economic and administrative reasons. Until recently the Council has had no cause to question the working of this idea."

"Recently?" his subordinate questioned.

"Since Castelly became governor. A political appointment." The speaker smiled grimly. "The Council was glad to find him a post where he would not embarrass its decisions."

He leaned forward. "It looks as if even Valeria wasn't far enough removed. Because trouble is growing, or so we understand, and Castelly's reports don't add up." He tapped the file on his desk. "Read these reports before you leave to-morrow," he instructed. "You'll report at Valeria in your professional capacity as a normal replacement." He pushed the file across the desk. "Good luck," he said.

Shuttling down to the surface of Valeria at the end of the long haul from Earth the agent wondered how long it would be

before the underground made contact with him. Judging by that last message in the file he had studied, the person signing himself "Slurf" wanted quick action. It would be interesting to know just how that letter had got through. Not that that was important at this time. What was important was that he should get a clear picture of the local conditions before he committed himself. The underground might not like that but he would have to risk their resentment. He was not going to risk making himself unpopular with his superiors on Earth. As would be the case if he went off half-cock through being impatient.

He came down the passenger ramp after the touch-down looking about him with interest. Centre City did not appear to differ in any particular from its counterparts on several other planets. One set of spaceport buildings was very like another. The one feature which did command attention was the heat. The sky was without a cloud, and there was a shimmer of heat all round the horizon. Valeria, it appeared, *did* run Hell a close second as had been claimed for it.

A uniformed man halted him as he stepped off the ramp. "Dr. Hart?"

"Check," Hart answered.

The man put out his hand. "Glad to see you," he said. "My name's Wilson. I'm the local chief of police."

"So soon?" Hart smiled.

Wilson smiled back. "Routine," he answered. "We don't usually expect trouble from the M.O.H. people. But—we've found it saves trouble if we brief people on their arrival. Saves *us* trouble."

Hart fingered his chin. "They weren't stressing anything when I left," he commented. "Is this new?"

The policeman nodded. "It's new," he said. He looked at Hart evenly. "This isn't personal," he warned. "Just that, being new, you might make a mistake."

"Such as?"

"Such as being tempted into being softhearted. Such as enclosing a personal message to a sorrowing relation of one of your patients who isn't allowed to send messages out. Not thinking you'd be doing any harm. Not realising that the message was a code or something like that."

"I see," Hart said.

He saw more. He saw that the authorities on Valeria were worried. He concealed a smile. There had been attempts to

get messages out, and these messages had been intercepted. They were making sure that no messages should get out. What they obviously did not know, he reflected cheerfully, was that one message had already penetrated the net.

"That's all, doctor," Wilson said. "I'll see you around." He strode away.

Thoughtfully Hart picked up his travelling bag that identified him as the person the underground was expecting—a blue bag with a broad red stripe. He passed through the Customs, was directed to where he would find his headquarters, and proceeded on his way.

Centre City itself was not extraordinary, boasting only one main street. That was as it should be. That was all that the Council back on Earth would expect it to have. But Hart had the impression that the local inhabitants saw things differently. There was a bustling air about the people who passed, out of keeping with what should be no more than a village kept within very strict bounds.

Later, exploring the place, he confirmed this feeling. Centre City was more than just its main street. There were shops in all the cross-roads, warehouses, depots. There was a market, and it was busy. He shook his head. What he had seen argued one way only—that there was more to Valeria than Centre City. He walked back to his rooms wondering just how much more this extra was, and how it came about.

In the staff recreation room, seemingly in all innocence, he voiced this. "Looking around this metropolis," he commented, "it's bigger than I'd expected. Lots of businesses. What do they live on—each other?"

"Farmers," a colleague responded. "They bring in their produce. With a hundred thousand convicts to provide for, they're bound to overproduce. To be on the safe side. The paddlers' ships spotted that first, and got trading rights. Oh, we're a growing community, I can tell you."

Turning this information over in the days that followed, Hart was puzzled. There wasn't any suggestion in the Governor's reports in that file he had read to suggest that Valeria was developing to this extent. True, there was mention of trading rights, but the impression was that this was on a minimum scale.

Just what was happening? The sooner he had some definite facts, he told himself, the better. The trouble was, he could

not demand to examine the records. Not as the medical officer he was supposed to be.

He would have to do it the slow way. Without arousing the curiosity of the authorities. Otherwise he'd be shipped back immediately. Before he had all the information he had been sent to get, and without which the Council could not act. Bazaar gossip was worthless; the often repeated, loudly expressed view on Main Street that Valeria was on the up and up under the Governor's leadership meant nothing.

He had been on Valeria for a week, and the underground had not approached him. Why not? It had had every opportunity. He was not being watched by the police. He was certain of that. Had the underground changed its mind, or, had it been killed?

He had the answer to this question the same day.

"Dr. Hart to report to the theatre. Urgent!" The announcement snapped the lounge to attention, and whipped Hart out of his comfortable chair. He hurried out.

There were a score of cases, all badly wounded men.

"Breakout," a senior surgeon snapped.

"No!" a voice whispered. "No. Don't shoot!" An orderly stooped over the writhing figure, injected a drug. The plucking voice muted. "Slurf's men," it sighed. There was a note of panic in the last two words, and Hart saw the faces round him stiffen. Who was Slurf that he should be so feared?

He had no time then to wonder. Afterwards, however, he brought the matter up. "One warder," he probed, "said something about 'Slurf's men.' I haven't seen a Slurf yet—"

His companion grunted. "If you want to live," he answered, "see it before it sees you." He pulled a face. "Of all the filthy creatures! He shook his head. "He wasn't meaning that overgrown tarantula, though," he corrected. "He meant the leader of a gang of outlaws, escaped convicts. Nobody knows just how many there are of them. They hole up in the Gammadoolas region, beyond the border farms. They raid—rob—murder. Lately they've been growing bolder." He frowned. "From some of the stories, their leader's well named. If the Governor doesn't take steps soon—!" He shrugged.

In the Governor's reports there had been nothing of unlawfulness on such a scale. Because if there had been, the Council would have investigated. Which would have uncovered the

fact that the Governor was working to build Valeria into more than what it was intended to be.

All of which meant that he wasn't going to find the answers by staying at the job of medical replacement. If the underground wasn't coming to him, then he must go in search of it. He was not supposed to be on duty during the next forty-eight hours ; he would use that time to pay a visit to the border. If he uncovered anything, he would overstay his time, if it couldn't be avoided. He began to check over what he should take.

A faint sound at the door spun him round. There was something white on the floor—a piece of paper. Slowly he nodded. He did not move to open the door, to try to spot the person who had pushed the message through the crack. He wasn't concerned with him. He picked up the paper.

“EIGHT HUNDRED HOURS. TAKE TRUCK PARKED ONE HUNDRED YARDS FROM NORTH GATE. PROCEED ROAD PASSING CAMP SEVEN. CONTACT WILL HAVE BREAKDOWN FORTY MILES OUT. REASON FOR TRAVELLING — MEDICAL INSPECTION GAMMADOOLAS BORDER FARMS.”

Now that the message had come he felt relieved. Not more comfortable. There was nothing reassuring that he had learned about these outlaws he had been ordered to meet. There shouldn't be any danger though. It wouldn't be to the outlaws' advantage to injure him. All the same, it would do no harm if he went prepared for trouble. In his bag was his gun. He got it out, and checked it.

Promptly on time next morning he walked out of the north gate. Sure enough, there was a truck where the note had promised. He climbed into the cab, engaged the gears, and pulled away. So far, so good.

He did not deceive himself. It was on the cards that the police were aware of his arrangements. But they certainly would not intervene at this stage. Not until after he had met his contact. He shrugged. There was nothing he could do about that. Except hope that the police did *not* know.

He drove on through the increasing heat, out of Centre City, past Prison Camp Seven with its raw blocks of buildings surrounded by bare, baked ground stretching to the guarded fences. Thereafter the road dropped down, cutting across allotments irrigated by water channels ; the cultivated,

moistened earth dark between the thirsty rows of green vegetation. Subconsciously he noted this welcome change from the dry, dusty streets of Centre City.

But his mind was busy with what lay ahead. What the contact man he was to meet would tell him? How much the underground was prepared to reveal at this first meeting. He had forty-eight hours. How much could he accomplish in that time?

He had been driving automatically. Now, the thirty-odd mile crossing of the valley accomplished, the road twisted and turned between the first foothills, as though it gathered itself for the task ahead. He rounded another bend, and slowed down. Ahead of him was a road block, with armed police turning watchful, suspicious eyes on him as the truck crawled forward the last few yards, and he stopped.

One man came forward. Hart recognised him as the man who had met him on his arrival. "Mr. Wilson," he acknowledged. He smiled. "Good morning."

But there was no answering smile from the policeman. "Just where are you going?" Wilson demanded.

"Check up," Hart replied. "The farms on the border."

Wilson nodded. "They're due for a visit," he admitted. He pushed his helmet back from his forehead. "Not that they've ever sent a newcomer before."

Hart shrugged. "I wouldn't know about that. I don't see why the farmers should object. Provided it's a doctor."

"I wasn't thinking of them." Wilson stared at him. "It's you. On account of it being slurp country." He stepped back. "Presumably your boss knows what he's doing." His expression suggested otherwise. He scowled. "In case they haven't rubbed it in sufficiently," he growled, "when you're outside the fences, don't be a damn fool and get out of your truck."

"I won't," Hart said. He let in the clutch, and the truck rolled forward.

He had plenty to think about. Wilson's attitude had not been encouraging. He'd said straight out that he didn't think Hart was fitted for this mission on which he'd claimed he'd been sent.

Hart set himself to recall all that he had learned about slurfs. "A giant member of the Araneida group, of aggressive habits, its bite causes instantaneous paralysis. Normally the victim

is not consumed immediately, but is coated with a pungent excretion to discourage scavengers. The slurf leaves the still living body where it has fallen in the confidence that it will be available when it returns."

He took one hand off the wheel, and pulled his belt round under his coat so that the holster lay more conveniently. Then, satisfied that there was no more he could do, he settled down to driving.

He was well into the hills now, and all he could see was their slopes leaning up away from the road. Abruptly, the road turned, and flung itself at the hills as though to storm their heights with one tremendous charge. Until this confidence melted, and it seemed as if the road, inching along the mountain's flanks, sought only to hold what it had gained at that first onset. Nevertheless, however strong the hills, the road would conquer them. It had come far. It had trodden down other hills as it came. It would force its will upon these also. It bit into the rock, hewed a swath, and held it. It curved back; finding a weakness, it exploited it, and lapped the hills about with its ambition.

He had covered just about forty miles.

He rounded another bend, and the breath hissed through his teeth. A vehicle was parked about one hundred yards ahead, and involuntarily his right hand came away from the wheel, and slid down to his belt.

The truck crept forward, inching past the stationery wagon. He eased his gun out of his holster. Tight lipped he watched for a sign from the driver he had come to meet.

He was level.

"You took your time," a voice said.

Unbelievably he stared across the gap at the girl sitting behind the other wheel.

"I suppose you were wise not to seem in a hurry," the feminine voice continued, "but I'll admit it feels comfier in this spot now that there's company." He saw her eyes flicker, scanning the threatening slopes on either hand.

"How long have you been here?" he asked.

"Half an hour." She shook back her mane of hair. "It was beginning to seem longer," she confessed. "Still, it's all right now."

Let her tell him what she must, and let her go! "What message have you got for me?" he demanded.

She shook her head. "Not a message," she corrected. "They want to meet you."

"Where?"

"Across the border." Her hands rose to the wheel. "I'll go first," she said, and disposed of any objection he might make by pulling away.

He fell in behind. The road went on climbing in a blast furnace of stone. By the time she halted at the crest he was dripping. The road widened here, and he pulled alongside, and looked where she looked.

The view was majestic, and forbidding. Forty miles off, perhaps more, other mountains reared peaks equally high. The land between was broken, cut up, covered by bushes and gaunt trees. It was a harsh, arid landscape; the essential Valeria. Here, he reflected, was no Eden.

Nevertheless there were those who were not to be discouraged by this. For below, defying the threat of the place, he could see cultivated lands—the border farms. Since the valley through which he had passed would not produce enough for the future they envisaged, pioneers had crossed the range. He shook his head in rueful admiration. For their courage that must be brought to nothing when the Council learned that its orders had been disobeyed. For the wasted effort, and time, and money that had been spent on work they would be ordered to abandon.

Because Valeria was not to be encouraged to develop into a colony. Since that would rob the booming world of Sirius 2 of men and materials which it swallowed as fast as they arrived. Valeria had nothing to offer which could not be got more easily elsewhere. Unless one craved for heat, and hard ground, and the risk of a long drawn, hideous death. He shook his head once more. The sooner he completed his assignment the better for all concerned. Including those misguided brave ones who manned the border farms.

A grinding sound from the rear brought his head round. A convoy was nosing its way up the last stretch.

He heard her voice, speaking urgently. "The Governor," she called from her truck. "I'm your assistant, if you're asked. Ladys Firm. I'm your guide. I've done this trip twice before."

He nodded a brief acknowledgement of her warning. She smiled, but his face did not soften in return. There could be no pretence of friendship with her and her associates, who's actions went beyond all limits even for outlaws. He would meet with them, would do a deal with them if it were to the

advantage of the Council, because those were his orders. But he would not go one inch beyond that.

The convoy was up with them now, each truck taking up its position for a halt, and he searched for Castelly. Hart wanted to see the man in the flesh, form his opinion of him. He recognised him ; the long, narrow head, the enforced quietness of his face. Here was a fanatic. That explained some of the puzzle. A disgruntled man would never have forced his subordinates to carry out his ideas, but a man with a mission could deceive them into thinking that the policies they carried out conformed to what Earth ordered.

The Governor was on the ground, inside the ring of outward facing trucks, and coming towards him. He stiffened.

"You are—?" The face was quiet, the voice was quiet, but the eyes were alive. They were too alive.

Hart answered as he had been schooled.

Castelly nodded, smiled, waved one hand at the country below them. "If you come back up that slope, in your right mind," he said, "there'll be work for you on Valeria, doctor. As there is for all of us. Until that's cleared." Again he pointed to the Gammadoolas stretching to the horizon.

Hart frowned, pretended not to understand. "I didn't know the settlement was to expand," he said. "On Earth—"

Castelly nodded. "I know. On Earth there isn't enough information. People think of a settlement as static. But it can't be. Things never stand still." Again he pointed. "Out of that area, doctor, comes death. Which, if we don't clean up, will destroy the settlement. We have to expand in order to hold what we've done." He stepped back. "When you've done this trip you'll understand better what our job is. You'll do your own part more effectively." He smiled. "Good luck," he said.

The girl's truck pulled away as if at a signal, and Hart fell in behind. The sides of the hills closed around them again, blocking out any sound the convoy would make if it were following them down.

He shrugged. He was not concerned with the convoy's presence at the pass, nor its purpose. He was concerned with his appraisal of the Governor. Castelly was a fanatic, and fanatics were notoriously touchy. Whatever Castelly's ultimate intention was, and Hart felt he could make a shrewd guess at that, he would not relish Hart's mission if he learned the truth. Particularly as he would expect the agent to pick holes in what the visionary was trying to bring about.

It was plain enough, Hart told himself. It had happened often on Earth in the past. Settlements had been planted in the wilderness, with strict instructions that they were to remember that they were intermediate stepping stones only. The Cape of Good Hope was only a victualling station on the sea route to the Indies, and it had defied orders, and had grown. Trading posts in North America had obstinately defied similar orders, and had begun the opening up of the New World of those times.

The difference here was that this policy of growth was being deliberately fostered by the very man who was supposed to hold it in check. Such a man would never hesitate to block an agent who had been sent to uncover proof of his disobedience. Such a man, believing fervently in his mission, might be prepared to go further. That was less melodramatic than it sounded. On Valeria, Castelly was a virtual dictator. He could easily grow into the belief that he was, actually, a dictator. Hart would have to watch every move he made, in case Castelly learned the truth about the relief doctor.

He was conscious of relief when they negotiated the last bend, and were running again on level ground. He pulled up with the girl, cab to cab, signalled to her to stop. She shook her head, and put on more speed. Angrily he fell back. Short of risking an accident there was nothing else he could do.

The scrub disappeared, cut off abruptly. Looking sideways he saw the land had been cleared so thoroughly that an ant could not have crossed it unobserved. His mouth tightened. If such a safety belt was necessary around each farm the area must be alive with slurfs. He looked ahead once more, and saw the fence, high, of strong wire, finely meshed. The girl was slackening speed. The fence crossed the road, and the two trucks came to a halt before it.

A man emerged from a stone building on the other side of the fence. "From?" he demanded shortly.

"Medical round," the girl answered.

"Guess you're all right," the man commented. "Never heard of a female running with the Slurf." He opened three locks which held the gate, and swung back the barrier. "Don't take all day," he commanded.

The trucks surged forward, and the watchman swung the gate back, and they went forward until she drew up at a cluster of buildings.

Hart looked at her dubiously when they had alighted. "Does that fence keep them out?" he asked.

"Not by itself," she answered. "If it were electrified—yes. But there isn't enough power for that. Not yet. It slows them, though. Also they must touch alarm wires along the fence. By the time one gets over it's been spotted. It doesn't get far." She set her lips. "We'd best get on," she said. "If we work fast, we can do ten farms before it's dark."

For the rest of the day she drove him hard. At each fortress there were case sheets to be checked, and medical stores to be replenished. From their trucks. He whistled at this last. The underground was certainly efficient. It hadn't missed a single trick to make his masquerade convincing. He unbent sufficiently to comment on this, but she merely nodded, and bent to pick up another container, and went off with it. He did not get another chance to question her. She saw to that. Realising what she was doing, he did not try to force things. There would be time later. She would have to talk sometime.

By the evening they were at one of the camps furthest into the wilderness. "We'll sleep here," Lady's Firm told him when they were packing up.

He gave her a hard look. "So this is where they'll come," he suggested.

"No," she denied. "You'll meet them to-morrow."

"Where?"

"I don't know," she returned. "They didn't tell me that."

"How much did they tell you?" he asked, but she turned away, and did not reply.

They ate their meal in silence. After it was over she stood up. "Don't go wandering around outside during the night," she warned. "It's sometimes happened that an alarm hasn't worked." She looked at him. "I wouldn't want to think of that happening," she said. "Even to you," she finished.

She was gone into the adjoining room before he could close his mouth. After a moment he grinned. She deserved her triumph. She'd put up with his attitude all day, and it must have galled her unmercifully.

He made a wry face. It was a pity that she should be what she was.

The alarm woke him. He flung himself from the bunk, dragged on his boots, snatched up his gun. Dawn was coming through the window. There were explosions, the rattle of

automatic weapons. Surely this was more than dealing with a single creature that had crossed the wire? He plunged towards the next room, flung open the door.

In the nick of time he saw the figure outside the window, automatic weapon levelled. He hit the floor as the gun opened up. From a corner of the room came flame, and thunder, and the one outside reeled, crumbled, and slid away. He turned his head, and saw the gun in her hand, saw her face set in rigid lines.

In that instant all the inconsistencies vanished. His instinct had been right. She was no outlaw.

She was infinitely more dangerous. She was one of Castelly's agents. Somehow the Slurf's messenger had been caught, and she had taken his place. And he had fallen for it!

He stood up. There was still a chance. If he was quick. The firing was slackening. He leaped backwards into the other room, slammed the door shut, and heaved a trunk against it.

He crouched under the sill of his window, peering out. He found what he sought. There were a dozen vehicles swinging in a curve, heading outwards, withdrawing under fire. One truck skidded, spun in a circle, stopped. An arm hung limply out of the cab. The others went on, making for a gap he could see where the fence was down.

He dived out, ran at full speed for his own truck, climbed in. He jammed his foot down, and prayed.

Either the defenders recognised the medical wagon, or he took them by surprise. Nothing hit him.

He bounced across the remains of the fence, flashed across the safety zone, then fought the wheel as he tried to maintain speed over the broken ground.

Steadily, in spite of his efforts, he fell behind. The dust cloud he trailed grew smaller. The outlaw drivers' skill surpassed his. That was not surprising. Their lives depended on their ability to move in fast, then get away before their foes could encircle them. Added to this, they knew where they were going.

When he could no longer see the flying dust he slowed down. From now on he must follow their tracks. Which involved an additional risk. If he had not caught up with them by nightfall he must spend the time until dawn cooped up in his truck. Because of the things that prowled outside.

Overshadowing all other considerations was his anger. He had been led by the nose. He had landed on Valeria believing his mission secret. Whereas the Governor had not only known, but had used him to try to further his own plans.

He writhed as he remembered how obligingly he had swallowed everything that had been set before him. The suggestion that the truck had been parked by the underground for him to use. Where he would have been suspicious if he, as a newcomer, had been posted for this duty. But, because it had been disguised as an outwitting of the authorities, he had been the bait.

When he remembered how naively he had commented on the efficiency of the underground his face burned. What a guileless simpleton she must have thought him. No wonder she had not answered, but had bent over a package, and carried it off. For if he had seen her face he must have read the contempt in it.

Well, he was still in the game, and the game hadn't finished yet. Maybe when it was over they would have to revise their opinions. The raid had changed things to his advantage, upset the Governor's scheme. It was up to him to upset it further. Permanently ! Let him get speech with the Slurf, whoever he was, *and* get a message out, and Governor Castelly, and Policeman Wilson, and Miss Delilah Ladys Firm were all going to regret they had started this game.

He settled down to the job in hand.

Two hours later he jerked where he sat. The going had improved slightly, and he had been making better time. He slowed, his eyes intent on the shape on the ground ahead. He—hadn't—imagined—it ! It was a man.

The truck halted. Hart's eyes swept the scrub around him. He could see nothing—no movement. That was not enough. He started up the truck, drove it in a circle round the body, staring out. He could still see nothing. He was in a shallow basin, his horizon limited to a hundred feet. He stooped. One hand opened the door, the other drew his gun. He stepped down to the ground.

Away from the safety of the truck he moved fast. In an instant he was bending over the body. In the same breath he was upright once more, whirling round, his gun thrust out before him, his eyes staring.

He saw nothing.

He turned again. There wasn't anything he could do for this man, who's limbs were held in a vice of poison, who's body was coated with a foul smelling excretion. Except one thing. His hand tensed.

He had done what he would pray someone should do for him, if he were in the same hellish case.

There was no sound, no warning. Even as he turned to leap back to the safety of the truck, the creature hit him, high up on the shoulders, flinging him forward across the man he had released. Falling, he knew terror. His brain shrieked, anticipating the impact of the slurfs' fangs, the horror which would follow instantly.

Going down, he tried to twist the gun, to fire into his own body. He heard a shot, but felt no pain. He struck the ground. His body imprisoned the gun under it. He was finished.

Strangely, he felt nothing, beyond the weight of the thing upon his back, holding him down. A dreadful, hairy limb lay across his cheek. Lay ! The limb did not move. Had his shot, by some miracle, not gone wild ?

In one sudden explosion of madness he had flung the slurfs' body off, was free, was firing. Twice ! Three times ! The shells missed, throwing up earth around the enemy. His hand was shaking uncontrollably.

He froze. The slurfs had not moved. But, from behind, he heard another sound. He turned, unsteadily, and watched the truck coming towards him.

"Get inside !" he heard her yell. "Quick ! In case there's another."

The gun in her hand swung to and fro, covering the scrub behind him, protecting him.

He stumbled forward, hauled himself into his own cab, dragged the door shut. He panted. His whole body shook.

She wheeled her truck next to his, held a flask out to him. "Better swallow some," she advised. "You don't want to pass out."

He took it, held it, raised it. Some spilled on his chin. He did not care. The contents bit into him, burned him, made him gasp. He felt better then. He could look back at her, at her face, pale under the dust and sweat. "It was you," he said.

She nodded. "It used your truck as cover. I saw it as it charged."



He licked his lips. "If you'd missed—!" he muttered. He stared at her. "If you hadn't trailed me—!"

"Yes," she said. She turned her head to look at the dead man, shuddered, looked back at Hart. "I wonder how long he was lying there?" she whispered.

He tried to sidetrack her thoughts, deliberately misunderstanding her words. "Maybe they're not far ahead," he said. He brought his hands up to the wheel; was glad to see that they were steady again. "You'd better get away," he advised. "In case they heard the shots, and come back to investigate."

"And you?" she demanded.

He shook his head. "I'm going on."

Anger showed in her face. "Just what game are you playing?" she asked. "You're a doctor. What do you want with these men? What are you doing this for?"

So there was another piece in this jigsaw, Hart noted. The Governor hadn't revealed that the new doctor was a Council operative. That meant that the police weren't deliberately disobeying their orders. But that did not mean that they would relish the idea of an agent from Earth cleaning up their mess.

"My job," he answered, and let it go at that.

But she did not. "Your job!" she flared. Her eyes were hot. "You're not up to a job here," she told him. "You've just proved that." Her gun rose. "For your own good," she said, "you're under arrest. You're going back."

She saw his face change as she was speaking. He was looking past her at the farther side of the hollow, at the three trucks which had suddenly appeared, and which spread out as they came towards them.

"Don't say anything," he warned. "Let me do the talking"

She turned her head, and gasped.

"Remember!" he said urgently. Under cover of the side of the cab he reloaded, laid the gun across his knees. Then he put his arm through the window, and held up his hand, palm forward.

The trucks halted.

"From the Council," Hart shouted. He saw the girl's eyes widen, but kept his face impassive. There were guns pointed at them from each truck. "Name of Hart," he went on. "You had a message I was coming."

A broad-faced man in the middle truck scowled. "We were on our way to get you now," he answered. "But not here. At the farms."

Hart shrugged. "I wouldn't know about that. I wasn't told."

The leader's scowl did not alter. "Where's Luke?" he growled. "Why isn't he with you?"

Luke, Hart guessed, would be the one who was supposed to be his guide. Who's place Ladys Firm had taken. "The raid on the farm this morning—!" Hart lifted one hand, let it drop. "Some men got hurt. I reckoned the best thing to do was to follow those who got away."

Slowly the man nodded, accepting this story. His head turned. "And her—?" he questioned.

"My assistant." Hart shrugged. "You don't have to worry about her."

"Why'd she come?" the other persisted.

"Because she was scared to stay," Hart snapped.

"So!" The thick-set man shook his head. "So that's what she claimed, eh?" He sneered. "No," he denied. "She wasn't scared, brother."

Hart frowned. "What're you driving at?" he asked.

"That she was fooling you. *She's* not from the Medical. She works for the Governor."

"You're crazy," Hart protested.

The spokesman shook his head. "I'm not crazy. I've seen her before. Once. In Camp Seven. She was with some of the high-ups that came visiting."

"He's right," Ladys Firm admitted. She smiled briefly. "If it had worked," she said, "we'd have known where their headquarters was."

The squat man grinned. "Your hard luck," he said. He pushed the man beside him. "You drive her wagon," he ordered. "Tie her hands. The boss'll want to talk to her."

He turned back to Hart, jerked a thumb at the body. "You finish him?" he asked.

Hart nodded.

"Pity," the outlaw commented tersely.

Hart stared.

The squat man spat. "He was selling us out to the Governor. So we dropped him here, half-way, and told him to walk to his friends." He grunted. "He didn't get far."

"When was that?" Hart felt sick.

"Yesterday. About this time. Near enough." He spat again. "Pity you did what you did, but you wasn't to know. Can't blame you for that. An' he did have some time to think it over."

The agent said nothing, fighting down the urge to lift his gun, to start shooting. To kill without mercy. Stone-faced, he watched as the man who had taken the girl's place, dragged her hands behind her, lashed them together. She would be uncomfortable. But that was better than being killed outright. As she probably would be if he argued against such treatment.

When they reached the outlaw hide-out, when he had met the chief, had heard what he had to offer, he would demand the girl as part payment.

He fell into the procession as it pulled out of the hollow.

It was the middle of the day, and the heat had strengthened. If that were possible. His head ached. He drove mechanically following the vehicle ahead. They reached the mountains he had seen from the pass, and began to thread their way between their outlying buttresses.

The outlaws were well served by the country. The place was a maze. Within a mile Hart was lost in the never-ending twists and turns. Without a guide no man could have found his way out of this labyrinth. Plainly the leading truck picked up landmarks only the outlaws recognised. Philosophically he put this complication out of his mind. When they came back they would have a guide. If they came back. He put that thought down also.

These men had not contacted the Council merely to impeach the Governor. What they wanted was their freedom. Plus what they could extort from the Council as the price of their information. He frowned. It was the first clause that stuck in his gorge. He had no desire to see these tigers set free again. Nor had the Council. But—it was possible that what they were offering could outweigh this. In which case he had no option. He must promise them what they wanted.

Provided, he told himself, that he took her back unharmed.

It might be all right. However vile these men were, they would hardly spoil their own hopes for the sake of killing her. It might be all right.

The track they followed widened suddenly. He saw the barrier of the outlaw camp. It was constructed on the same lines as on the farms. There was the same safety zone, meticulously cleared. There was a similar high fence. The gates opened, and they drove in, and the gates closed behind them. They went bumping over the track between the rough cabins, heading for the centre of the fortress.

There were shouts of enquiry from the cabins, curious about the unexpected return of the party.

"Picked him up on the way." Hart heard the answers. "Following the track. With one of the Governor's specials. We got her too."

"Her !"

Heads craned, men broke into a run to keep up, to peer into the cab where Ladys Firm rode. Mouths widened in laughter, eyes flamed with gloating malice. Grimly Hart held his truck ten feet behind the vehicle ahead.

The convoy wheeled left on the edge of an open space, and halted. The truck doors opened, and the crews descended. Hart cut his engine, wiped his hands and face, and opened his door.

He stepped out into an expectant throng. His fellow travellers were bunched together, flanking the girl. She looked exhausted. That was not surprising. To ride for hours in that heat, unable to raise a hand to her face, to wipe away the dust and sweat, would tax anyone's endurance.

He walked towards her. What he was about to do was dangerous. But, if he got away with it, it would do to establish his position from the beginning. The outlaws, milling around, their numbers increasing every moment, mocking the prisoner, filthy mouthed, made no attempt to stop him. Until he put his hand into his pocket, brought out a knife, and opened the blade.

The squat man took a step sideways, placing himself between Hart and the girl. "The idea is—?" he growled.

Hart eyed him easily, the knife ready in his hand, held loosely. "She can't escape," he pointed out. "No need to keep her tied up."

Slowly the other shook his head. "It's not you that says what'll happen," he returned. "So forget it. She stays like she is."

The agent said nothing. Only his hand moved forward smoothly, until its point pricked the squat's man's middle. "I do say," he stated. His eyes were cold. The squat man could see he was not bluffing. "Well?" Hart demanded.

There was stillness in the crowd.

A new voice delivered the squat man from his dilemma. "Well, what?" it asked.

Hart's eyes slide sideways. He did not need to be told that this was the man who had signed the letter to the Council.

He knew the man's face from the pictures in the files. He knew his record. Every man in the Service knew it. If ever there was anyone best fitted to call himself "Slurf" that man was Hyman Factor.

Looking at him, at his almost bald head with its streaks of black hair across it, his pale eyes, his tiny down-curved mouth, his grisly frame, Hart could imagine the delight this creature would take in the offences he had committed. Here was someone who relished cruelty for its own sake. Here, also, was a very dangerous adversary, not merely entirely ruthless, but intelligent also.

"He figures to cut her loose," the squat man declared. "When I said no, he was set to cut me."

"Not 'was' " Hart corrected. He leaned a shade on the knife, and the squat man took a step back. "I'm still set," Hart warned.

Eerily, under that hot sun, the Slurf cackled. "Why not?" he asked. The pale eyes glinted, the mouth stretched. The domed head nodded. "Let her run," he commanded. "While she can," he finished.

The squat man drew aside. The knife did its work. The girl's hands separated.

"Thank you," she muttered. She staggered, and the agent's arm caught her.

"Water," he told the nearest man.

Again the Slurf's shrill laugh sounded. "Why not?" he said again. He waved a bony hand. "Water for the lady," he told the man. His figure shook. "We wouldn't want her to think she wasn't welcome."

Abruptly he tired of his humour. He jerked his head at the emissary from the Council. "You don't have to play nursemaid," he complained. "I want to talk to you."

Hart nodded. He pushed his scarf into the girl's swollen hands. "Don't worry," he advised.

He walked over to Factor. "Where do we talk?" he rapped.

The Slurf wheeled. "We go this way," he said.

They moved away from the others, across the open space, towards an enclosure.

"Not that," the Slurf said. He pointed ahead to a cabin standing by itself. "There."

Hart walked in silence, waited while the outlaw leader opened the door, followed him inside. There was a bunk,

a table, several chairs, all roughly made. Factor motioned to one chair, and Hart sat down.

"Talk," he instructed.

The Slurf paused. "You're not on your own doorstep," he reminded the agent.

Hart grunted. "You didn't send your message because you liked the climate here," he answered. "You want to get out. Sell me on what you've got to offer, and the Council might be prepared to deal. It won't like the idea. No more than I do personally. But, if it's for the benefit of the majority, it would be done." He leaned back insolently. "It's a buyer's market, Factor, and you're trying to sell. So you can take what I offer, if it's good enough for me to offer anything, or stay here and rot."

The outlaw was still, rigid with anger. But he kept enough control over his rage to remember that the agent spoke no more than the truth.

Deliberately Hart flicked him again. "Maybe you'd hoped that what you've got would make the Council eager." He shook his head. "I warn you the Council wouldn't lift one finger to get you off Valeria. We don't want you back in circulation. So it'll take one hell of a lot to make the Council reckon it's a good bargain."

Factor blinked. "You're tough," he snarled. "You don't have to be so tough." It was plain that he was shaken. "What I know is good. The Council'll see that. But if you won't tell them—"

"If it's good," Hart said, "I won't block it. I'll give it to them just as you give it to me. But not more than that."

"Suppose you cross us?" Factor asked. "If you hear what it is, then cross us when you get back."

Hart snorted. "Even you don't believe that," he answered contemptuously. "That's not how the Council works. Everyone knows that." He stood up. "But if that's how twisted you are, there's no more to say."

"Wait!" Factor swallowed. "You're right. They wouldn't do that. I know."

"Well?"

"Yes." Factor leaned on the table. "Sirius Two," he whispered. "What's there on Two that isn't on Earth? Not enough. So that they go to Two for it."

"Huh?" Hart jerked. He stared at the creature on the other side of the table. "If that's a bluff—?" he said.

"It's not bluff." The man was genuine. "Look for yourself." He lifted the lid of a chest against the wall, and Hart saw the ore for which Earth ships made the incredibly long haul to Sirius. He straightened. "If this is on the level," he said, "you're as good as off Valeria already."

"You'll swear that?" Factor rasped.

"If it's in paying quantities. Not just a freak pocket."

The criminal's mouth broadened. All his self sufficiency came back. "It's there for the picking up," he promised.

"In that case—" Hart stood up once more. "I can make the farms before night," he said. "In Centre City I can get a signal off. A fast ship will pick me up." He opened the door. He was not surprised to see several of the outlaws lounging nearby. "If you'll give us a guide out of these hills—"

"Us?" The Slurf grinned. "Just you," he corrected. "You're the one from the Council."

Hart stood still. "She comes with me," he said flatly. "Or we don't deal."

"No?" the Slurf sniggered. "You're out of line," he said. He walked past Hart. "Take a look at this," he invited.

He moved forward, Hart at his elbow. The outlaws followed, their faces alight with expectancy. In the distance a whooping sounded. The others of the band, afar off, had seen the direction their leader was taking, and came storming.

Hart saw Ladys Firm. Two of the outlaws had her arms, were dragging her with them. The girl was fighting, but without effect. He saw her face, crazed with fear. He grabbed the Slurf's elbow.

"What's the idea?" he snarled.

"In there." The Slurf flung out an arm. "Look for yourself."

Hart took another step. The enclosure was a well, twenty-feet deep, with sheer sides. Ringing the top were spikes, close together, their points slanting down. He needed no confirmation of what the pit held.

"Anyone of the Governor's we get," the Slurf told him, "goes in there." His screeching laugh rang in the air. "Like she's going," he said.

"No!" Hart denied.

"Yes." The Slurf's mouth grinned at him. "And, if you argue, you too." He leaned towards Hart. "You should

have kept quiet. Now it's sure that the Council will pay, we don't need you. If you don't come back, the Council'll send someone to take your place. That one won't know what happened to you. So we do business with him."

"No," the agent told him. "It's *your* mistake, Factor. You should have kept quiet. Your men don't know what we've agreed." His face was set. "They'll never know it from you," he whispered.

Factor glared, froze, then snatched for his gun. He was fast. He was not fast enough. Hart's shots blasted his middle.

The agent's gun moved in an arc. One of the fellows holding the girl was the squat man. Hart fired twice, killing both the men.

"Hold it," he yelled. His gun traversed the crowd, menacing each one of them. He saw the girl stoop, snatch a gun from the belt of the squat man, straighten. Then she was backing towards him. The crowd snarled. In another moment the spell would break.

"Inside," he spat. "Jump!"

She leaped past him. He continued backing. One man in the front of the mob flung himself sideways, his hand whipping down. Hart's bullet smashed him flat.

It would not last. They could not hold out in the cabin for long. Only a bold move could save them.

Deliberately he straightened, slid his gun back in its holster. "Anyone here who's not gone crazy?" he asked.

He saw the blank amazement in all their faces, played on it. "Don't any of you want to get off this place?" he asked. "Or are you all mad like Factor was. Too mad to know what's good for you."

They came closer. For the moment hostilities were suspended.

"What are you driving at?" one asked.

Hart spread his hands wide. "I made Factor an offer. A good offer. But he was mad. He wanted to kill the girl also. He was ready to throw everything overboard for that. He was throwing you all also."

"How good?" some one yelled.

Hart shrugged. "What he asked for." He looked round the ring of faces. "That offer still stands," he said. "Transport off, and a clean sheet." He turned away. "Talk it over," he suggested.

He sat down on the cabin step, took out his gun, reloaded. Not looking at them. They shuffled, then, one by one, drew away. Into groups, talking and arguing.

"What do you think?" a low voice asked from inside the door.

He did not turn his head. "It could be," he answered. "I think there's a chance the bright lights will win."

He heard her chuckle. "I wouldn't mind them myself," she confessed.

"Nor me," he replied. "In case they don't see reason," he warned, "keep clear of the door. I'll be coming in fast." He sat, the gun lying loose in his hand, seemingly at ease. But his eyes were busy.

The groups had come together. One man only was speaking. He seemed to be carrying the others, who growled their endorsements. Hart judged this man was suspicious of the way the agent had shot down their leader.

"—only got *his* word for it," he heard.

He half turned his head. "Get ready for trouble," he warned.

His head stayed at that angle. There was movement on the far side of the square. He could see trucks. In the trucks were men in uniform.

He dived backwards through the door, rolled, and she slammed it closed.

"The marines have landed," he told her. He crouched next the window, his gun up, ready for the rush.

It did not come. The outlaws had no time for that. The trucks came storming down on them, scattering them in panic. There was some wild shooting. Then it was over.

In the cabin Hart looked at the girl. "I could kiss the sheriff, and every member of the posse," he said. "Even the ones with whiskers." Gratefully he sheathed his gun. "How come?" he asked.

"Transmitter in my truck," she told him. "The convoy was behind me, well back. When you spoiled everything by breaking out, we had to follow. Hoping the Slurf would pick you up, and lead us here." She stared at Hart. "Why did the Council send you here?" she asked.

There were voices outside. "I'll tell you later," he temporised.

He turned as the door was flung open. Wilson the policeman loomed in the doorway, his gun covering Hart. Behind him was the Governor. Both men looked angry.

Hart stared at them coldly, ominously. "You'd better come inside," he snapped. He ignored the gun Wilson held. "The Council will want an explanation of the mess you've made."

"Council?" Wilson's eyes narrowed.

"If you'll put that cannon away," Hart returned, "I'll show you my identity. After that, I want an answer to my questions." He looked at the Governor. "I'll remind you, sir, that I rank you," he said.

Revealing himself in front of Wilson he had drawn the Governor's teeth. The policeman could not escape taking the agent's orders, even if the Governor disagreed. Moodily the policeman put up his gun.

All that remained, Hart told himself, was to soothe everybody's feelings. There was no need to have Castelly face a tribunal. What the man had done proved to have been to the advantage of Earth. The Council would be disposed to overlook the Governor's flouting of its orders for the good that had come of it. And Wilson could be appeased by a citation for his eradication of the outlaw nest.

He went over this out aloud, touching lightly on the consequences if he did not have cause to report well of the local authorities when he got back to Earth. But not stressing this more than was necessary. He let it be understood that the Council would look with favour on those whom he commended in his report for their co-operation. He finished by suggesting that the sooner his signal was sent off from Centre City the louder it would be in praise of the local authorities.

"Yes," the Governor agreed. He looked at Wilson. "Detail an escort for Dr. Hart," he instructed. "See there's no delay."

Hart smiled. "Thank you, sir," he said. He turned to go with the policeman, then stopped. Plainly another idea had occurred to him. "It would help to support my report if your agent Miss Firm could be seconded to accompany me," he said. "In view of her local knowledge—!"

"Of course." Castelly needed no urging. Nothing, his expression announced, must stand in the way of Valeria's development, nothing must delay it unnecessarily. Already he could see himself as the man whom future generations on

this world would honour as the man who had cleaned up this new world. "See to that also, will you, Mr. Wilson?"

"Yes, sir." Heavily Wilson moved towards the door. "If that's all," he said.

Emerging from the hills on to the desert floor the girl turned her head to study the driver. "For a properly accredited upholder of the law," she commented, "you certainly manage to bend a lot of regulations."

He grinned. "Still worrying about not making your arrest stick?" he asked.

"No," she denied. "It's not *that*. I don't blame you for talking your way out of trouble with the Governor." She nodded. "I can see that the way you handled it was the best for everybody." She stretched. "No," she said. "It's not that. It's the way you've just kidnapped me, without wanting to know how I felt about it."

"You said you'd like to see the bright lights." He looked at her innocently. "If you'd *rather* stay here—?" he hinted.

"I would not," she told him emphatically. "As you know very well." She glared at him. "Someday," she threatened, "you'll find someone you can't manage. I'd like to see that."

He took one hand off the wheel, put it over hers. "It could be you will," he said. He nodded to himself. "I think I'd like that also," he murmured. He took a deep breath, brought his hand back to the wheel. "Yes," he said again, "I guess I would."

Ladys leaned back against the corner of the cab, and smiled. And Hart, peering through the glass at the track ahead, at the scrub, at the mountains looming up on the horizon, smiled also.

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